

Chapter One

The awkward disquiet in his heart just wouldn't ease off. Keanu Omira had battled it from the day he made up his mind to pursue this new project. Surely, heads would roll, dreams would die, but he had eagerly anticipated this moment for the past twenty years, so why the queasy feeling now?

As he walked briskly through the revolving glass doors of Kane Capital's office building, Keanu attempted to silence his conscience by focusing on the day ahead. The security guards at the reception stood at attention and offered him a salute but he took little notice. His employees chorused several good mornings as they scurried past him; he nodded just once.

At the lobby, he pushed the button of one of the three elevators and waited. Two young male employees walked towards the foyer describing a party they attended the evening before. They shut up abruptly the moment they saw him. The active chatter he met in the lobby became an uncomfortable silence. Clearly, his staff were waiting for him to leave so they could carry on.

The elevator arrived and he stepped in with his chauffeur in tow, wheeling along his brown Armani trolley bag. He peered through the green tinted glass wall, taking in the view of the Lekki Peninsula sprawled and receding below him.

A commercial motorcycle weaved in and out of the traffic. Suddenly a car crashed into the motorcycle, throwing the driver and his female passenger onto the road. They both hit the ground heavily, and the woman's helmet bounced off her head.

Keanu shook his head and pursed his lips. "Such recklessness; serves them right."

"Sir, we are on the 6th floor."

He turned in response to his chauffeur's voice and stepped out of the elevator. Sunlight streamed through the tinted glass roof, bathing the lobby in a golden warmth. Keanu resisted the urge to linger for a while and allow the peace he felt in the lobby touch his soul. He moved on and

opened the door to the executive reception area, nodding to greetings from his personal assistant Adeseun James and the other staff.

Keanu's office was posh and massive; the flooring and walls covered in paneled brown oak. This was his den, the place where his personal spirit of dominance endued him with the drive he needed to take those very tough business decisions.

He moved to his work area, shrugged off his jacket and draped it around the free-standing hanger close to his chair.

The desk was bare except for his laptop and one file boldly labeled – CEO. He knew it would contain matters that required his urgent attention and he deftly skimmed through the contents.

The door opened and Keanu looked up to see Adeseun step in, pen and paper in hand.

"Ask the Corporate Director to see me now," Keanu said.

"Yes sir."

"And I will like to have a meeting with the Treasurer immediately afterwards, so put him on notice.

"My wife is coming in from Abuja this afternoon; arrange for one of my personal chauffeurs to pick her up; and warn him not to be late."

"I will do that sir."

Adeseun bobbed his head at each instruction. There had been no need to write so he returned his pen to his breast pocket and left.

Keanu lowered himself onto his chair and slowly rocked back and forth. The only painting in the room held his gaze; it was a life-sized image of a tiger with bared fangs poised to pounce on an invisible prey. The portrait never failed to inspire him; he relaxed and smiled. His mind was made up; nothing and no one was going to change it.

He glanced at his watch. The Corporate Director's office was next door; what could be holding him?

The restlessness he felt earlier crept up on him again.

He shuddered and stood to walk the length of his office into the adjoining room where he often stepped away to unwind whenever the pressure of work became intolerable. No one would believe that beyond the door was an exquisite executive suite, with conveniences that included a king sized bed. He stopped in front of the long dress mirror, cocked his head to one side and carefully straightened his tie - a baby pink handmade Roggero Bonnell, one he purchased during his last trip to Rome. He caressed the feathery smoothness and smiled. The beauty of the tie was worth all of the two hundred dollars it cost him.

He sneaked a glance at his shoes to confirm that their perfect shine was still, perfect. For the last time he turned sideways to look himself over in the mirror; he didn't need anyone to tell him that he looked good.

Banji Allens, the Corporate Director and his right hand man sat in front of his desk, waiting, when he came out.

Banji stood. "Good Morning, Keanu."

"Morning Banji. How are you today?"

"I'm fine."

They shook hands firmly.

“Great. There is this sizzling hot idea I’ve been brooding over for a while and I want us to talk about it. Let’s sit over here.” He waved him towards his eight-seater meeting table while he picked up a file from his briefcase before joining him.

“Tell me what you know about Creamy Foods?”

Banji had worked with Keanu long enough to understand his style of broaching a subject with a question. He breezed through his answer.

“It’s the quick service restaurant to watch in Nigeria today; serves both hot meals and fast food to the middle working class and young people in general. It’s been in business for five years with impressive growth statistics; has ten outlets - six in Lagos, four in other locations in the west. Sales hit a billion naira last year. The company’s strength is in its hands-on management and very tasty menu. It’s owned by Bisi Sanders; she knows her market and serves it well.

“The company’s shares were floated on the stock exchange last year; the promoters retained 40%. The funds raised were invested in setting up four stores outside Lagos. My studies show Creamy should hit close to a 100% growth in sales each year for the next three years. In my view, the company has excellent prospects.”

Keanu nodded firmly as he spoke. “You know, I truly admire the way you keep up with developments in our corporate world. That synopsis was spot-on. Let me go straight to the point; I have been thinking... I want to buy Creamy Foods.”

Banji’s jaw dropped. “What!” He spread his hands on the table. “Why would you want us to invest in a fast food company? Doesn’t make sense to me; we’re an equity finance firm and invest in serious projects. We focus on infrastructure development; that’s where the big bucks are.” He squinted. “It doesn’t sound fair; Bisi put everything she has into this project.” ... He paused. “She’s supposed to be your friend. What’s this all about?”

Keanu smiled. He had full respect for his colleague’s technical competence but it often amazed him how many of them lacked real vision.

“Relax. When are you going to accept, Banji, that there are no sentiments in business? This company has great promise, you just said so yourself – a possible 100% return every year for 3 years! The truth is that Bisi will never be able to extract the juice in the business. I hate seeing good potential go to waste.”

Banji leaned back and folded his arms across his chest. Slowly he looked up at the painting and then pulled his left earlobe a couple of times. He sat upright, rested his elbows on the table and faced Keanu squarely. “What do you have in mind?”

Keanu’s voice was level, clear and steeped in passion as he explained. “The potentials in a quick service restaurant are unlocked as you increase the number of outlets. Creamy Foods has one of the best brands in this country. I think we can do a mass rollout of fifteen to twenty more outlets in twenty-four months. Once the locations are right, we should be able to fill the customer capacity in the first one to two

weeks. She doesn't have the funds to do that; that's where we come in."

Banji's expression softened a little, and Keanu hoped he was beginning to understand. It was true they were not entrepreneurs. All they did was identify an opportunity in a company, go in as investors, unlock the value, make their profits and then step aside for the owners, leaving them with a much stronger company and better off. More so, they had an advantage with this deal; the current global economic climate had shrunk the value of the company's shares below the book value.

"Creamy Foods trades at 75K today, that's an extremely good deal."

Banji's poise still held some reluctance, but Keanu was glad that he picked up his pen and flipped his jotter open. "Okay, so how do we approach this?"

"Luckily the company has 60% of its shares trading on the stock market. Bisi has 30% and a friend of hers holds the other 10%. What I want you to do for me Banji, is to buy up 41% of the company's shares."

"Directly?"

Keanu smirked. "Obviously not. Work through our stockbrokers and buy through our allies. Make the purchases in small unnoticeable tranches. With the current share price, this is an opportunity we shouldn't miss. I have my plans to take over the 10% held by her friend."

"How?"

Keanu's smile was sly. "Leave that to me."

Banji scribbled a few points. "I'll prepare all the data we need, say by Wednesday and then we can draw up a clear strategy to win this."

"Excellent! As always, I know I can count on you."



Mid afternoon, Keanu was signing off some operating expense requests when his phone rang.

It was Adeseun. "Madam Omira is on line two, sir."

That was Cathy, his wife of twelve years. There was a time her voice alone sent chills of excitement down his spine. Things were different now. He barely suppressed the irritation of this interruption.

She was an events manager and was currently in Abuja on a business trip. They had spoken once this morning and he couldn't understand why she was calling again.

"Yep?" he said.

"Keanu. I called to remind you that I'll be in Lagos by three. I hope you've assigned someone to pick me up."

Keanu struggled to keep his voice level. "Cathy, what's the problem? We spoke this morning and I told you I'll send a chauffeur."

"I know we spoke, but I don't want you to forget like you did the last time. You know once you're in that office, you don't think about anything else but work. So, since you confirm you've made arrangements, let me leave you to carry on. I'll see you in the evening." She dropped the call before he could put in another word.

His hand shook as he replaced the receiver. He inhaled hard to regain some calm. She seemed to derive strange joy from making him angry. True, his work took him away from his family quite a lot, but he couldn't help that. And since, he couldn't make things work at home, he had diverted his passion into his work. Making money was now his life tonic; so what?

The only regret he had was that the deterioration in their relationship was taking its toll on their children, Matthew, eight and Sandra, six.



Taju left early enough and was in good time to get to the airport, but then he ran into a traffic congestion on the Palm-groove axis of Ikorodu Road.

"Arrghh, what is this?"

He hissed loudly as he slowly joined the long queue of cars ahead. The army of traders weaving in and out of the lanes, selling their wares, alerted him to the fact that the traffic hold-up had been there for a while.

A young orange seller, her goods gingerly balanced in a tray on her head, eagerly walked up to his car. "*Daaaaddy*, buy orange. It is very sweet; full of *juwice*."

He wound the glass window down slightly so she could hear him. "Common, get lost girl! Who is your daddy?" He shooed her with a rabid wave of his hand.

As she moved away and he watched her go, a young boy who couldn't be more than eight, sneaked up to the car. Very quickly, he squirted some liquid soap on the windscreen, whipped out a brush and started to clean it.

The veins on Taju's neck ballooned. He wagged a finger at the boy. "If you let me catch you, I swear, I will use just one hand to squeeze life out of that your wretched body." He activated the windscreen wiper to clean the soap off. The boy eyed him and moved on, desperately looking for an amiable driver in need of a cleaner windscreen who would be willing to pay for the service on the spot.

The clock on the dashboard of the car continued to tick up to two-thirty. Taju had hoped the traffic would free up soon, but now he knew he couldn't get to the airport on time. In the last thirty minutes, he hadn't moved more than four hundred metres. Madam Omira, as the company staff fondly called her, would be arriving soon and he didn't want her stranded. He fished out his mobile phone and punched in the office number.

The phone rang thrice before he heard a voice on the other end. "Hello, Mr. Adeseun, I am in traffic and will not get to the airport on time."

Adeseun swore softly. "I asked you to leave early enough. The MD was emphatic that you shouldn't be late. How could you be so damn irresponsible?"

"*Oga*, boss, take it easy! I left the office more than two hours early." Taju knew he was exaggerating a bit but had to, he didn't want to

get into trouble. "I am inside *go-slow*, traffic congestion, and it is car you asked me to take to the airport, not helicopter, so I cannot fly. There is an accident ahead. I am calling so that you can make another arrangement, so Madam will not be stranded."

"The MD said clearly that you must be there on time and you come up with these foolish excuses...."

"Hello... Hello." Taju peered at the screen of his phone. It was old and gravely disfigured, but he managed to confirm that Adeseun had dropped the call. "You are the one who is foolish," he muttered. "These small boys of today have no respect; just because you sit in an air-conditioned office and I spend all my time on the road, under the hot sun, you think you are better than me." He hissed again and returned his mobile phone to his pocket.

The sky darkened, followed by a dragged out rumble of thunder. It was going to rain. Madam is a good woman. Taju hoped Adeseun would find an alternative.



Cathy strolled out of the Murtala Mohammed domestic airport wheeling her beige trolley case behind. She was dog-tired, but thoughts of the success of the wedding in Abuja, brought an insistent spring to her steps. Just before the bride and groom departed for their honeymoon, they, in company of the groom's father, a retired army general, had expressed their profuse appreciation at the professional way she handled their special day. It was always gratifying to be able to meet the expectations of her clients, especially those that paid this well. Now all she wanted to do was get home and put her feet up to a glass of strawberry milkshake.

The terminal was swarming with people and the noise they exuded became a sleepy burr in her ears. As she walked further away from the arrival corridor, the airport became warmer and then downright uncomfortable. Every step she took towards the exit was in expectation of the peace that would come from getting out of here and grabbing a nap in the car on the long drive home.

From the corner of her eye, she noticed an unusual movement. A gentleman cut an angle and walked up to her.

"Hello," he said. She stopped.

"Can I help you with that?" He pointed to her bag. "It seems a little heavy."

True she was tired but she didn't think she showed any noticeable strain in handling the bag. She looked closely and recognized him; they had been on the same plane from Abuja. She recalled averting her eyes from his gaze, several times during the flight. He was tall and fine looking, and had on a closely fitted casual cream shirt that showed off a bodybuilder's physique. Probably in his mid-thirties. Up close his face was a mask of deep interest; she knew that look.

"No thanks. I'll manage." She flashed him a polite smile and

walked on, increasing her pace.

He caught up with her easily, matching her steps with his. "I was at the wedding in Abuja and I saw you were fully involved. Are you a relation of the couple?"

Cathy willed him to go away; she was too tired for this. It was time to be curt. "No, I'm not."

He wasn't giving up. "My name is Jack. I just thought, you know, I should say hello seeing that we were at the same wedding and on the same flight back. Fate must have a reason for throwing us together twice in two days and I'm not one to let opportunities pass me by. And ... you're quite an attractive lady, so I see no reason not to pitch my tent on the side of fate." He was rubbing his jaw now. "May I know your name?"

She hadn't experienced such a bold proposition in a long time and then from a total stranger. "Do you mind? I've just had a hectic two days and all I want now is to get home to my children. Okay?"

He smiled, revealing defined white teeth; and lifted both hands in surrender. "Okay, maybe some other time." He gave her a firm salute and backed away.

In spite of the fact that she was in her mid-thirties and a mother of two, she was surprised that she still had to deal with men flirting with her. Sometimes it was flattering though, considering the challenges she had with her husband, Keanu. But, notwithstanding the temptation, an extra-marital affair wasn't an option. That would offend God and she cherished her relationship with God. Hopefully, this one - Jack, would take a hint and not be a pest.

She looked around the terminal for a familiar face, probably Taju. Her forehead rippled into a strong crease as she wondered if Keanu had forgotten again. That would be strange, considering they had spoken just hours before.

She walked up to the exit door. It was crowded with other passengers trying to decide how to approach the pelting rain outside. A plump woman ran inside, pushing through the crowd before closing her umbrella and splattering water all over Cathy's navy suit. She apologized, but didn't wait to catch her breath before continuing her race towards the departure area, probably late for her flight. Cathy took one look at her drenched skirt and decided against going near the exit again.

All the airport seats were taken, so she sought a quiet corner where she could comfortably make a call.

Just as she switched on her phone, a text message came in from Adeseun. "Welcome back ma'am. Taju could not get to the airport on time. I have arranged with one of the airport taxis, to take you home. He will be standing at the information desk now. I apologize for the inconvenience."

She looked through the milling crowd around the desk and true to Adeseun's word, a middle-aged pot-bellied man was holding up a cardboard sheet bearing her name.

She felt a little bit at ease that arrangements had been made, but that didn't take care of the rising fury she felt towards Keanu, for not

making sure that a company car was there to pick her up.

To her pleasant surprise, the taxi, a Toyota Camry was in extremely good condition. She was settling deep into the back seat when her phone rang. She flipped it open.

"Good afternoon Ma'am, this is Adeseun. I hope you had a smooth journey."

"Yes, I did. Thanks for the taxi. Where's Taju?"

"That's why I called. He's stuck in traffic somewhere. I apologise"

Cathy cut in. "No problem. My husband?"

"He's in a meeting..."

She cut in again. "Thank you Adeseun."

She leaned back, slipped off her shoes and wriggled her toes. She tried to relax but the niggling anger at Keanu's sloppiness lingered. How and when did things go so wrong between them? In her wildest dreams, she never could have imagined that her marriage would deteriorate so badly. Keanu and herself had been so much in love at the beginning but they hardly spoke these days. Whatever, little conversation they managed, ended up in a tirade of anger and accusations, or even worse, days of silence.

The rift in their relationship she managed to cope with, but what unsettled her more these days, was the rumors of his affairs. Her friends made it a duty to keep her abreast of his latest flings and where they failed, the soft sell magazines filled in the gap with their insinuations. So far, she had no concrete evidence that Keanu was cheating on her but his recent behavior supported the gossip - late nights, absence from home and his sexual indifference. She, more than anyone else, knew that her husband was a warm-blooded male; but he hardly touched her these days. She knew he must be indulging himself somewhere.

If she had the heart, then she should take her revenge by hanging out with the likes of Mr. Handsome at the airport. Maybe that would make Keanu sit up and pay attention.

She watched the rain mercilessly patter the window beside her. The sky was grey and the streets deserted as several pedestrians huddled together in any area that provided some shelter from the rain. She felt sorry for them and offered a silent prayer of thanksgiving that she could afford not just one but several cars. It made sense to give thanks for every little blessing, because in reality, in another set of circumstances it could well be her out there in those wet shoes.

She folded one leg under herself, leaned into the centre armrest and rubbed her hands together; it was getting a little cold. The taxi driver must have felt it too because he reduced the coolness of the air-conditioning.

They turned off the Apapa-Oshodi expressway unto the Third Mainland Bridge. There was still a long stretch of road ahead, but she was at least glad the traffic was light.



Keanu was reviewing the monthly management report when the green light on the intercom machine beeped.

He pressed the speaker button. "Yes Adeseun?"

"Labake George is at the reception asking to see you. She doesn't have an appointment but insists that it's urgent."

Labake. He hadn't spoken with her in two years, what could she want?

"Let her come up."

Keanu stood and looked her over as she sashayed across the room towards his desk. She was still the same beauty he had quite a passionate affair with a while back, but closer up he noted that something wasn't just the same. Under the cover of perfect make up, she looked tense, and she scanned the room a little too deliberately, as if expecting someone else to emerge from the shadows. He restrained himself from turning round the table to welcome her with a hug.

He shook her hand across the table. "Labake, how are you? Quite a surprise to see you here; won't you sit down?"

Her smile was brittle. "Good to see you too and I'm fine." She sat on the edge of the chair.

"Are you alright?" Her eyes were a little too red.

"Yes, I'm fine."

He lowered himself onto his chair. "So... what's up?" He smiled in an attempt to lighten the atmosphere.

"I just need to talk a bit and I thought of you."

Keanu did a double take. He didn't expect that. "Ok," he started slowly, folding his arms onto the table. "What do you want to talk about?"

She sniffed and fiddled with her fingers. "My baby would have been two yesterday."

"Baby?"

"Have you forgotten?" Tiny beads of sweat appeared on her forehead.

She couldn't be talking about that. He hadn't even given it a second thought after their relationship ended.

"I can't stop dreaming of babies and it's never hard to identify mine among them. It's getting to me and there's no one I can talk to about it. Not my mum, not even my friends."

How could she torture herself like that? Two years. Why would anybody carry a burden for that long? He shouldn't have allowed her into his office. Now he would have to find a way to get rid of her.

"Labake, that's all in the past. You should let it go and move on with your life. You have a bright future ahead of you. You'll get married, have children; you shouldn't let the past drag you back."

"That's what I thought when I listened to you and agreed to abort your baby. I haven't spent one day since then without hearing his voice crying and seeing his image, arms stretched towards me and eyes pleading for me to carry him. I shouldn't have killed my baby." Her face

crumbled, tears welled up in her eyes and her hands on the table trembled. "The pain has refused to go away."

Something was very wrong; she didn't look well. He hoped he could get her out before she made a scene.

"Labake. Take it easy and I think you should see a doctor. Let me arrange that."

"I'm not sick!" She wiped away the sweat on her forehead with the back of her hand and sniffed repeatedly. "But if you want me to see a doctor give me the money and I'll go. Fifty thousand Naira should do." She stared into his eyes. The raw emotions he saw as he stared back unnerved him. She was losing it and definitely needed help.

Too suddenly, she put her head on the table and began to sob softly. "Keanu, why did you make me kill my baby."

Keanu was at a loss on how to handle this. He had to find a way to get her out fast.

"I'll give you the money but I don't have it here."

Her head jerked up and she slowly leaned back into the chair, eyes again fixed on him. Her nose was running now and she made no effort to clean it up.

"Give me your account number and I'll pay it in," he said.

"I don't believe you. You messed up my life. You used me and dumped me and never looked back."

"Pull yourself together. You knew I am married. We couldn't have gone on forever."

He watched as she scratched her jaw. Then she pulled up one sleeve and vigorously scratched her forearm. That's when he took in the puncture marks and it slowly dawned on him that she must be on drugs.

"I never lied to you." He opened his wallet and handed over ten thousand naira. "Give me your account number and I'll pay in the rest later today."

She snatched the money from him and carefully tucked it into her purse. Then she relaxed a little, scribbled a number on a piece of paper and slipped it across to him. She stood and cleaned her face with a handkerchief. "I'll call you later. But make sure you pay the balance into my account. I really need it to see the doctor; it's a good suggestion."

Relief washed over him as she stumbled out of the room. He leaned back into his chair. Could the abortion have affected her so badly? He had stopped seeing her almost immediately afterwards. He recalled now that she didn't have too many friends and the only family she ever spoke of was her mother.

However, all that was really none of his business anymore. He exhaled and turned into his computer.



A vaguely familiar voice woke Cathy from deep sleep. She hadn't realised she was this tired.

"Please let your passenger come down here, we don't allow taxis

into this estate.”

“Madam,” the driver turned round to face her, “this man says we cannot drive in.”

Cathy rubbed her eyes and then wound down the car window. Thankfully the rain had stopped. She recognized the security man. “Paul. It’s me.”

Paul started. “Ah, Madam, I’m sorry, I didn’t expect to see you in a taxi.” He raced to drag the gate open and waved the vehicle into the enclosed street.

Cathy directed the driver to her home, a six-bedroom house on Plaza Lane. The gateman let them in and the car turned onto the graveled driveway. As she stepped down from the taxi, her daughter Sandra ran out of the house with a scream, with Matthew not too far behind.

Sandra collided with her and raised her arms with a glee. Cathy bent down to hug her, but Sandra clung to her neck and she had to pick her up. “Mum I don’t like it when you travel. Everywhere is so boring. Matthew is so wicked. Mummy he slapped my face this morning and yesterday he hid my Barbie doll and...”

Matthew became visibly angry. “It’s a lie. She is very naughty and always behaving like a baby. I didn’t slap her and I didn’t take her stupid doll.”

“He did! He did! Liar!” Sandra said, pointing an accusing finger at her brother’s face. Cathy dragged Matthew close and hugged him. She had been gone for only three days and yet she missed them both sorely.

“Nobody is a liar and do stop fighting,” Cathy said. “Let’s go inside before the neighbours start wondering what this noise is all about.” She dismissed the taxi and then put Sandra down. She held onto each child and led them inside.

Suddenly, a bark rang out from across the grounds. A golden retriever appeared from the back of the house, and raced to join them. About two feet high and covered in deep gold fur, the whole family loved this dog. It was one of the most affectionate and intelligent creatures Cathy knew. Keanu had brought him back from one of his trips abroad as a gift for Matthew. He lifted his triangular shaped eyes and barked a special welcome to Cathy as he skidded to a stop at her feet.

“Golden!” Cathy bent and ruffled his head. The dog yelped in pleasure and wagged his tail, as they all went into the house.

After dinner, and after dismissing the nanny, Cathy sat with both children at the dining table, working them through their homework; a daily routine she started when they were in kindergarten. The discipline had paid off and now both children were permanently at the top of their class.

Golden knew better than to try to get their attention during this period so he sat quietly opposite the television. As soon as they were through on the table, he would be able to watch the Cartoon Network channel with the children.

Suddenly, Golden’s ears peaked. He barked and ran towards the door. The children knew what that meant and they rose too.

"Daddy is back!" Matthew exclaimed. Cathy focused on reviewing the assignment she gave Sandra. On one hand, she was happy that Sandra answered the questions correctly; on the other hand, her anger rose at Keanu's slipshod arrangement to convey her from the airport. She mentally rehearsed how to confront him.

He walked in with his brief case in tow. The children were beside him as he stopped just at the edge of the living room, three steps above the dining area. She pretended she didn't know he was there.

"Hi," he said.

"Hello," she replied coldly, without looking up.

"How was your trip?"

She was silent.

"Cathy, I'm sorry about the car not being there when you arrived."

She looked up, her face a visage of bitterness. "Don't even try pretending that you're sorry. Of course you're not." Her voice rose and she pointed a finger at him. "Keanu, I called you, twice; and the second time you snapped at me. But what I said was right; your work is more important than your family. You knew my chauffeur had to travel to see his sick mother; that's the only reason I asked for your help. Clearly you couldn't be bothered."

His calm belied his rising anger. "Obviously, you too can't be bothered about what really happened. So please yourself with whatever you want to believe." He turned and walked away, up the stairs to his room.

The children felt the vibes of their parent's confrontation and with their excitement dowsed, slowly returned to the dining table to continue their homework.

Golden sank lower into the fluffy beige carpet. With everyone in this foul mood, there was a strong probability there would be no cartoon tonight.

Chapter Two

The sweetness and viscosity of her voice was like fresh honey. It swooshed and swirled around his mind; sucking him up and out from the depth of unconsciousness.

He wanted to grab her and love her, like she deserved to be loved. But he dared not try; experience had taught him that this might be another dream; so he kept his eyes closed and instead just savoured the moment. He couldn't afford to lose her yet again. If his dreams were the only place he could find her, then let it be: he would sleep forever.

She was reading from the psalms and the words soothed him, bringing peace to his tormented soul.

"He makes me lie down in abundantly green fields. He leads me beside peaceful waters."

What wouldn't he bequeath for the simple joy of looking into her eyes and watching her lips move as she voiced those words? It should be so easy, but still he held back.

She seemed near but he sensed the distance between them like a gaping bottomless hole; a pit of surreality that dashed his hopes for them to be together again; ever.

The smell of her perfume wafted up into his head; he inhaled deep and deliberate, contented to draw a little more of her

inside him.

“I walk through the valley of the shadow of death, and yet I’m not afraid. My Lord is with me. His goodness and love pursue me everyday.”

Read on sweetheart.

His eyelids fluttered; he struggled to still them. The longer he tried to remain motionless, the more he became aware that his joints were stiff. Now, he remembered, he hadn’t moved from this spot in a long time.

His left knee jerked. She stopped reading. He felt her eyes sweep over him. His lips quivered as his fingers trembled. Why couldn’t he just be still?

She whimpered.

What was she afraid of?

He heard the book snap shut and hit the floor. The resonance of patting footsteps followed, moving her further from him.

A door slammed shut.

I’ve lost her again. I shouldn’t have moved.

There was nothing more at stake now. He prised his eyelids open slowly and with much difficulty. As usual, all he could see was a whiteness so bright, it hid the walls and ceiling that enclosed the room.

Where am I? What am I doing here?

Honey; please come back.

