

# **Eight Days To Live**

## **A Novella**

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## **DISCLAIMER**

All characters appearing in this work are fictitious. Any resemblance to real persons, living, dead, undead, in the before-life or in the after-life, will be deemed a compliment of the author's genius.

## **DEDICATION**

To the voices in my head, may you never go silent.

To the world, may we find healing and calm after the storm.

To the first responders, doctors, and nurses, including my sister, Doctor Nkechi Sandra Okonkwo, this one is for you.

I do hope you enjoy it!

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## One: I'm a junior staff

*Monday, 9th March 2020*

The woman returned home barely three hours after she left for work in the morning. She was exhausted, following long days, nights, and weekends at work that proved abortive. She was employed at a State-funded health and safety research lab, and for the past few weeks, the pandemic caused by the deadly coronavirus, COVID-19, and the race for a cure against it had been the main preoccupation of the office. It was more like a race between agencies, and their directors, to find the cure first. The woman, like many of her colleagues, did all the major work, with the directors and managers breathing down their necks, waiting to take the glory for any fruit that blossomed.

The woman sighed as she approached her front door. She had her key in her handbag, but recently, due to the 'stay-at-home' directive, which had been issued nationwide, her husband and three children were stationed at home, but not her. She knocked twice and within seconds, she heard footsteps scampering like heavy raindrops towards the door. It was the usual routine for her kids to try to outrun each other to the door hoping to be the first to open it. In the past, the woman would give biscuits, lollipops, or whatever she could lay her hands on, to whoever welcomed her first, but today she had none. All she had was bad news.

The regular "Who is there?" resounded from inside the flat, and the woman answered.

"Me," she said.

"Me, who?" three tiny voices retorted, one after the other.

"Me!" she snapped. "Open the door."

Nothing happened.

The woman banged the next time, then ordered, although mildly, "Open the door."

Another set of footsteps was heard, and then a masculine voice asked, "Who is there?"

"It's me."

The door swung open suddenly in front of her. It was her husband, flanked by the kids. With one look at the mask covering her lower face, all three of them ran off. The woman looked at them in confusion, then at her husband, before realising that she resembled a surgeon returning from an operation, who could also pass for a monster in the eyes of children. Before she went in, she took off the mask and gloves she had on, wrapped them into a ball, and threw

them in the trash can sitting outside by the door. She walked in and her husband closed the door after her.

“You are back quite early today. You left less than three hours ago if I recall,” her husband remarked, as they walked into the living room.

“There wasn’t much going on in the office,” she replied, as she plonked herself down on the couch. What her husband didn’t know was that she could have come back even earlier, were it not for the choking traffic she had sat in for hours on her way to work.

Due to the ban on commercial motorbikes and tricycles, which should have significantly reduced traffic, the whole world seemed to have moved into Lagos; because all the roads were constantly blocked. Moreover, the closure of a faulty major bridge exiting the Surulere axis did not help matters, and the recent advice to stay at home and self-isolate seemed to have fallen on deaf ears. The woman was glad to be back home for the time being.

“I see that they’ve started giving you all masks and gloves to take home,” her husband said, waking her from her thoughts. “It’s about time.”

“Yes, they finally realised that safety in and out of the office isn’t for only senior staff.”

Her husband approached with a bottle of hand sanitiser, squirted some into her hands, then also sat down. After she massaged the liquid into her palms for a few calculated seconds, she opened her handbag and brought out two rectangular packs; one, of surgical gloves and the other, of face masks. One dozen of mini hand sanitisers followed the packs.

“Your office means business,” her husband said.

“They do,” the woman responded, not displaying any emotions. She also brought out a sealed white envelope addressed in print to *Onyekachi Adelabu*. She placed it on the table.

“What is it?” her husband asked, noticing the odd look on her face, but not the envelope she had brought out.

“They gave us these supplies of protective gears to manage.”

“To manage?” He scrunched his eyebrows so tight, they almost touched. “I don’t think I understand.”

The woman exhaled. She didn’t know how to share the news with him. Just a few days ago, he had been laid off because the factory where he worked had been closed. At first, they had been asked to work in shifts, then government officials stormed the facility and shut it down. Eighty percent of the products that had been produced were set aside for distribution, while the other twenty percent were given to some staff members to manage... to those who were

going to be laid off to reduce operational, overhead, and staff costs. Her husband was one of the deadweights to be let go of.

He looked at his wife, who was yet to respond, then added, “Kachi, I truly don’t understand what you’re saying.”

“The same way you were given cartons of juice, water, and other products to manage.”

“What?” The man flared, as his eyeballs widened in their sockets. “Those idiots let you go? Do they not understand the work that you’re doing?”

“I’m a junior staff.”

Kachi eyed the envelope on the table, and that was when her husband noticed it, then looked up at her.

“But the junior lab assistants do all the work. Doesn’t the management know that? They need all hands on deck to find a cure for this devastating coronavirus yet they fire hard workers. We are finished in this country.”

“Calm down, Dele.”

“Calm down?” The man forced a smile, albeit sarcastic. “I don’t know how you can be calm knowing that they have retained senior staff, who don’t know how to do anything, to work.”

“You ask if the management does not know that the junior staff does all the work. Yes, they do, but it’s like asking them to fire themselves, then let the supposedly real workers work. It’s not going to happen,” Kachi argued. “Let them do the work. At this time, they will be forced to justify all the huge salaries they’ve been receiving. They have no other option than to work.”

Dele was silent.

Kachi continued nonetheless, “The main issue, though, is with the pay. They can’t afford to keep staff and still fund research and supplies. The operational costs at this time have tripled, as everything else has tripled in the market, strangely, due to the coronavirus. It’s baffling. But the government is also channelling a lot of funds to hospitals because doctors and nurses are needed to shoulder the outbreak. We, at the labs, normally work backstage. You know that already. And this is the time for doctors and nurses, not lab workers.”

“Look, I trust you more than anyone in the world,” Dele finally spoke. “You deserve to be there. You deserve to help out and find an anti-virus. This is not a joke.”

Before Kachi could respond, murmurs were heard in one corner of the sitting room. Both Kachi and Dele turned to the source and saw their kids peeping through a door, leading to a

room that wasn't theirs. It was Kachi and Dele's room, but they never for once complained when the kids went in there.

"Won't you come and welcome me?" Kachi called, and all three kids ran in, almost falling over each other.

"Mummy, what did you buy?" the oldest asked, and the others repeated.

"Something," she lied. "But since none of you welcomed me when I returned, I will give it to your daddy."

"Ohhhh," all three protested in unison.

"But mummy, we didn't know it was you at the door," the oldest, and by virtue of his birthright, the mouthpiece of the group, said.

"I said it was 'me'."

"But daddy said if they don't say their name, don't open the door."

Kachi turned to her husband, and cheekily asked, "Daddy, is it true?"

Dele didn't respond. He was absentminded and long gone in his thoughts. Her termination had hit him harder than she imagined. Between the two of them, brilliant workers, without any influence or connection in high places, after many years of work, their monthly take-home combined was not up to the meagre sum of two hundred and fifty thousand naira. It was just enough for them to live by each month after setting aside funds for feeding, utilities, supplies, trimestral school fees for three, and medical bills for the children; as the health plan of both parents didn't include the children, then savings to buy a car and move into a bigger flat.

They lived in a two-bedroom flat, the same one since they got married nine years ago. It had been like a mansion to them when they were just two, but with three kids in the package, the place seemed cramped up and prices of bigger flats were commensurate with the word 'big'. And now, in this period of uncertainty, they had to put all their desires aside.

But Dele's present distraction was not linked to money, want, lack, or how they would stock up their storage at least for the next two months, it was because he feared what would become of his family, the country, and the world if nothing could be done about the virus. He stood up.

Kachi's eyes stood up with him. "Dele?" she called.

He snatched the sealed envelope from the table and headed to the door.

"Dele?"



He forced his feet, one after the other, into his knockabout shoes that sat permanently by the front door.

“Dele? What are you doing?”

He opened the door.

She stood up, and yelled, “Dele!”

The door slammed shut in response.

## **Two: What have you done?**

***Tuesday, 10th March 2020***

Even when the kids had long gone to bed, Kachi was still wide awake. She glanced at her phone and 00:10 a.m. stared back at her. It had been almost fourteen hours since Dele dashed out of the flat and he had still not come home. She had called him endlessly but he didn't pick up or return the call. She was not worried that he was in danger, but worried about what he could be doing. The situation of the world, coupled with their present predicament was more than enough to push anyone off the wall.

Slumped on the couch, she unlocked her phone to call him again when she heard a knock at the door. She immediately jumped up and ran to the door. She unlocked it and yanked it open, and the stench of alcohol mixed with stale sweat threw her back. She scrunched her nose, tilting it to the side, as she moved away for Dele to enter. He staggered in.

"You've been drinking?" Kachi asked, which was more of a statement than a question.

Dele didn't respond.

She noticed that he didn't return with the envelope, and though she was curious about it, she didn't comment on it. He, on the other hand, continued to the couch and collapsed into it. She followed, sat across from him, and watched him quietly, overly tempted to press the issue of his drunkenness further, but not wanting to nag him and send him out of the house again. She also contemplated talking to him about his reckless behaviour by exposing himself, and his family to the deadly virus, then concluded that she had nothing to lose.

"Dele," she began. "You know I have no problem with you going out to drink or hanging out with your friends, but this behaviour is not acceptable. There's a crisis and a stay-at-home advice, and you still felt the need to go out and drink? Really?"

Dele didn't say anything. He didn't even move. For a second, Kachi thought he was asleep, because he snored wildly, which was usual for him, but this time, his snoring seemed rather intentional as if trying to make her give up and leave him alone. He was definitely awake and listening.

"Dele," she called again. "I don't know where you have been, but just know that you have exposed yourself to the coronavirus and that you have put your family at risk of contracting it too if by chance you have it. But if you don't have any issue with that, then so be it."

She stood up and walked away.

Dele turned his head to look at her at the same time she turned to look at him, and his eyes met hers because she had not gone far. She returned with the hand sanitiser and held it out to him. Lowering his head, he opened his palm and received a squirt, then massaged it into his hands. He did not want to look at her. She was right, and he felt stupid.

“I’m sorry,” he snorted.

Kachi had already turned around to leave when she stopped. “What?”

“I said ‘I’m sorry’,” he repeated.

Kachi returned and sat beside him, but still maintained some precautionary distance. “As I said before, I don’t mind you going out for drinks or hangouts. You just have to be safe this period, not only for yourself but also for your family.”

“I’m sorry about that too.”

Kachi looked at him quizzically. It didn’t occur to her immediately, but when the message hit her, she asked, “What have you done?”

“I went to your office.”

“What?” Kachi leapt up from the chair dramatically. “Why would you do that?”

“I wanted to tell your bosses that they were making a big mistake by letting you go. They had to know.”

“Why would you do that?” she repeated her question. “I have told you that they have no other option.”

“They do, but they just don’t care,” Dele replied, sounding annoyed. “This is not about the money. They just want a lot of you gone so that they will keep the small money and supplies they are receiving for themselves.”

“I don’t understand.”

“I told them that you were a good worker and willing to come back to work without pay, just to make a difference and help with the fight against the deadly virus.”

“You did?” Kachi felt suddenly uncomfortable. Although she was committed to her job and passionate about it, she didn’t think she could work for free, even if it was for a short period, especially if others would be getting paid for her own work. “What did they say?”

“They mocked me and said that there are other workers more skilled than you, so they prefer to keep only the best.”

Kachi lowered her head, undoubtedly upset. She then looked up, and asked, “Who said it exactly?”

“I don’t know, one of the bosses.”

Kachi sighed.

“I want you to get back to work.”

“I don’t understand.” Her brows furrowed. “You just told me now that they don’t want me back even without pay, but you still want me to go back. Do you expect me to kneel and beg them until they take me back? Wouldn’t I look desperate then?”

“You can go elsewhere. Apply to other labs. I’m sure they will be looking for extra hands.”

“Dele, I can’t work for free. Not at this time. Besides, I had been working tirelessly with my team and still got nothing. Why should I go and apply somewhere else, then when I get no results, they would lay me off as well? I’ve accepted my fate, and I choose to be with family until all this is over... if ever it ends.”

“I just don’t know why you are always doubtful,” Dele said, with a yawn. “I believe all you need is a purpose to...”

“A purpose to?” Kachi asked, but wild snores rent the air. This time they sounded real. Dele had fallen asleep.

Kachi sighed, as his words replayed in her head. He believed too much in her.

### Three: Normal or very bad?

*Monday, 23rd March 2020*

Two weeks flew by and the isolation had become unbearable for a lot of people, that is, those who heeded the advice to stay at home. Family members were not used to seeing each other throughout the day, except on weekends, which was only two days of tolerance, and usually over before it even started. But during this period, people were frustrated, and many were clueless as to what to do with their time and themselves.

Kachi's case was the opposite. She had initially been afraid to stay at home, unsure of how seeing her husband and children from morning until night indefinitely was going to play out, but her fears had long been allayed. She was happy that her husband was calmer than usual. He acted as if he was one of the children, obedient, regimented, and well-behaved. He would remain in the room until summoned to eat and watch T.V. when everyone else was watching. Kachi liked the peace and quiet.

She was in the kitchen, preparing ingredients to cook for the week, in and out of thought, when Olatunde, her eight-year-old son got her attention and brought her back to reality.

"Mummy, mummy, mummy," he called back to back, not giving her the chance to answer.

Kachi turned to him. "Take it easy, Tutu," she said, then noticed a scowl on his face.

She smiled because she knew how much he hated the endearment she had coined from his name, but it didn't stop her from calling him that. Olatunde sulked for he knew that it was useless trying to talk his mother out of calling him a name she had given to him when he was born, from what he had been told.

"What is it, Tutu?" It was Kachi's turn to bring him back to reality.

"Daddy is coughing."

Kachi raised both eyebrows, a bit surprised. The information was weird and unprecedented. "Coughing how?" she asked.

Olatunde lifted both shoulders and collapsed them almost immediately in what appeared to be a shrug. He had no clue.

"Normal or very bad?" Kachi pressed further.

"I don't know. He just shouted my name and told me to call you because he's coughing."

"Okay," Kachi simply said, as she processed the unusual information.

She washed her hands, mumbling to herself about why Dele would want to announce his cough to her or the whole house, then wiped them on her shirt. She dismissed Olatunde, who diverted and returned to join his siblings in the room they all shared, while she went to see Dele in their bedroom.

The room was hot and stuffy when she entered, and Dele was drenched in sweat. There was no power, so she understood why he would be so hot, though he hadn't opened the windows. She went to open them, but he stopped her.

"Kachi, please leave them," he said, in between coughs, then added, "I'm feeling cold."

She shrugged and came back to him, and that was when she noticed it... his state: his nose dripping and spittle flying as he coughed. 'How had she not noticed this before now?' she wondered, as she touched his forehead with the back of her right hand. He was cooking. She looked at him, lost until he sneezed on her and brought her focus back to him.

She jumped back immediately, but a little too late, then rushed out of the room to cleanse herself. She went to the bathroom and washed her whole hands and face with soap, then she applied an ample amount of hand sanitiser. If she could use the whole bottle, she would have. She used some of the sanitiser on her clothes, just to be safe.

Before going back to her husband, she retrieved her second phone from her handbag, along with some packets of biscuits, nuts, and juice boxes from the kitchen, then made a stop at her children's room. She put Olatunde in charge and instructed them not to come out of the room without permission, even if it was just to peep. She then gave them the snacks, drinks, and the phone to call her if they needed anything. She sanitised their hands, clothes, and door handles, then headed out.

"Mummy, is daddy okay?" Olatunde asked her on her way out, and she froze.

She turned around and looked at all three of them, before saying, "He is, but he doesn't need disturbance."

The kids smiled, and she left. She felt guilty for saying that, because she didn't know what was wrong with her husband and if he was going to be fine. In fact, she didn't know what he had exactly, but she needed to find out first before jumping to any conclusions.

She went back to her husband, sanitised the door handle, then opened the door, but didn't enter. He turned to look at her, sniffing without ceasing.

"Dele, just to be on the safe side, I'm going to the lab to get a testing kit."

Dele's look changed.

“I’m not saying you have the coronavirus, but I need to check, just in case,” she responded, but his look didn’t change. “You understand, right? It’s a precautionary measure.”

“Don’t go.”

“It’s for your own good.”

“I mean, don’t go there. If I have the—”

“Don’t say that,” she interrupted. “We don’t know that you have anything.”

He continued nevertheless, in between painful coughs, “If I have it, your bosses will come and take me away.”

Kachi smiled. “No one will take you away. Don’t worry.”

“Try and...” Dele paused to cough again and clear his chest, and Kachi waited for him to finish. “Try and get the kit from somewhere else.”

“There’s nowhere else I know of. Besides, if I even ask anyone, they would get suspicious. I would rather ask the people I know.”

“Even if they don’t like you?”

“Yes, because I know how to relate with them,” Kachi said. “I have to go now so that I can come back home on time.”

Dele nodded.

“I have given Olatunde some snacks and drinks for him and his younger ones and left my other phone with them. They are not to come out from their room without permission.”

Dele nodded again, and Kachi shut the door and hurried out, taking her mask, gloves, and mini hand sanitiser with her. She heard Dele from outside the door, he didn’t stop coughing.

## Four: So who is sick?

*Monday, 23rd March 2020*

Kachi arrived at her former office building, glad that they hadn't completely closed for the day. They were open for a few hours, but after the last truck of supplies arrived, they shut their gates and allowed only those with access badges to enter. She had met some opposition as the security guards at the entrance gate refused her access, arguing that she was no longer a staff member. She almost resorted to creating a scene, before she was allowed entry to see her former manager, Doctor Casmir Olanrewaju, the same man who had added her name to the sack list.

She entered the doctor's office, confrontational, but relaxed when she remembered that she needed a huge favour. She smiled at him, a fake smile, but a smile all the same.

"Good evening, sir," she said.

"Doctor," he corrected. Ever since he was awarded his doctoral degree a year back, he had insisted relentlessly on being addressed as Doctor instead of Sir.

Sir, Doctor, Kachi didn't care. On a good day, she wouldn't have complied, but not today. "Good evening, Doctor."

The man smiled underneath his mask. "How are you, Kachi?"

"I'm fine," she replied, then hesitated. "But I need help."

"Kachi, we told you all that we can only make some payments at the end of the month when we receive additional funding, but nothing for now." His reading glasses jumped on his face as he spoke.

Kachi flushed, then shook her head mildly. "Not that kind of help, sir. I mean Doctor."

"Oh." The man relaxed in his seat. "What do you want?"

"Please, I need a testing kit and some of the trial medication we've been using, just in case."

"Just in case?" the doctor repeated, sceptical.

"Yes, sir, I mean Doctor," Kachi corrected herself, then made a mental note not to forget.

"So who is sick?"

The question hit Kachi like a punch to the face, sudden, unexpected. "Who is sick?" she repeated.

"Who do you need the supplies for? Just in case?" Before Kachi could respond, he added, "Kachi, you worked with us long enough and you know what COVID-19 can do to someone



with a poor immune system or underlying health conditions. You have an obligation to let us know if you have encountered someone with the coronavirus disease.”

Kachi froze. What had she been thinking? That she would just waltz into the lab and ask for a testing kit without an explanation? It was exactly what she had been thinking. She gulped, then said, “Maybe when I find such a person, I will let you know.”

“The person needs to be taken away.”

“Yes, taken away, from their loved ones. I will initiate that as soon as I find this person.”

“It’s the best way to stop the spread.”

Kachi didn’t respond, but their eyes met each other’s, in a staring contest. His mask couldn’t conceal his seemingly wicked smile, so Kachi hissed quietly. He was the boss after all.

“Kachi, you had a good reputation here. Don’t just throw it all away,” the doctor said, then pushed his reading glasses up his nose. “That reminds me. Your husband was here two weeks ago because he believes in your skill, passion, and dedication. You need to maintain that.”

“Really? Because he told me that you wouldn’t have me back even for free and that there are others better than me.”

“I’m sorry I can’t help you, Kachi,” the doctor said, as he turned away from her, indicating that he had closed out on the discussion. “But remember what I said. You have an obligation to report any case you come across, and also a reputation to maintain.”

“I won’t forget any of that,” she said. “Thank you, sir.”

“It’s Doctor.”

Kachi didn’t correct herself this time, for she had said it intentionally. She turned around to leave.

“And Kachi,” he called, as he opened his desk drawer and pulled out a white envelope with her name on it. “I believe this belongs to you. Remember to keep all that you have been privy to, confidential.”

Kachi came back and snatched it out of his hand, then stormed out of the office. She was no longer curious about what her husband had done with the letter. She didn’t go home, however. She couldn’t go home knowing that her husband’s life could be in danger, and her children’s as well, by association, if she didn’t do anything about it. She thought quickly, then pulled out her phone and called the chairman of the junior staff union.

“Kachi baby,” the man answered.

Kachi sighed in irritation. The chairman was a friend and he joked a lot. He insisted on calling her that name despite her protests. Anytime she got upset about it, she considered it

nature's revenge on her for adamantly calling her son by a name he, too, didn't like. She gave the union chairman a break for that reason.

"Ismail, how are you doing?" she asked, and without waiting for an answer, she added, "Are you in the office?"

"Yes, I am. What's going on?"

"I'm coming to see you now."

She hung up and hurried off to Ismail's office before anyone saw her wandering about and sent her out. She knocked at the door and entered.

"Kachi baby, I'm so sorry I couldn't do a thing about your situation," he immediately said. "I'm sure I wouldn't even have been able to do anything had my name been presented. The only reason they left me on is that I'm a union executive. The executives of the junior staff union are the only ones they didn't touch."

"I'm sure everyone knows that and understands perfectly," Kachi responded, with a wave of her hand. "But I'm not here for that."

"What are you here for?"

"I need some supplies."

"Ah," Ismail already protested, without knowing what it was. "What kind of supplies?"

"A testing kit for the coronavirus and some trial medications we have been using for the symptoms."

Ismail's eyes bulged open. "For what?"

"It's confidential."

"But you know you can tell me anything. Besides, who am I going to tell? The people who fired you and would not hesitate to let me go?"

Kachi sighed. The man was right. "My husband is sick," she blurted. "Terribly sick."

Ismail waggled his brows mischievously and rubbed his palms together, then said, "Good. If he dies, finally he'll be out of the picture and you'll have time for me. So give me one reason why I would want to help him?"

"If he dies, chances are, I will too, so there's no point," Kachi said. She wasn't surprised or offended by the statement. The man joked all the time. "But seriously, I need to test him, just in case, and if it's the virus, I want to help him."

"For that level of support, you'll need to inform your former manager, but—"

"I already did," Kachi butted in.

“You did?” Ismail was shocked. “I was going to say, ‘But he will bring your husband in and quarantine him’. And if they can’t contain the situation, you know you’ll never see him again, right?”

Kachi knew that. “I didn’t tell him it was for my husband.”

“Don’t be naïve. I’m sure he is already making plans to go to your house unannounced.”

“Please, I need your help now, please,” Kachi said, moving from one leg to another in clear desperation. “Please.”

“Calm down, Kachi baby,” Ismail whispered. “And keep your voice down. I can get you the supplies, but if ever they are found with you, I didn’t give them to you.”

“I won’t say a word.”

“So who would you say gave them to you?”

“I don’t plan on getting caught.”

“Did you miss the part where I said your manager is making plans?” Ismail paused briefly, then added, “You know what? I think I have an idea.”

## Five: Under the trash can

*Monday, 23rd March 2020*

After thrashing her used mask and gloves in the trash can beside her door, Kachi hurried into her house. She had left almost two hours ago and the place looked the exact way when she returned. Even the rhythm and the frequency of Dele's coughing hadn't changed. The kids hadn't called, as they hadn't found any need to come out of their room. She sanitised her hands, then went into their room and saw them all asleep. It was going to be difficult to implement the plan that Ismail had suggested with them asleep. But she didn't relent, and she didn't waste any time at all.

She rushed to the kitchen and packed some food, snacks, and drinks, enough to last for a few days, then went into their room and also packed some clothes. When she was done, she woke Olatunde and his six-year-old younger sister Olajumoke up, then carried the three-year-old Olabode, who was still asleep and rested his head on her shoulder. She led them out of the flat, and they dragged their feet after her.

They didn't go too far. They walked a few steps to the neighbour, who shared the same floor as them. Her hands, heavy with bags and a big baby, Kachi was still able to knock.

"Who is there?" a voice bellowed.

"Ebere, it's Kachi."

The door opened in front of her, and without being asked in, Kachi entered with her kids.

"What's going on?" Ebere asked, making space for them to go through.

"Please, I need to leave the children here with you for a few days."

"A few days?"

"Yes, please. I'll be back before you know it."

Ebere wore a look, an unreadable one. "Don't you think you should have asked me beforehand?"

"I'm so sorry, this just came up. I wouldn't have come to you if I had another option on such short notice."

Ebere glanced at Olatunde and Olajumoke, then back at Kachi. "Would they even be okay staying with me for a few days?"

"Of course. They're used to you, and you're like an aunty to them. You were around when they were all born." Kachi exhaled. She was talking too much. "I need your help, please."

“Is something wrong?”

Kachi looked at her two kids, who were now fully awake and staring at her, also wanting to know what was wrong. She didn't want them to know what was happening, so in Igbo, she said, “I have to go away with my husband on an emergency for a few days, and you know we can't carry the kids around during this period and endanger them. We will be back soon.”

“What will they eat?” Ebere continued in Igbo.

“I have packed some food, snacks, and drinks for them, but I will leave my key under the trash can in case you need any other thing from my place.”

Ebere thought it was a huge favour to ask, but she nodded all the same. “Okay, no problem.”

Kachi turned to Olatunde and switched back to English. “Tutu, you are in charge now. So make sure everyone listens to Auntie Ebere and do not frustrate her.”

“Where are you going?” Olatunde responded.

“Away for just a few days, me and daddy,” Kachi said so that Olatunde wouldn't have to ask about his daddy or bring up his cough. “We will be back soon.”

Olatunde didn't respond.

“Tutu?” Kachi called. “Did you hear me?”

Olatunde nodded, looking sober. For once, the name ‘Tutu’ didn't sound so bad.

“Make sure you tell Auntie Ebere the food and bath routine and help her with it. Call me if you need to talk to me or Daddy.”

“Yes, mummy.”

Kachi took her last born to the couch and lay him down, then looked at Ebere. “I have to go now. I also added some masks, gloves, and hand sanitisers in the bag, if needed. Please call me if anything.”

“No problem,” Ebere replied.

After sharing hugs with her children, Kachi left and hurried back to her flat, then kitted up before going to her bedroom. Her husband still looked frail, but not much different from how she had left him. He turned to look at her.

“What is going on?” he asked. “Did you get what you were looking for?”

“I did, but we have to go.”

“Go where?” he asked, worried. “Did something happen?”

“No, but Ismail said that since I asked my former boss for a testing kit, he might send the authorities over here to investigate. So we have to leave, just in case.”

“I told you,” Dele retorted, then coughed. As if the cough had jolted his memory, he asked, “Who is Ismail?”

“A former colleague.”

“Okay.” Dele nodded. “So where are we going?”

Kachi hesitated, then replied, “Ismail’s place.”

“The same Ismail?”

“Don’t worry, he is just a colleague and a junior union executive. He offered to help and said we could use his place since he is mostly at work now. We need to be isolated, just in case.”

Dele said nothing, although the whole process and all the ‘just-in-case’ frightened him.

“Please, we have to move now or everything will be in vain, and I’m not ready to lose you.”

Dele still said nothing, but the look on his face meant that he was okay with whatever the plan was.

She approached him with the medicine that Ismail had given to her, which was expected to reduce his symptoms, assuming he had the coronavirus. And with her hands shaking out of fear, she administered two doses to him. Since she didn’t want them to share cutlery in the flat, she used the bottle cap, which she deduced to be 5ml, then put it in his mouth. He winced as he drank the awful mixture and massaged his chest as the liquid went down.

She packed up the medicine and changed her gloves, after which she put a mask over his nose and wore him a pair of gloves.

“You know I can do all this myself, right?” he asked.

“I know, but I don’t mind.” She helped him up, and continued, “I left the kids with Ebere for a few days and also gave them some provisions. If there is anything, they will call me.”

Dele kept silent again. He had no objection to what she had said, but he also had no comment to make. The look on his face still suggested that he was okay with the plan. She walked him out of the flat, locked her door, and placed the key under the trash can, as planned.

When they got outside, they walked a few minutes out of the Lawanson area where they lived until they got to the Masha roundabout, then boarded a private car used as a taxi. She paid for all the seats to avoid a crowd, otherwise, there would have been four people squeezed up at the back, and two in the front passenger’s seat. Once settled in the car, the driver zoomed off. Dele didn’t stop coughing, and the driver didn’t seem worried.

## Six: He is well paid

*Monday, 23rd March 2020*

The chartered vehicle dropped them off in front of a compound in Victoria Island that was secured by an unlocked gate and no security guard. It was already past 7:00 p.m. and daylight was fast fading, but there wasn't any artificial light in range to provide support apart from the few light poles on the street metres away. So they entered the compound cautiously, alert to possible danger, for anything that might spring out of nowhere and attack them.

The compound was not well maintained, with little bushes here and there and the main house that sat largely in the centre. It looked deserted and partly devastated, clearly in desperate need of salvaging. A broken-down car with four flat tires also added to the eerie atmosphere of the place. It was enough to chase anyone out, even frighten and deter hardened armed robbers.

Dele had initially thought that they were going into the property and almost changed his mind when Kachi led him to the back of the house following instructions that Ismail had given her. The backside of the compound was a different story entirely. It was clean and tidy and had a locked iron bar gate that one could see through. It housed a refurbished three-bedroom boys' quarters, where Ismail lived.

Dele watched quietly, as Kachi extracted a bunch of keys from her handbag and inserted the biggest one into the padlock on the gate. She then proceeded to the front door, looked through the set of keys, inserted another into the keyhole, and opened the door.

"Interesting. You not only have the key to his place, but you also know which goes where," Dele commented. The first thing he had really said since he first heard the name 'Ismail.'

"Dele, this is not the time to get jealous. He offered to help and gave me his keys while I was at the office." She showed him the keys, which had been labelled. "There's nothing else, please. I've never been here before, and when all this is over, I will never have to come here again."

"When all this is over? By that, you mean when I die from the virus, if I have it, right?"

"No, I mean when the work here is over, I won't need to come back anymore after we..." She paused and pointed back and forth between them. "You and me, have left here."

"Okay." Dele had no other option than to trust her if she was willing to do whatever it took to help him. "So what next?"

“He said we should go to his home office. It’s the first door to the right once we enter.”

They both entered and were amazed by the interior of the boys’ quarters so much that they believed it could pass for an apartment. Whether they liked it or not, there was a big difference between an apartment, a flat, and a boys’ quarters. The location also played a major role in the classification.

The apartment was painted pure white, and cream tiles adorned the floor making the place cool, even with no air conditioner or fan on. Plaques and photos of achievements decorated the wall, each tagged with ‘Ismail Baba-Raji’ and the name of whoever else was in the photo. The man had done a good job with his place.

Locating the home office didn’t require any special skill, as there was only one door to the right. Kachi led Dele there, then she opened the door and they entered. The room was truly a home office. It was spacious and could have been the master bedroom converted to the office because it had an en-suite bathroom and toilet. There was a desk at one corner with a desktop on it, then another larger desk with an incubator-like device on it. The gadget had about three entry points for the hands, such that several analyses could be carried out at the same time.

A monitor was connected to the incubator-like device and a camera was implanted in it to record experiments. The whole set was not topmost quality per se, but still commendable. In front of the desk sat a high swivel chair, like the ones in bars, to facilitate the use of the device. At the other corner of the room, a single bed was kept, probably for subjects to use or for a researcher who needed to be close to their work. Kachi didn’t know which, but she concluded that the room was a mini lab.

“Who is this man again?” Dele asked, as his eyes darted around.

“A junior staff union executive.”

“Still. Look at this apartment. No one would ever know that a place like this exists in this compound,” Dele said. He sniffled several times, then added, “I guess he is well paid.”

“Very well paid, I can bet,” Kachi added. “A workaholic bachelor who has nothing else to do with his salary decides to literally bring work home.”

“Bring office home, you mean,” Dele said, humouring Kachi, and she laughed. After a brief pause, he asked, “So what’s the plan?”

“Get comfortable on the bed let me run the test first, then we will know what to do next.”

“That’s fine,” Dele replied, as he climbed in, slipped off his shoes, and lay down laboriously.



Kachi changed both their protective gears and grabbed a cloth, which she expertly tied as a tourniquet above Dele's elbow. She asked him to stretch out his arm, and after rubbing the skin to reveal a vein, she slid a syringe in and drew blood. She then loosened the cloth before going to the analysis desk.

"So how long would it take before you know the result?" Dele asked.

Kachi sanitised the device, then had her face pressed into it, analysing the blood sample she had collected. "We received this new testing kit that will provide results within six hours."

"Six hours?"

"Yes. It took longer before, but many manufacturers are creating other testing kits to reduce the wait time," Kachi replied. "However, I said 'within six hours' so yours can come at any moment within the time frame."

Kachi's phone rang at that instant. She pulled it out of her pocket and saw that it was from Ebere. She immediately answered.

"Ebere is everything okay?" Kachi asked.

"Yes. The kids are well-behaved, but they have gone to bed now."

"Okay, so no emergency?" Kachi asked, relieved.

"No. Just that some men came banging on your door. I opened it and told them that no one was around."

"Who were they?"

"I don't know, because they were completely covered up."

'Ismail was right', Kachi thought. Her boss had certainly made plans to investigate her home right from the moment she asked for the testing kit. It was a good thing she had left. She took her focus back to the call, and asked, "What did they say?"

"They left without saying anything or leaving a message. I also don't know if they will return, but I will look out for them and let you know."

"Thank you so much," Kachi said. "You're a true friend."

"It's no problem at all."

Kachi hung up and turned to Dele. Without being asked, she vomited what Ebere had told her verbatim. That was where the conversation ended, as information, and nothing more. So they refocused on the test, and with many hours to wait for the results, they sat to talk and reminisce on the old times. Dele didn't cough much during the time, but his sniffing didn't stop.

Unaware of the time and how long they had been there, they were startled when they heard a noise in the apartment, which came towards them in the room-cum-lab. It took them a few seconds to remember that they were in someone else's apartment. The lab door opened and a middle-aged man wearing a mask, goggles, and gloves walked in. He moved the goggles over his head, and the mask under his jaw, revealing his face. He looked more like a model than a lab worker. Dele's antenna immediately stood.

"I'm Ismail Baba-Raji," the man said to Dele, smiling wildly. "You must be Mr. Oladele Adelabu."

"And you must be the man who likes my wife," Dele responded. "You can call me Dele."

## Seven: Eight days to live

*Monday, 23rd March 2020*

Any other person would have gotten offended by Dele's statement, but not Ismail. He was much of a joker, so he saw most things as a pun, rather than any other thing.

"Everyone can like anyone they want, but the woman always remains with who she loves," Ismail said, shining all his teeth, then laughed sheepishly. "Besides, women just never stick around long with me."

That was all Dele needed to confirm that there was nothing between his wife and the cute, and apparently wealthy former co-worker. Dele could already tell that the man was a clown because of his mannerisms and the way he talked, and to Dele, those were the only character flaws that probably kept him away from women, or women away from him, because while women liked funny men, they stayed off jesters.

Ismail turned to Kachi. "I hope everything is okay."

She nodded, scared and unsure if Dele would read unnecessary meaning to her response and reactions. She looked at him, and she could tell that he had no further issues.

"So have you gotten the result?" Ismail asked, then dropped a bag on the desk. "I brought some other trial material, as needed."

"Which one?" Kachi asked.

"Some alcohol solution just brought in earlier in the evening. I managed to sneak a bottle out before stock was taken, so they won't miss it."

"What does it do?"

"Who knows?" Ismail shrugged and laughed hysterically. "That's why we are lab workers and we have a station here. We will analyse it and see what purpose it serves."

"Okay," Kachi replied. She looked at the time on her phone; it was 11:30 p.m. Four hours had already gone by, so it was enough time to get a result. So she added, "Let me go and check the test result."

Kachi went back to the device and looked through it, her face pressed to it. She took longer than usual on it, turning the knobs from left to right as if she was trying to change the result she had seen.

"Kachi?" Ismail called, omitting the 'baby'. "Are the results inconclusive or what?"

Kachi finally peeled her face away from the device and looked at her husband. “Dele, I am so sorry.”

“What?” Dele scrunched his face and sniffled twice.

“The result is positive.” Kachi lowered her head, taking in deep breaths in utter devastation. “You have the coronavirus, and...”

She paused.

“And?” Dele repeated, urging her to speak, almost already having a heart attack from the first news and that which was yet to come.

She swallowed hard, and said, “It’s already at an advanced state.”

“What does that mean?” Dele asked.

Ismail hurried to the device before Kachi could respond, then said, “Let me see.”

Kachi stood up and gave him the seat, then she went to Dele’s side. Ismail didn’t waste any time. He sanitised the device, then just like Kachi had done, he pinned his face to the viewer, but pulled it off almost instantly and replaced his mask and goggles. Dele witnessed Ismail’s reaction and jerked in the process.

“What is it?” Dele asked.

Ismail shook his head. “It doesn’t look good at all.”

Dele looked at Kachi. “What are you both trying to say?”

Kachi and Ismail glanced at each other.

“I’m old enough to take any type of news, and for this, I demand to know what is wrong.”

There was silence.

“According to the result and calculations of the device,” Ismail said, helping Kachi out.

“You have about eight days to die, that’s already from today.”

“What?” Dele exclaimed. The shock somehow revived his cough, which had gradually stopped, because he held his chest and let out a series of them.

“To live,” Kachi finally said, her eyes betraying her, as tears gushed out of them. “You have eight days to live.”

Dele panicked. Live, die, he didn’t see the difference. He wasn’t sure which one scared him the more, but the bottom line was that he wasn’t going to make it out alive. He panicked again and wiped his forehead, as he said, “But I read it somewhere that it takes about fourteen days before I exhibit symptoms. Does it mean that I have gotten it since?”

Kachi shook her head, as she went to get the trial medicine, and his eyes followed her. Just as she had done in their flat, she administered a bottle cap dose to him, then replaced the drug.

Only then, did she reply, “Wherever you visited was filled with the virus. Everyone there was probably already sick and spreading it, so you must have caught it from several sources. You have an enormous amount of the virus in your system, that is why it is reacting very fast.”

“Okay. How can I see the kids?” Dele’s voice trembled. From what he understood, he didn’t have to wait eight days. He could drop dead anytime. “I need to tell them goodbye, even if it’s from a distance.”

“Don’t say that,” Kachi replied, amid streams of tears. “You’re not going to die.”

“You are not convincing if that’s your aim. You have already given me eight days to live.”

“I didn’t give you eight days to live,” Kachi corrected. “The test result did.”

“I’m sorry, I didn’t mean ‘you’ specifically, but I better make the best of the eight days.”

Kachi pulled away and went to talk to Ismail who had been looking at the two of them the whole time, not saying a word. Going by the result, he knew that Dele wasn’t going to make it if no cure was found, and he wondered for how long Kachi was going to deceive him.

“What can we do?” Kachi asked Ismail, wiping the tears off her face.

“Two things.” Ismail raised two fingers. “First you need to test yourself.”

“I know, and I will, but what can we do about him?” Kachi turned her head to check if Dele was listening. He was looking to the ground, lost. She turned back to Ismail. “I can’t give up on him.”

“Don’t let him die without seeing his kids.”

Kachi shook her head. “I have to help him.”

“How? We have been working tirelessly for weeks, a whole team, and have found nothing. So I don’t know how you expect you and me to come up with a cure.”

“I don’t expect you to come up with one. I only need you to help me with materials.”

“Kachi...”

“I can work out of here for the next few days.”

“Kachi...”

“He has seven days from tomorrow, which is only a few minutes from now, and I’m not going to sit down and do nothing.”

“Kachi!”

Both Kachi and Ismail turned to Dele who had been trying to get her attention.

“He is right,” Dele said. He sniffled, and Kachi didn’t know if it was still due to his illness or if he was going to cry. “There is no point wasting your time. What you need to do now is be strong for the family.”

“I will, starting from right now.” Kachi extended her hand to Ismail. “Please, help draw my blood and run the rest.”

Ismail exhaled loudly in a sigh. “I don’t have any kit here with me. I’ll have to get one from the lab tomorrow.”

“Okay. Please help me get copies of my notes and our research so that I can start working on a cure from here,” Kachi said, sounding desperate. “I will also need samples from all the trial medicines we have worked on.”

“That won’t be necessary.”

“Why not?”

“Because the results for all the samples came back yesterday and nothing worked. We need new products, new analysis, and fresh trial samples. In fact, we need new everything. That’s why the new alcohol solutions were ordered. The solution contains some compound bases and—”

“That’s fine. I’ll use the alcohol solution,” Kachi interrupted. She couldn’t care less about the components of the solution. “But I still need the notes.”

“I’ll see what I can do.”

“And the second thing?” Kachi asked.

Ismail tilted his head to the side, then remembered he had mentioned that she needed to do two things. “We need to report the case to the authorities,” he whispered.

Kachi frowned.

“We can keep it anonymous, but we have a duty to inform the authorities so that wherever your husband had visited when he supposedly contracted the disease will be locked down, and anyone who has been there, even from before he went there can be tested. That’s if they aren’t already sick and spreading the virus in a panic. It’s the best way to contain it.”

Kachi turned to look at Dele. He was looking at his hands and shaking his feet, clearly nervous. He sniffled again, but he didn’t cry. Kachi turned back to Ismail and nodded. “Fine. I’ll ask him for the name of the place he went to have drinks two weeks ago. I believe that was where he contracted it.”

## **Eight: Seven days to go**

***Tuesday, 24th March 2020***

Kachi had spent the rest of the night looking at Dele's result over and over again, and she did not stop until the morning came and the sun burst through the thick clouds, putting to rest the threat of a heavy downpour. She still couldn't believe it and wondered at what point Dele had contracted the virus. She knew it had to be when he went out drinking, still according to calculations, but it could have been somewhere else. She just couldn't tell, but what she knew was that he had been reckless, but it wasn't the time to scold him for that. Her main worry was to make sure that she herself was fine, the kids were fine, Ebere was fine, and although out of her hands, she hoped for a miracle for all of them, if needed.

Before Ismail had left for work at 7:00 a.m., which was his usual time, she supplicated for four extra testing kits, in addition to the one for her. Ismail couldn't make any promises, as he was already risking a whole lot to get her everything she wanted, but he was going to try.

When Ismail left, she returned to the desk to continue looking at Dele's test result, not sure why. Her eyes were aching and she hadn't gotten any sleep yet, at least not on a bed, because she drifted in and out of sleep, while seated, with her head bouncing around in all directions, until Dele woke.

"Did you get any sleep at all?" he asked.

She sat up, her eyes red and exhausted. She rubbed them, and replied, "I don't need any for now."

"Yes, you do."

"I'll get enough sleep when this is all over."

"But what would staying up do for you?" Dele asked. "If anything, it would make you even more tired and you won't be able to do any work eventually. We might as well just go home and wait out the remaining days until I die."

Kachi stifled a yawn. Dele was right. She stood up, getting support from the desk. "How are you feeling now?"

"Much better, with the cough and runny nose, although I feel weak and have pains all over my body."

Kachi went for the medicine and administered another dose to him, then she sanitised her hands afterwards.

“When would this medication stop?” he asked. He frowned because it left a bitter taste in his mouth.

“I won’t give you any more. The external symptoms should stop for now.”

“When would I get internal symptoms?”

“Everyone reacts differently, so don’t worry about that for now.”

“Okay, now go and get some sleep.”

Silence came from Kachi.

“Kachi you need it. Every other thing can wait.”

“I’ll go and prepare some breakfast for you first, then catch some sleep afterwards, before Ismail comes back.”

Dele relaxed. He knew that it wasn’t easy to convince Kachi not to do anything she had set her mind to do, so he was glad she listened to him. She headed for the door, and just as she was about to step out, he called her.

“Kachi, wait,” he said.

She turned around.

“Thank you, for everything.”

Kachi smiled weakly, then left the room.

Breakfast was simple, four slices of bread, with a splash of butter on each, and fried eggs, then creamy tea to push it down. Within five minutes, she had served Dele, then returned to the sitting room. Her body agitating for some rest, she slept on the couch for a while and was refreshed when she woke up.

The time was about 4:00 p.m., and Ismail was not yet back, but she wasn’t worried, because she knew how the office had been even before the first case was officially confirmed in Lagos State. Whether a staff member was doing any actual work or not, the person was kept long hours in the office to justify their salary.

Kachi went to check on Dele and met him sleeping, so she snuck out to the kitchen to heat up the lunch that she had packed for them, then took one portion to Dele. He was still asleep, so she placed the food on a tray by his bedside. She ate a little portion herself, then went back to the analysis desk.

While waiting for Ismail to return, she wanted to initiate the process of adding the alcohol solution to Dele’s blood sample to analyse the effect but noticed that there were no more active parasites in the blood. It was because the parasites could only thrive inside the living cells of an organism. The blood sample had been out long enough for all the active cells to



have been used and destroyed by the virus. Kachi needed a fresh sample. She went to Dele, who woke up as she approached.

He looked up at her, then at the syringe in her hand, then back at her face. "Is everything okay?" he asked.

"I need your blood sample."

"Where is Ismail?" he asked, as he looked around the room.

"He isn't back yet and we have seven days to go, so I need to start doing some work," she replied. "I want to test the alcohol, but I need a fresh blood sample."

Dele didn't question her any further. He stretched his hand, and she took the sample. She then went back to the desk and initiated the process. Shortly after, Ismail returned and came to the home lab fully kitted. Before leaving the office, he and his colleagues had been advised to go home and stay safe. He had laughed sarcastically about it because he knew that there was nothing like safety in his house. So he was going to remain kitted at all times until Kachi was done.

"You're back early," Kachi remarked, as she glanced at the time on the device. It wasn't 5:00 p.m. yet, although short of just ten minutes. "Did something happen?"

"No," he hurriedly said, then waved a greeting at Dele.

Dele waved back.

"I got the things you needed since morning, but I couldn't leave them with me all day in case someone saw them," Ismail continued. "I took a break, but I need to get back now."

Kachi smiled, relieved. "Thanks."

Ismail dropped the things, then left.

The first thing Kachi did was test herself. She had up to six hours to get the result, and she waited impatiently. In the meantime, and two hours down the line, by 7:00 p.m., she went to look at the alcohol solution process she had initiated and nothing had changed. She waited and watched for some time, then took a break and went to fix dinner. They ate together, albeit quietly, and when they were done, Dele used his phone to catch up on what was happening in the world, while Kachi went to wash up the dishes.

She returned later and checked both tests, and there was nothing new. She then went to sit at the other desk to wait. She wasn't aware when Dele slept off and wasn't also aware when she slept off until she woke with a start after hearing whispers. She was disoriented for the first few seconds before realising where she was and why she was there.

Dele was sitting up on the bed. He looked refreshed as if he had just taken a bath, and he had a change of clothes. Ismail sat not too far from him, but not too close to him either, and they were both talking and enjoying a bottle of drink each.

“Good morning,” Ismail said to her, making him and Dele laugh. “We lowered our voices. Sorry if we woke you up.”

Kachi waved her hand dismissively and stretched, then noticed what they were drinking. “Beer? What time is it?”

“There’s no time restriction to drinking,” Ismail replied. He lifted his mask a bit and took a swig of his drink, then flashed thirty-two teeth. “Besides, the man is sick and he might die anytime. One bottle of beer wouldn’t hurt.”

Dele laughed, almost uncontrollably. He seemed to already be used to Ismail’s jokes.

“Funny, but that’s not what I meant.” Kachi also laughed. She looked towards the window and the sky was black. Even the stars and moon seemed to have been chased away by the coronavirus. “For how long have I been sleeping?”

“For like four hours now,” Dele replied. “It’s almost midnight.”

“And you didn’t wake me up?” Kachi jumped off the chair and went to the analysis desk.

“I think he wanted you to rest,” Ismail volunteered. “And I already checked the results.”

Kachi looked at him, urging for feedback without even saying it.

“You tested negative for the virus.”

Kachi shut her eyes and sighed, relieved. Then she opened them almost immediately, awaiting the next feedback.

“The alcohol did nothing to the parasites. They dried out on their own after they had stayed long enough without an active cell to latch on to. We got the same result at the lab today.”

Kachi was exasperated. “It means that for us to achieve anything with this alcohol solution, we would have to introduce it directly into the host’s bloodstream when the parasites are still alive, and for long.”

“We might as well just shoot the host in the head because the alcohol will kill the person before it even finds the parasites.”

Kachi sighed again. She consulted her phone, which was on the desk, for the time. It was now five minutes to midnight. “We’re counting down the days and we’re still not close to anything.”

“Just take it easy,” Dele said. “I have already accepted my fate.”

“I thought I had, but not anymore.” Kachi unlocked her phone and scrolled through. “I’m going to see the kids first thing in the morning and also get them all tested. It would be nice for you to record a video for them.”

“Why don’t I just call them?”

“You can, but they can watch the video over and over again any time they want to see you.”

“You have a point. Okay, let’s do it now.” Dele smiled and pulled down his mask under his jaw. “I’m feeling energetic.”

Kachi tapped on her camera icon and scrolled over to the video option, then said, “It’s recording. Say something.”

## Nine: Six days he had

*Wednesday, 25th March 2020*

It was past midnight by the time Dele had recorded the video, and he went to sleep shortly afterwards. Ismail also sat-slept, tired from the long day at work coupled with the beer he had ingested, but Kachi didn't go back to sleep. Her eyes shone like an overcharged portable lamp due to the long hours she had already slept during the day. She would have enjoyed some company, but both logs passed out like bears after taking the last sip of their beers.

So instead of sitting aimlessly or trying to force herself to get some more sleep, she decided she would spend the time on her phone. She woke Ismail up, who staggered off to his room to sleep, while she went to the sitting room to lie on the couch, with her phone clutched in her hand. When she was comfortable, she unlocked the phone and searched through the web to follow up on general news around the globe.

Nothing good was being reported, especially on social media, as everyone focused on the coronavirus. In fact, the weight of the news was worse than the virus itself and enough to send people to their graves through means of fear. Having read and heard enough bad news for a few hours, she decided she would just look through funny posts and memes, especially from Nigerians because she knew that her compatriots always made jokes about everything in the world, whether good news or bad news. And as unserious as it was to her, humour was most welcome. She scrolled through, laughing at instances when she came across anything that tickled her senses.

When she had had enough of the jokes, the time on her phone displayed a few minutes to 4:00 a.m. She still had some time before she headed off to see her children. Without more ado, she drifted into sleep.

It was Ismail's movements that roused her by 6:00 a.m. when he woke up to get ready for work. There was no power, so he turned on his noisy generator so that he would not sweat as he prepared. The noise was enough to wake a whole neighbourhood up, so there was no way she could sleep through it. While Ismail went to use the *Jack and Jill* bathroom meant for the two other rooms in the apartment, Kachi went to check on Dele. He was still sleeping, so she freshened up in the en-suite bathroom and got ready. She then prepared a light breakfast, the same as the previous day, which she took to Dele. He had still not woken up, so she put the food beside him, left him a note, and headed out as soon as the sun came up.

Geared up with her face and hands protected and her sanitiser in her handbag, Ismail offered to drop her off at her bus stop and use the opportunity to chat with her.

“You know you don’t have to sleep on the couch, right?” he asked.

“I know, but I’m not really a guest, so I shouldn’t mess up your guest room.”

Ismail laughed. “You’re not serious. So what are you? A squatter?”

“That’s exactly what I am.” Kachi cackled. “And that’s why I’m sleeping on the couch.”

“But on a serious note, please feel free in my place for as long as you’re there.”

Kachi nodded. “Thank you, and sorry for the inconvenience.”

“You’re welcome,” Ismail said. “And I’m not inconvenienced.”

“You’re putting on protective gear almost twenty-four hours a day, even in your own home, which is supposed to be a safe haven for you. That’s an inconvenience if you ask me.”

“It simply means that I’m fully covered, and the virus doesn’t stand a chance with me.” He laughed again. “But it’s truly not a problem. Remember I suggested it?”

“Yes, but you didn’t know my husband had the virus then.”

“Don’t worry about it, Kachi baby. I’m happy to help.”

Kachi paused, taking a deep breath, before she said, “By the way, you have a lovely place.”

Ismail smiled.

“I’m sure at a point, my husband thought that I was hiding part of my salary from him if another junior staff could live in such a place.”

Ismail’s smile didn’t leave his lips. “Well, I wasn’t always a junior staff. I was a manager in my previous place of work.”

Kachi turned to look at him. “Really?”

He nodded. “And I used to live in Ikeja, in a proper house.”

“So what changed?”

“Victoria Island was a move I made to avoid long hours trapped in traffic, to and from work on a daily basis. My current place used to be a second residence in case I couldn’t go home anytime, but when I changed jobs to the present one in Victoria Island, I let go of the place in Ikeja and kept this one. Mostly because I couldn’t afford to maintain both with a pay cut.”

“I see, but I was referring to the reason why you left a manager role for a junior staff one.”

“Simply a poorly thought-out decision on my part.”

Kachi looked at him, waiting for further explanation. He had stopped moving because there was slight traffic heading towards the bus stop that would take her back to the Surulere axis.

“There was too much politics at my former office,” he carried on. “The people controlling the business were the CEO’s cleaner’s four children, who had somehow reached all the top management positions and were more or less the decision-makers.”

“Really?”

“Yes. And if they liked you, you would get a few perks here and there, and if not... well.”

“Why did the CEO engage his cleaner’s children?”

“Who knows? Maybe loyalty, trust, or voodoo.”

Kachi let out an animated laugh.

“It was kept a secret, but you and I know that there is nothing hidden under the sun.”

“That’s true,” Kachi commented.

“So I left because of the politics and got into a government-funded office where I met even worse.”

Kachi widened her eyes dramatically, and for the third time, she asked, “Really?”

“Yes. At least from the union point of view, you get to see a lot. The difference is that the bosses at the lab don’t hide the fact that they have brought in their domestic staff to run the affairs of the office. Their house helps have higher grades and higher pay and you wonder if your education had been in vain. The good thing is that I’m passionate about my job, so I’ll stay there until the crisis ends, then move on.”

Kachi didn’t say anything else. The road freed up a bit and Ismail drove up to a junction where he could make a U-turn and go to work so that he would not be late.

“Can I drop you off here? The traffic doesn’t seem to be moving.” He pointed ahead to a crowd of people. “The bus stop is just there.”

“No problem.”

“Please, keep safe. The effects of this virus are real.”

“I will.” Kachi opened the door and alighted. And before she slammed the door shut, she said, “You, too.”

Ismail made the U-turn and zoomed off, while Kachi hurried to the bus stop, trying as much as possible to keep a safe distance from annoying body gummies. She didn’t get into a bus, she instead hired a private car and requested to pay for all the seats, which the driver agreed to. He was one of the compliant Nigerians, Kachi concluded, because he had a face mask on, and a huge bottle of hand sanitiser sat in his cup holder.

As the driver engaged the road, Kachi turned her head and looked at the commuters, all clumped up together, trying to outsmart each other and get into available cars and buses. It

was as if many didn't know that there was a virus, or they didn't believe it was real. Whatever the case, she felt sorry for them and watched sadly as the driver accelerated and sped off.

Within an hour, and free of traffic, Kachi got to her neighbourhood and it was as busy as the rest of Lagos. Many people were on the street going about their business, but she didn't allow it to annoy her. She paid the driver when he came to a stop, and after collecting the money and putting it in his glove compartment, he quickly squirted a copious amount of the sanitiser on his hands, massaged his palms, then applied it to his neck, upper face, ears, and bald head.

Kachi laughed within, wondering what he hoped to achieve by doing that, then she alighted and bolted up her building. She passed by her flat first, disposing of her protective gear and using the key that was still under her trash can. Once inside, she had a proper bath, changed her clothes, then packed some more essentials and food for herself and her husband. She then locked up her place and replaced the key.

She went to Ebere's door and knocked twice, but nothing happened. When she repeated the pattern of knocks, drums of footsteps rushed towards the door and Kachi smiled knowing that her children were still themselves. Ebere asked who it was, and once Kachi answered, she opened the door.

"Mummy, mummy, mummy," her children yelled, as they hugged her almost knocking her over.

Kachi's smile hadn't left her face. "How are you all?"

"Fine," came a chorus answer, followed by Olatunde's question, "What did you buy?"

"Something, but because the three of you welcomed me at the same time, I won't give it to anyone," Kachi replied, glad that a good opportunity had presented itself because she hadn't remembered to bring anything for them. She looked at Ebere. "My dear, how are you?"

"I'm well."

"Hope they have been good children?"

"Very good. I'm so impressed. Well done."

Kachi blushed. She brought out her phone from her handbag and turned to Olatunde. "Tutu, your daddy recorded a video for all of you. Go and watch it in the parlour with your siblings."

Olatunde snatched the phone and ran off, and his siblings followed. Once they were out of sight, Kachi turned back to face Ebere.

"What is going on?" Ebere asked. "I hope you and Dele are doing okay."

"We are," Kachi half-lied. "But the virus is just spreading crazily, and people are not doing the right thing. If you go outside, you will see crowds and clusters on the street."

“It’s better because if people start to panic, it will get worse.”

“I am not saying they should panic, but that they should just stay at home or stay apart if they must go out.”

“You’re right.”

“Anyway.” Kachi looked into her handbag. “I need to test you all.”

“Test us all?” Ebere raised an eyebrow. “Why? Are you saying that we might have the virus as well?”

“Not at all.” Kachi smiled, then told another lie, when she said, “My office tested all of us and advised us to test our families so that we can be sure everyone is safe.”

“Oh, okay.”

“I will start with you, then the children, before I return to the lab.” Kachi brought out the testing kits, then opened the first one. “Give me your hand. I just need a blood sample.”

Ebere obliged without delay. She stretched out her hand and Kachi tied a cloth above her elbow. The process was over before she knew it. Kachi then went to the sitting room, where the kids were still watching the video. She knew that they must have watched it more than five times already, and was happy that she had suggested it.

“Tutu,” she called, and Olatunde left the phone with his sister. When he approached, she said, “Can you mobilise your siblings? I need to do a test.”

“Mobilise?” Olatunde curled his lips and looked to the ceiling as if he were trying to figure out what the word meant.

“Can you bring your siblings together so that I can take blood samples for a test?”

Olatunde didn’t think further about it, he said, “Okay.”

Kachi was impressed, as Olatunde went to talk to his siblings. He told them in clear terms that their mother wanted to take their blood. They both screamed, and his sister flung the phone before they ran away.

Kachi went to pick up the phone and put it on the table, then said, “I don’t want to take their blood. You make me sound like a monster.”

Ebere, who had heard the whole thing, exploded in laughter. She caught hold of the kids and brought them back to the parlour. “Don’t be scared. She just wants to collect a little for a test. She already took mine.”

“Ohh,” they all said, then formed a line behind Olatunde.

Kachi told each of them to look away as she tied and wiped their hands, then took the blood samples. Olatunde shook uncontrollably as the needle entered, stayed in for a few seconds,



and came out. After the ordeal, he used his mother's phone to record the reaction of his siblings, laughing at his sister as she scrunched her face and hopped around even before the needle got close to her. Ebere had to hold her before she calmed down. The process took longer for the last boy, as he fought everyone until he was restrained, and the sample was taken.

"I have to leave now and get these tested because it's time-sensitive," Kachi said, to no one in particular, as she put the samples in her bag. "I will call once I get the results."

Speaking of call, Kachi looked around for her phone, then saw that the kids had resumed watching their father's recorded video.

"Tutu, I need my phone," she said. "I have to leave now."

"We want to do one for Daddy, too," Olatunde pleaded.

"Go ahead, and hurry up."

They screamed in excitement and immediately began recording.

The video was created in less than two minutes, then Kachi transferred their father's video to her second phone so that they could continue watching it later. Afterwards, she left, gearing up herself first and scaring the children off. And just as she had come, she boarded a private car and returned to Ismail's place. First things first, she went to check on Dele, and he looked weaker by the day. One would think he had aged a few years. Even though they were meant to stay apart, she helped him to the bathroom to have a shower and brush his teeth, then he changed his clothes.

After the process, he self-isolated again while she prepared food for him. She transferred the video from the kids to him in two parts via WhatsApp, which he watched on repeat and laughed at each time. And as he ate his lunch when it was ready, Kachi went to process the blood samples. It had taken a few hours, but all four results came back negative, and Kachi didn't hesitate to call Ebere and give her the good news.

Kachi then spent the rest of the day reading and researching, while keeping an eye out for what everyone else was doing to find a cure. Intermittently, she checked on Dele and gave him something to eat and drink. He seemed to be getting worse with each ticking second, and she feared that he probably had fewer days to live than the six days he had.

## Ten: It's now five days

*Thursday, 26th March 2020*

Ismail returned from work sometime after midnight with no good news from his end. Apart from the fact that the lab had not gotten any more trial cures, more cases were being confirmed due to the perceived carelessness of the general population. A few deaths had been witnessed, by carriers, who looked and reacted worse than Dele but had not been made known to the public to avoid nationwide panic. Kachi thought it was a bad idea because she felt that people needed to know the truth to be more responsible.

Coming back to her own responsibility, Dele. She knew that it was just a matter of time before his symptoms got deadlier and extremely painful for him to bear. From the few cases she had been privy to because of work, the victims had suffered greatly in their final moments before death gave them an easy way out. She couldn't tell Dele any of this, of course, as the nature of her job and threats from her work prevented her from doing such. And she also did not want to scare him. It was the reason she wanted to do whatever it took to help him.

Kachi and the rest of the household had gone to bed shortly after Ismail returned home, but invasive thoughts had woken her up as early as four in the morning. Her head and heart were heavy with worry, so there was no place for rest. Her brain couldn't take in any more research or news, and she seemed to find all the jokes she had previously enjoyed, irritating. She had even been tempted to give in to internet bullying by replying insults to the jesters. Instead, she found succor in the thoughts of her children and watched the video they had recorded.

She laughed, and like Dele, put the video on repeat. After watching it endlessly and getting tired of it, she noticed the other one that had been recorded when she wanted to collect the blood samples. She hadn't seen that one before, so she played it, laughing as Olatunde made commentary throughout the time Olajumoke was fidgeting until her fears came and went.

In the same video, Olatunde laughed at Olabode, who was fondly called Bobo by everyone. As Bobo fought tirelessly against the blood sample collection, Olatunde revealed that Bobo was always fighting everyone even before he knew what he was fighting against. Olatunde added that sometimes, Bobo even fought himself to get the result he wanted. Everyone had laughed in the video, except Kachi who hadn't even heard it. And hearing it now, she still did not laugh. In fact, she almost cried at the realisation that, perhaps, she had just found the answer she needed. The only way to fight the virus, was by itself.

She sprung out of the couch and went straight to the home office where Dele was struggling to sleep. It was evident that he had breathing difficulty because he was wheezing and seemed to be gasping for breath. It sounded worse than when he snored. She wore her protective gear, then went to him and tapped his shoulder mildly.

He awoke instantly, squinting his eyes, but suddenly looked worried when he saw her. “Is something wrong?” he asked.

She shook her head. “No. I just want to run an experiment, and I need your blood.”

“Kachi.” Dele cleared his throat. His chest felt heavy. “I think—”

“Don’t say anything if it’s to make me stop the fight. It’s now five days to go and I don’t plan on giving up. Not now, not ever,” Kachi ranted, cutting him short. “Give me your hand, please.”

He sighed, relieved that she hadn’t come to end his life and put him out of his misery, then stretched his hand. With expertise, she collected the blood, then hurried to the analysis desk. She initiated a process of separating the virus from the blood, then went ahead to collect fresh blood from her own hand.

“What are you doing?” Dele, who hadn’t gone back to sleep, asked.

“I want to try and fight the virus with the virus.”

“How?”

“Once the parasite is introduced into the body, it latches onto a cell and penetrates it, then replicates as it destroys the cell. It’s a continuous process, so I want to introduce fresh viruses extracted from your blood back into the affected blood to see if the fresh viruses would eat up the active cells, which would still have resident viruses in them, in the process of multiplying.”

Dele, his face a mass of confusion, said, “I don’t understand.”

“Okay, let me explain better. When a virus enters the system, it latches onto a living cell and penetrates it, then multiplies within, before bursting the cell.”

Dele’s face changed. He could only imagine what was going on in his body.

“So while the resident viruses are entering more cells and multiplying, I want to introduce fresh viruses, which I’ll call ‘visiting viruses’. The visiting viruses would not know that there are already resident viruses in the living cells, then they would latch onto the infested living cells and eat them. And in the process, they will eat the resident viruses and their duplicates inside the cells.”

Dele nodded. He now understood, but something else needed clarity. “Okay, but what then happens to the visiting viruses after they have eaten the resident virus-infested cells? Wouldn’t they just get stronger?”

“On the contrary, they might get weaker after digesting a pack of viruses of their own, disguised as active cells. I believe that the unsuspecting visiting viruses might just get the disease and stop multiplying, then eventually die off.”

“Wow,” Dele replied, almost crying. A glitter of hope sparked in his eyes. “And this is sure to work?”

“I don’t know. It’s a trial, and there’s only one way to find out.”

She inserted the syringe into her stretched-out arm and immediately drew blood, then went to start the process. She imagined dreamfully how the world would change if her idea was brought to fruition... if it all worked out.

But it didn’t work out, at least not completely, because the virus was quite stubborn.

The whole day had been spent on the process, from separating the virus from Dele’s blood, dividing the extracted virus into two batches, introducing one portion into Kachi’s fresh blood with cells still active to form a test solution of resident viruses, and introducing the other part of the virus to the test solution to see if the visiting viruses would attack the disguised resident viruses.

Everything had gone tremendously well, and the visiting viruses had immediately attacked the living cells. As a result, the attacking set of visiting viruses was slowed down, pregnant with a ball of resident viruses. Even when Kachi introduced a new sample of her fresh blood, the visiting viruses did not attack the new cells. They remained dormant.

Dele had celebrated at the result, but not Kachi. She had half-celebrated but wasn’t close to satisfied. She wanted the visiting viruses dead and gone from the system, not asleep in it. But she admitted to herself that it was a first successful step. It was about 8:00 p.m. when she had completed the whole process and experiment, so she waited to know what would happen next to the sleeping visiting viruses.

## Eleven: We have four days

*Friday, 27th March 2020*

When Ismail returned late into the night, or rather early into the morning, he reviewed the recording of what he termed a successful process, and he, too, was jubilant. It called for a celebration and bottles of beer were shared amongst him and Dele, which they sipped from underneath their masks.

Kachi wasn't in the mood to drink, but she didn't kill their spirit either. What she had found was a major milestone, so she didn't object to them celebrating on her behalf. She wanted to stay focused and observe the sleeping visiting viruses. They didn't move, but they didn't die, either. They were just stubborn. She had even added an alcohol solution, and nothing changed.

More hours passed and zilch happened. Night fell and the sun came up in the morning, but there was still no change. Ismail had come to check on Kachi and the process before heading off to work, but unlike her, he was happy that something good might come out of the whole process. The whole thing made Kachi look like a madwoman, checking almost every fifteen minutes to see if things had changed, and talking to herself if she didn't get her desired result.

The next time she checked on the analysis a few more hours later, all the active cells in her blood had dried out, so she introduced more blood, but the stubborn viruses still did not move. She was confused. She didn't know if it was a good sign, one of victory, that she had rendered the viruses useless, or a sign of worse things to come if the viruses became even stronger as her husband had pointed out, taking the strength of several viruses in one.

She had also contemplated initiating the process on her husband, but it had only been one day of observation, short of three hours, so she was afraid of the outcome if, after a few days, the viruses bounced back bigger and stronger. She looked at the analysis again and the active cells in her blood had dried out. She picked up a syringe to pull more blood when Dele spoke.

"If you continue taking your blood at this rate, you won't have any more left."

Kachi halted, with the needle close to the crook of her elbow, just below a tourniquet. "We have four days only. I need to speed up the process and see what the viruses are up to."

"The parasites are asleep, why are you trying so hard to wake them up?"

"If this is trying hard to wake them up, then what would you say if they are in someone's body? They will have an endless supply to feed on there and wake up without effort."

“Why don’t you just try out the process on me? At least the viruses have gone a whole day without incident.”

“Almost a whole day. It will be exactly a full day in three hours’ time.”

“Three hours only? That’s not a lot.”

“What if after twenty-four hours, the viruses wake up?” Kachi asked, and without waiting for a response, she added, “Ideally, I should wait for up to twenty-four hours and some, before carrying out any tests on a human.”

“I don’t mind.”

“But I do,” Kachi fired back. “What if they wake up after twenty-four hours and become stronger, then kill you instantly? I would have created a new powerful strain of the virus.”

“And what if they don’t? What if it takes them a few days to die off and get flushed out of my system? We won’t know if we don’t try, and we cannot afford to wait to find out. The time is now.”

Dele was right, and Kachi knew it. The more time she waited to observe the sleeping viruses, the more time she wasted. She looked at him and nodded. It was time to initiate the process on him and take whatever consequence that came with it, good or bad.

“Try it and let us see,” Dele said. “We have absolutely nothing to lose at this point.”

## Twelve: In about three days

*Saturday, 28th March 2020*

Night and morning, Kachi didn't pay attention to the times of each day, she only put her mind on the fact that once it was midnight, it was the start of a new day and one day less for her husband to live. She had done the process on him, as agreed, and it had worked. His own had taken longer to activate than the initial test because of the mass of virus in his system compared to the little sample that had been collected. And as expected, the visiting viruses had attacked the resident ones and also those in the cells leaving him feeble, and the attacking visiting viruses dormant. Further blood tests maintained the good news, and after six hours of observation, nothing changed.

Kachi knew that nothing would change with the sleeping viruses within the twenty-four-hour time frame. All she was interested in was what would happen after one full day. Like the previous day, Ismail came home and celebrated, but he was the only one who drank. Dele was on supplements to build up his immune system and his strength, and Kachi wanted to remain focused. Ismail didn't mind celebrating and drinking alone, and also couldn't wait to celebrate with the whole world.

At 1:00 a.m., which was now twenty-nine hours after the initial test and eight hours after it had been carried out on Dele, Kachi had gone back to the analysis desk to check up on the sleeping viruses and received a shocker. The stubborn viruses had moved, and her legs gave way, almost throwing her to the floor. Luckily, the chair stopped the fall. It took her some time to regain herself, then she stood up.

She looked at the analysis again and saw the evil visiting parasites in motion. It meant that sometime after twenty-four hours, they were going to wake up in Dele, which also meant that he had a minimum of sixteen hours before that would happen. Kachi wished that she could flush the viruses out somehow before the deadline, and also feared what would happen if she wasn't successful and they got a fresh supply of active cells to feed on.

She was afraid to reintroduce more fresh blood to her experiment, unsure of how the visiting parasites might react. After much thought, she did. The viruses moved towards the cells, but slowly, and oddly, Kachi saw hope in that. She concluded that her main work now would be in looking for a way to destroy the viruses in their vulnerable dormant state, rather than just finding a way to flush them out of the system.

She reasoned that if she flushed them out, they would still be alive, albeit asleep, and when they eventually awakened, maybe in trash cans or other surfaces, they would find their way back into people and start spreading again. She felt that there had to be a way to permanently stop them, so she decided to carry out extensive research on viruses in general.

She wanted to research their origin and sources, and their components and weaknesses, so she moved from the analysis desk to the normal one with the desktop, then fired up the system. Unfortunately, that was when the power distribution company decided to cut the electricity and leave her in total darkness. Within seconds, the confused tunes of exhausted generator engines came alive in the neighbourhood almost deafening her.

The desktop did not go off immediately because it was connected to a UPS that was already beeping annoyingly. Kachi reckoned that she had limited time to do the research, so she got to work. A USB stick branded with the name of an internet service provider had been plugged into one of the ports of the monitor, and a green light blinked several times on the tip before it stopped. She was connected to the internet and had no issues going online for her research.

She began without delay and once she was satisfied with her general research about an hour later, she focused fully on the Covid-19 strand, the killer of the moment. There wasn't a lot of information on the parasite, but just like other viruses, they had similar basic components, so Kachi figured that there could be something out there to fight them. She powered up the flashlight on her phone, got out the research book that Ismail had brought back for her, then took notes. She also looked out for all compounds and acids that had been used to tackle other viruses in the past.

When she was done, she turned off the system, surprised that the unmelodious mix of the beeping UPS and all the coughing generator engines hadn't woken Dele or Ismail up. She then went to the sitting room where she lay on the couch and ruminated over all her findings. Thereafter, she wrote a list of the items she wanted Ismail to bring back for her before Dele crossed the twenty-four-hour timeline.

She didn't know when she fell asleep. It was Ismail who woke her up in the morning before he left for work. They never worked on Saturdays before the pandemic, and suddenly, people had to be present almost every day. Ismail said that an emergency meeting had been called, so he had to go. Kachi had lost track of the days of the week, so she was glad, for had Ismail stayed at home, she wouldn't have been able to get the things she needed before it was too late.



She didn't tell him that the viruses had moved in order not to kill his joy, but she asked him to get her hydrochloric acid, potassium chloride, and sodium chloride, preferably before midday, which would leave enough time to test the items before using them on Dele. Ismail did not make her any promises, as usual, but he said he would see what he could do.

Kachi also didn't tell Dele that the viruses had moved when he woke up. The news alone was enough to kill him, especially as he had sleeping viruses in his body. When he asked her if anything had changed, she denied it, then went about making food and preparing breakfast, lunch, and dinner at the same time. She had all the time in the world until Ismail came back, so she wanted to busy herself with other things.

After she served Dele's breakfast and had hers, she called her children and they spent time catching up on what each person had been up to. She also spoke to Ebere and thanked her again for her help. Dele displayed a level of energy that should have made Kachi happy, but she knew that it wasn't going to last for too long. When the call was over, Dele went back to bed to rest, while Kachi went to check up on the resurrected parasites. It had taken them a while, but they had finally reached the cells of the blood. They had latched on but had not yet entered. Kachi figured that the cells would dry up before the parasites got a taste, so she drew fresh blood and introduced it.

She looked at the time restlessly hoping that Ismail would show up soon, as his absence made her worry. In about three days, it would all likely be over and Ismail coming on time was the only thing that could help. It was her last hope. Not wanting to kill herself with worry, she had gone to check on the parasites again and they were still on the cells. They hadn't found a way in yet.

As she moved away from the device, she heard a noise at the front door, then Ismail rushed into the lab office holding a sealed medical bag containing the supplies. Kachi looked at the time on her phone and it was just a few minutes to midday. He had come in at the right time. She still had five hours to Dele's sleeping viruses' deadline.

"Sorry, I can't stay," Ismail uttered. "I snuck out of the office to get you this."

"Snuck out?"

"Yes. Things are getting hot with all the cases coming up, I believe. There are even police officers around."

"What do the police have to do with anything?" Kachi queried. "I don't understand."

"Neither do I, but you will know more when I return tonight."

Kachi thanked him and he left.

### Thirteen: Two days I have

*Sunday, 29th March 2020*

Kachi had worked tirelessly since Ismail left, trying to combine the right quantities of the compounds he had given her to get the solution she required. At intervals, she had given food to Dele but made sure she didn't mention that the viruses had moved or even latched onto the cells. She saw the hope in his eyes and didn't want to dash them. She had also taken his blood sample every hour to check that the viruses in him were still sleeping, and luckily, they were.

When she revisited the resurrected viruses, they had still not entered the cells. Even the new cells she had reintroduced via her blood sample were impenetrable, which was still excellent news. It meant that the viruses were either still too weak or they had lost their ability to enter a cell, but she still wanted them eliminated.

When the time struck 2:00 a.m., which was nine hours past the twenty-four-hour window following Dele's test, Kachi went to him for the umpteenth time to take another sample of blood to analyse and he got suspicious.

"Kachi, what's really going on?" he asked.

"I don't understand." She feigned ignorance.

"You have been collecting my blood almost every hour. Why?"

"To analyse it and check if the viruses are still dormant."

"Okay, but why?"

"I don't get." This time, she truly didn't understand what he was trying to say.

"The only reason you would do that is that something has happened to the initial sample you were working with, otherwise you wouldn't need to take mine all the time."

Kachi went silent.

"Kachi?"

Kachi breathed loudly, then replied, "There's good and bad news."

"I will take the bad one first."

"The viruses moved."

Kachi and Dele's eyes met at that instant, and Kachi could tell that Dele had just died on the inside. He didn't need to say it or drop down to the floor. It was evident on his face.

"The good news is that even after I introduced my blood, the awakened viruses didn't attack the cells," Kachi continued. "It means that they could be weakened for life."

Dele still didn't talk.

"But I have one more try at eliminating the visiting viruses while they are asleep, which is why I'm always checking your blood to be sure that they are still asleep." Kachi paused and got no reaction from Dele. "That is what I want to do now. If it works, then you will be virus-free for good, and so would the world."

"If not, I have to make good of the two days I have left."

"One step at a time."

Dele shrugged and extended his hand, thankful that it was the last shot. He didn't know if he had any more blood to give. Kachi took the sample, then dashed off to the analysis desk. She checked it and saw that the viruses were still immobile. She immediately got to work and took out the solution she had created, which was artificially made gastric acid.

From what she had read, viruses typically consisted of a nucleic acid molecule in a protein coat, and gastric acid was known to play a key role in the digestion of proteins. She believed that if she added gastric acid to the already weakened and sleeping viruses, their coating would be digested, and they would be destroyed for good.

She poured the acid over the sleeping viruses and didn't move an inch. Dele had watched her silently until he fell asleep, but she hadn't said a word to him. She didn't want to miss any part of the process, although it was being recorded. She stayed put for about an hour when she saw it. What she had been waiting for finally happened.

Layer by layer, she saw the viruses disintegrate and scatter about, then the active cells in the blood moved on the particles and devoured them instantly. Kachi tilted her head backwards, with her eyes and mouth open. She couldn't believe what she had just seen. Her shock lasted a few seconds before it turned to joy. Without wasting any time, she went to Dele and tapped him gently on the shoulder, waking him up.

"What is wrong, or right?" Dele asked a pleased-looking Kachi, "Because, for the first time in days, you are really smiling."

"It worked," she screamed.

"What?"

"The gastric acid worked."

"What gastric acid?"

"I created gastric acid using the right quantities of hydrochloric acid, potassium chloride, and sodium chloride. I felt it would destroy the protein coating the viruses and it did, killing them, then cells in your blood ate them up."

Dele didn't understand what Kachi had just said, and her graphic description sounded too dramatic for him, but he knew that it was good news, and it was all that mattered.

"So can you test it now?" he asked.

"Hmm." Kachi paused. "I don't know if I can introduce gastric acid into the body. It might not only destroy the viruses but also attack other organs or membranes in the body."

Dele didn't want to give up. He asked, "Is it something you can look up?"

"Yes, or I can ask Ismail." She went back to the desk and picked up her phone to give him a call. It was 3:20 a.m. and it suddenly worried her. "I wonder why Ismail isn't yet back."

"Maybe he came back and didn't want to disturb us."

Kachi shook her head. "I doubt it. He always comes in here, no matter what. He mentioned that things were hot in the office, so maybe he was held up. I'll still give him a call."

Kachi made the call and it rang out. She called a second time, and the same thing ensued. It wasn't any different the third and fourth times, and after the fifth time, she gave up. Although awfully worried, she didn't show it. She just went to the desktop, powered it, and ran a quick search on introducing artificial gastric acid to the body.

She didn't find anything on the subject, but she figured that if the acid attacked any internal organs of the body, they would be able to heal much later. Moreover, the acid had gone for only the viruses and not the active cells, so it was a green light for her.

She turned to Dele. "Are you ready to take a risk?"

He nodded, and Kachi proceeded to inject him with a first dose of the acid, then waited for some seconds to check for reactions, but nothing happened. The process had gone smoothly, so Dele went back to the bed to rest. Kachi also went to take a seat, but she could not stop thinking about the possibility that something was wrong with Ismail. She had tried calling him again, and still, there was no answer.

At intervals, she checked on Dele and sampled his blood, but there was still a presence of the viruses. She figured that it was because his blood was filled with them, so it was going to take longer to kill them all off. Also, she didn't know what total quantity or dosage of gastric acid she had to use, so she injected a little at a time and observed every hour.

Morning came and left and there was still no word from Ismail. Dele didn't panic, but Kachi was gradually losing focus. She was now convinced more than ever that something was off. She only hoped it wasn't very serious. Against the voices in her head, she called Ismail again, and this time, his phone was switched off. It was enough to send her to an early grave, but for the sake of Dele, she put in some effort to focus on the work she had started.

Hour after hour, she observed Dele, and each time noticed that the viruses were reducing in mass with each sample of blood that was collected, and his active cells were healthy. It was amazing news. She kept track of the dosages she was giving to him, and the interval, as well as the time it was taking for it to react. She could not tell if there was any form of internal damage for the time being, but Dele did not complain of any pain or discomfort. So she continued to observe until night fell.

## **Fourteen: No more after today**

***Monday, 30th March 2020***

A new day came and there was still no word from Ismail. Kachi couldn't take it anymore and Dele now saw reason to be worried. The fact that they couldn't reach him on the phone made matters worse. Kachi was tempted to go to the office to check on him. As a matter of fact, she decided that she would go there first thing in the morning, with the pretense of going to speak with her former boss, then she would use the opportunity to look for Ismail. She didn't want anyone to know that they were working together and illegally carrying out experiments.

Speaking of experiments, she observed Dele some more and could tell that he was only getting better. He had one more day to live according to the result of his first test from eight days back, and if the current result continued improving, then he would have a full lifetime to enjoy. She smiled suddenly at the thought of that.

"What are you thinking about?" Dele asked, waking her from her thoughts.

"A few days ago, I was counting down each second, minute, and hour, afraid that you would be no more after today, and now, there's hope that we will have many more days together."

"I know, and although I want to be happy, we still have until the end of the day to—"

"Don't even say that," Kachi interrupted.

"I meant to declare me virus-free. That's what is left. Total elimination of the virus."

Kachi nodded. "And I hope that's what we get."

Dele was observed for the rest of the early hours of the morning, and Kachi continued to keep notes. The sun had come up for the day and Kachi prepared herself to go to her former office to look for Ismail. She hoped he was there and held against his will rather than to have been involved in an accident, or worse, robbed and killed. The silence was murderous.

Before she prepared to leave, she went to check on Dele again. There were only traces of the virus this time and it was fantastic news. Dele was over the roof, while Kachi still didn't want to fully celebrate. A part of her did not stop to worry that something might go wrong. Until his blood was a hundred percent cleared, she was still hanging on the line. She was going to inject what she felt was the last dosage in the process when she heard a noise at the front door. Someone had opened it.

"Thank goodness," she said.

“It’s about time he returned,” Dele added.

Kachi had already put the needle to Dele’s arm, ready to insert it, when she halted. Something wasn’t right. Dele also noticed it and they looked at each other. They had heard footsteps, several, and the apartment sounded noisy. Both of them looked towards the door, as the stomping got closer, then before they could react, the door burst open, and about half a dozen people stormed in. They were all clad in protective overalls and head masks with clear goggles, so neither Kachi nor Dele could tell who they were. A few more of the intruders stood outside the room, as there wasn’t enough space for all of them to stand inside.

Kachi’s face was a mélange of fear and confusion. She didn’t know what was going on and didn’t know who the people were. The only part of their bodies she could see was their eyes, behind thick glasses, so she couldn’t recognise anyone even if she wanted to.

The person who led the group and stood in front of them, spoke from a distance, “My name is Inspector Tunde Osbourne from the Criminal Investigation and Intelligence Department of the Victoria Island Divisional Police Station.”

“Criminal?” Kachi repeated. It was the only thing she had heard.

“Yes,” the inspector replied. “Now, drop that syringe and step away from the bed.”

Kachi looked at the inspector’s eyes, then at the syringe in her hand, and finally at Dele. Her hand trembled and Dele feared that she would injure him if she attempted to quickly inject him. She, too, feared the same thing. But without anyone anticipating her next move, she tried to force the syringe into the crook of Dele’s elbow, and Inspector Osbourne immediately responded by pulling out his gun. He aimed it at her.

“Step away from the bed and get on your knees,” he ordered.

Kachi flew to the ground, having never seen a gun at close range in her entire life. She let go of the syringe and held her hands over her head refusing to even look up so that she would not get shot. Inspector Osbourne went to her and struggled to get on one knee because of the size of his protective overall. Once successful, he replaced his gun under a flap on the backside of his overall, then unhooked a pair of handcuffs and restrained her.

“This is intimidation,” Dele blurted when he got himself together. “What is her crime?”

“Stealing medical supplies from a State-funded lab where she previously worked,” Inspector Osbourne replied, as he lifted Kachi onto her feet. He then turned to look Dele in the eyes, and added, “And for also harbouring a highly contagious being. You. Thereby endangering the rest of the world.”

“The rest of the world is already in danger,” Kachi whimpered before Dele could respond. “And it is going to get worse. What I’m doing is trying to save it. I have also not stolen anything from anyone.”

The inspector moved Kachi to a corner, then nodded at the people who had come in with him, and they went directly for the analysis desk, attempting to pack it up.

“Those are mine,” Kachi yelled, getting her voice and confidence back. “Don’t touch them.” No one paid her any attention.

“I haven’t done anything,” she continued, yelling at the top of her voice. “Leave my things alone.”

“They are not your things,” a voice said from outside the door, and Kachi recognised it. The person squeezed through and entered, and the glasses he wore under his goggles shook, as he said, “Ismail already confessed to his crimes and is currently locked up by the police.”

Kachi was shocked, as she looked at her former boss, Doctor Casmir Olanrewaju. If stares could kill, the man would have dropped dead before he even stepped a foot inside the room.

“I told you that you had an obligation to report any case to us, which you didn’t,” the doctor continued. “Instead, you hid the case and connived with Ismail to steal precious supplies from us, which we would have used to find a cure.”

“The case wasn’t hidden,” Kachi said, sounding calmer than before. “Ismail reported it.”

“Anonymously. He had called the police to let them know that someone who went to a local bar had contracted the disease from multiple sources and was displaying extreme symptoms. The only mistake he made was that an anonymous random caller wouldn’t have known what protocols to follow, so it had to be one of us. Imagine my surprise when we traced the caller back to Ismail, and not you, and after two days of questioning him, he eventually confessed.”

Kachi said nothing to him. She looked at the people packing up her things and turned to the inspector. “Sir, yes, a friend stole the supplies for me, and yes, I kept a case hidden, but I did it out of passion and love. The highly contagious being you referred to is my husband, and we have three kids, so I couldn’t just let him die without at least trying to save him.”

The inspector said nothing, as he wasn’t moved or sorry. He just watched his team work.

“Sir, arresting me will do more harm than good. I have worked tirelessly for the past few days, and I can confirm now that I have found a cure because my husband has recovered.”

Everyone looked at Kachi, the inspector included. Kachi gulped. She hadn’t expected the reaction, but she was happy that she had everyone’s attention.



“The whole process of the work that your people are dismantling has been recorded. If one of them can just look through it, they will confirm it to you.”

“These are police officers ordered to take you in and return all that you have stolen back to the owners,” Inspector Osbourne replied. “We cannot read your results.”

“I can,” Doctor Casmir said, and without being invited, he went to the analysis desk to look into the device. Just a few seconds were all he needed to confirm that something positive had occurred, although he didn’t readily know how it had come about.

“You don’t have to be a lab worker to read the results,” Kachi clarified. “You can watch the whole process that was recorded. Each day of research has a summary as well.”

Inspector Osbourne immediately moved Doctor Casmir aside like a kid and looked through the recording. He didn’t understand fully, but it was clear that improvements were made when he was able to differentiate between the virus, the human cells, and the solution used to kill the viruses. He had only watched the summaries, as suggested by Kachi because each of the eight recordings was twenty-four hours long, except the first, which was only a few hours long.

“Pack everything up,” Inspector Osbourne ordered, gesticulating with his fingers. “We are taking them all with us to a police base.”

“That wasn’t the plan,” Doctor Casmir said. “The research and outcome belong to our lab.”

“No, it doesn’t,” Kachi responded. “The supplies might have come from you, but the result belongs to me. It’s my intellectual property.”

Dele nodded in support of his wife, while the other figures looked back and forth between Kachi, Doctor Casmir, and Inspector Osbourne as they exchanged words.

“Intellectual property you have gotten while working with us,” Doctor Casmir pointed out. “So we will have to work together on this going forward and come to an agreement.”

“You laid me off because you believed that I wasn’t good enough. Maybe I wasn’t, but now I am. And since you have other intelligent staff, you should be more interested in their work, and not mine.” Kachi turned to Inspector Osbourne again. “Sir, I know that I can save lives around the world, and I want to do it, but I am not sure this man has a similar intention. He might hoard my invention and give it to only the rich and powerful, and allow the less privileged to perish. I am willing to share my knowledge, but I must be on top of it.”

Dele nodded again in support, proud of his wife, and everyone looked at him this time.

“We will take it back with us to a law enforcement-owned facility,” Inspector Osbourne imposed, then looked at Kachi. “And you, too.” He then pointed at Dele. “And him, too.”

“Sir, please, can I at least give him his final dose of the cure?” Kachi pleaded and nodded at Dele. “It is time-sensitive, and it will determine if the cure works at a hundred percent or not.”

Inspector Osbourne didn’t argue or object. He nodded and uncuffed her, then she ran for the syringe on the ground. She sterilised the needle, wiped Dele’s arm, then pierced through the skin, pressing in the fluid slowly. Once that was completed, she geared herself and Dele up, then took her notes and left with the inspector.

## Fifteen: The world has you

*Tuesday, 31st March 2020*

Kachi and Dele had been taken to a state-of-the-art facility and they were impressed. They had no idea such a place existed in Lagos and wondered if any work was actually done there because the place looked and smelt new as if the whole structure had just been unwrapped. A speck of dust could not be found on any surface. The interior sparkled so much that Kachi was afraid to touch anything. She didn't know what agency exactly owned the facility, but there had been some sort of protocol involved because it took some time before they got authorisation to go in.

Even the reception of the facility was better-looking and well-maintained than the whole lab where she previously worked, and her office was supposed to be State-funded, working hand-in-hand with health agencies and bodies in Nigeria and around the world, to make sure that everyone was safe at every given time. She only wondered if someone high up in the office was using funds meant for maintenance for something else. But since she had been laid off, it was no longer her business.

Her things, which were technically Ismail's things, had been set up for her to continue her research and observation. And just a few hours after the last dose of gastric acid she had given to Dele, she declared him virus-free, much to the joy of everyone present. But she did not stop there. She wanted to check for immunity, and if anything went wrong along the way, she could heal him again.

So taking a blood sample from a different source in the person of a dying man who had been brought in at her request, she separated the viruses from his blood, then introduced the viruses into Dele's system and left it for observation. She also prepared a mix of the gastric acid and gave the dying man the same quantity she had given to Dele, but in five quick doses to test for instant healing.

She, Dele, and the dying man had spent the night in the facility, where she had observed them continuously. When the early hours of the morning came, she checked on Dele again, and there was nothing. The freshly introduced viruses hadn't stood a chance faced with his reinforced cells, so for a second time around, she declared him virus-free. She also observed the dying man, and surprisingly, he was already rapidly recovering from the infestation.

Her solution had worked, and she could not believe herself. She took some time out to think through things, from when she had started, when she returned home that very day, and how the events of her office had forced Dele into going out and inadvertently contracting the virus. She recalled how she had been stressed most times but didn't want to give up, and how she had practically abandoned her children to focus on her husband, but it had paid off in the end.

"Thank you," her husband said, bringing her mind back to Earth. "You did it. I knew you could, and you would."

She smiled in response, although she read minor meaning to his statement. Whether he had gotten the virus intentionally to test her potential or not, she didn't know. But whatever the case, she was glad that she had been able to do it.

Inspector Osbourne returned at the crack of dawn and went to meet Kachi, who could not stop smiling. He didn't need to be told that her cure had worked. He was even more surprised to learn that she had gone the extra mile to test immunity against the deadly virus. Now that it was out of the way, his main concern was replicating the solution to start distributing it so that healing and restoration could commence worldwide.

There were no workers in the facility skilled enough for the task that Kachi wanted to carry out, so she asked Inspector Osbourne to bring in some of her former colleagues, who had been laid off. Although he hadn't been given the boot, topping the list was Ismail, who she still hadn't seen. To help the greater good, Inspector Osbourne called for Ismail's immediate release and asked for him to be brought to the facility.

Kachi was disheartened when she saw him. He didn't look well, as he seemed to have been tortured, not questioned as Doctor Casmir had made it out to look. Although social distancing had been advised time without number, Kachi hugged him once they were close enough and welcomed him back. If at all she contracted the disease, she already knew how to tackle it.

Ismail looked around the facility, also impressed. "What is this place? You mean we had it since, yet we were subjected to work in that apology of an office building?"

"I'm not sure who owns it, but it has nothing to do with our office. Your office, I mean. And Doctor Casmir is completely out of the picture. He wanted us to work on the cure together, more like tried to force me to work with him, but I turned him down. I'm sure he will get a backlash from his superiors for that."

"Ouch. It must have felt like a slap on both cheeks for him, and it serves him right." Ismail laughed. He always found a way to make a joke no matter the situation. When he calmed, he added, "But he will still look for a way to come for you because of the supplies I took."

“That has already been sorted out with the police. They have paid back the equivalent of the things you had taken for me. They also provided me with more supplies.”

“That settles it then.”

“It does,” she replied. Her eyes travelled all over his face. “I’m so sorry for what you went through with the police.”

Ismail shook his head, making a poor attempt to hide a black eye. “It was nothing. I should be the one sorry for giving you up.”

“Of course not. If anything, you helped a lot, and stalling them until the last minute was nice of you. It was really brave.”

There was a moment of silence, which Ismail broke.

“Where is Dele?” He looked around as if the answer was in the air. “How is he doing?”

“Virus-free!” she exclaimed, unable to hide her joy.

“Really?” Ismail smiled cheekily, returning to his clownish self. “So all my drinking wasn’t in vain. At least you can join me next time.”

“Maybe,” Kachi said, blowing her cheeks in excitement. “That’s not all.”

“What is it?”

“He is also immune to the virus. We did a test with viruses from someone else, a dying man, and nothing happened. I couldn’t even see any trace of the new virus in Dele.”

“Wow. This is unbelievable. It seems like a dream,” Ismail commented. “And the dying man?”

“Five doses of my solution last night were enough to start the healing process. He is now in recovery, and he’s doing very well.”

Ismail nodded several times, a sign of being overly impressed. “And this solution, are you ever going to tell me what it is?”

“Artificially made gastric acid from the supplies you brought for me. Its job is to digest proteins, and guess what coats all viruses?”

“Proteins.”

“Of course.” Kachi raised her shoulders proudly. “I carried out extensive research on that.”

“Aren’t you brilliant?”

Kachi smiled shyly, then looked everywhere but at Ismail’s face. If he continued with his lauding, her head would have exploded.

“Your husband is lucky to have you as a wife.”

She looked up at him when he said that, and maintained her smile, only that it was bold this time.

“And me,” he continued. “I’m the luckiest to have you as a friend.”

“Okay, enough of the mushy-mushy talk.” Kachi let out a short laugh to hide her blushing. Then with a calculated attempt to change the line of discussion, she added, “We have a lot of work to do, Manager.”

“Manager?”

“I think it’s time for you to leave your current poorly-paid job and get that better one you deserve.”

Ismail didn’t say anything. He didn’t know what to say.

“You can thank me later.” Kachi laughed. “But now, we have more portions of the cure to produce and a patent to take out on it. The world needs us now.”

“Needs us? The world has you already,” Ismail corrected, and smiled wildly, then extended his hand with his palm open. “After you.”

Kachi smiled, as she led the way.

## **Postlude: Happy Independence Day, Nigeria**

***Thursday, 1st October 2020***

*“Today, I can confidently confirm that there is no new case of the coronavirus Covid-19 disease around the world and no more deaths. The enemy has come and gone,” the Governor of Lagos State noted. “The countless passing we have all witnessed have been tragic, but we are happy that fearless men and women of our community were able to come together and work as a team to find and reproduce a cure – The OA5 Solution, which has now restored the world to a certain point. We still have a lot of work to do in rebuilding nations and mourning our dead, but we will get through it.*

*“I take this opportunity to thank Mrs. Onyekachi Adelabu for her passion and her love, the key factors that brought about the OA5 Solution. The world will forever be indebted to you. And on this note, I say, Happy Independence Day, Nigeria, and God bless us all.”*

Kachi switched off the T.V. when the speech was over, then went to join her family and a few friends in the October 1st Celebration she and Dele were hosting in the garden of their new house. Ebere and Ismail didn't miss the event for anything in the world.

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## **About the author**

C. M. Okonkwo is a Nigerian author who grew up in Lagos and moved to France to study, where she obtained a B.Sc. in Business Administration and Management, an M.Sc. in Personnel and Employment Management, and an advanced M.Sc. in International HR Management and Development. A lover of travel and tourism, her writing ideas and style are inspired by experiences gained in different countries she has lived in and visited.

## **Author's Note**

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*Desperate Women Series*: Literary/Suspense

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Yankee Based Wives #2, 2016

Twenty-One Days, Literary/Suspense, 2015

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