

Title: Healing Hearts

The grand ballroom of the Statehouse was adorned with crystal chandeliers and ornate frescoes, its walls echoing with the footsteps of dignitaries and the murmur of whispered conversations. Ajasa Olakunle Caesar, or should I say AOC as he is fondly called by his close friends, stood at the center of it all, dressed in a finely tailored suit, as he was to be inaugurated as the state's new governor, the youngest governor to ever rule the state. The road to this moment had been long and arduous, marked by determination, dedication, and a past he had fought very hard to bury.

The story began years ago, in a quiet suburban neighborhood where AOC lived and worked as a Detective with the State Police Headquarters. AOC a graduate of the prestigious Police College had graduated top of his class, but for some tribal politics, he would have been on his way to an illustrious career at the Police Headquarters at the Federal Capital. However, the universe had a different plan for him, one that would give his life meaning while teaching him some life lessons along the way. AOC was welcomed with so much excitement by the State Headquarters, after all, it was no mean feat to top all the classes and physical exercises at the College, making him the pride of the security institution. AOC had maintained his stellar performance even as a newly commissioned officer and in less than five years he had risen to the rank of a Detective, something no other person had ever done in the history of the Force. Suffice it to say that AOC was having the time of his life doing the job he loves.

Nofisat was the only daughter of the famous food seller Iya Nofisat, whose canteen was just three streets from the State HQ. Rumor had it that Iya Nofisat had waited more than ten years after marriage to have Nofisat and she had to endure her husband taking a second wife before the heavens smiled on her and gave her a child. Little wonder, she was so protective of Nofisat and would never allow any of her customers to speak to her except for the handsome AOC. AOC had patronized Iya Nofisat almost every day since he joined the State HQ and she was quite fond of him, it is safe to say he was like a son to Iya Nofisat. This relationship also meant he was like a brother to Nofisat. He had joined the State HQ when Nofisat was just leaving Junior Secondary School and that meant he was around all through her senior secondary school days, helping with assignments and even giving free tutorials whenever he could find the time. The fondness between Nofisat and AOC was clear to the blind and on many occasions his colleagues had alleged that he was grooming her to be his wife in the future, a statement to which AOC always responded with a smile.

This Tuesday afternoon was like every other one that year, AOC had casually strolled down to Iya Nofisat's Canteen simultaneously fiddling with his phone and greeting his colleagues he met on the way like he usually does. AOC was quite predictable when it came to food as he had ordered the same combo of food for over five years; three wraps of Amala, four pieces of meat, one Ogunfe, and a bottle of mortuary standard bottled water. For the first time in over five years, Iya Nofisat's canteen was closed on a weekday, instinctively AOC knew something was wrong, Iya Nofisat had never closed her store on a weekday, not even on public holidays, anytime anyone asked her why, she would jokingly respond that the policemen who patronized her were like her children and if she closes her canteen on a public holiday, who would feed her children.

AOC's heart was broken when he heard that evening that Iya Nofisat had passed on in her sleep the night before. AOC visited her residence to pay his respects and he found a broken Nofisat looking

distraught like her life was over. AOC would later remember that look when he was assigned his first homicide case and the victim was no other person than his beloved Nofisat.

Thursday the 24th of May was a regular day at the State HQ. AOC had been radioed about the lifeless body of a lady that was found under the newly refurbished flyover on the other side of town. It was supposed to be the first homicide case he would be Lead Detective and he was excited to display his prowess as one of the best detectives around. He walked into the State HQ right about the same time some local thugs were being dragged down from a police van, some of the thugs had engaged in a fight with some police officers the day before and that prompted the Deputy Commissioner to order the raid of the thug's hideout and their subsequent arrest. AOC walked past the thugs briskly to his supervisor's office where he got his instructions on the case, the corpse had been deposited at the State Morgue and he was to begin his investigation from there. In most cases, criminal activities reported on that side of town often ended up unsolved. AOC was determined to break this jinx. His world was shattered when Nofisat's lifeless body was wheeled out of the freezer.

AOC's grief was overwhelming, he had not seen Nofisat since that day at her house. A visit to her family house had given clarity to the events that had led to the gory sight of her lifeless body on the Pathologist's table. It turned out that as soon as Iya Nofisat was buried, her husband and her family shared the money she had left behind for her daughter and sent Nofisat to live with a distant relative in another state. All the money given to the relative to take care of Nofisat and her education was squandered and soon Nofisat had to resort to menial jobs to survive, when the hardship became too much, Nofisat came back to her state and was introduced to a certain Madam Clara who posed as a local gin seller but was notorious for the prostitution ring she was running in her big compound. The police had tried to bust her a couple of times, but they could not because somehow, she was always one step ahead, some people even felt she was into witchcraft and voodoo hence why it was difficult to convict her of any crime.

The death of Nofisat shook AOC and he was determined to bring the perpetrators to book, AOC had interviewed over 100 people who had met Nofisat at one point and after three months of painstaking investigation, they had narrowed down to a suspect, a local tout who went by the name Charles Aguda, everyone knew him as Chizzy. Chizzy was a familiar face at the State HQ and even the State Prison, having previously been convicted of petty theft and burglary on multiple occasions. It was safe to say that out of the 40 years Chizzy had spent on earth, he had spent almost 60% of it behind bars. Chizzy was arrested and it didn't take long for him to own up to the crime. For someone like Chizzy, a life behind bars with some semblance of shelter and the assurance of a daily meal was a better deal than staying on the streets not knowing where the next meal would come from. He confessed to the killing and narrated how he had scored some money from a petty theft he and his cronies had committed earlier that day and had decided to visit Madam Clara's brothel. Madam Clara had offered him three different girls, but he vehemently refused and pointed at Nofisat as his preference because she was the youngest girl in the brothel, and he felt sleeping with her would be more pleasurable. Nofisat initially agreed but could not go along with it, it was supposed to be her first time, and the reality of what she was about to do hit her when Chizzy asked her to take off her clothes. Chizzy was enraged and left the brothel cursing violently and promising to get even. Two days later, Chizzy ran into Nofisat under the bridge when she was returning from an errand for Madam Clara, still enraged for turning

him down the two days before he pushed her violently to the floor causing her to hit her head, lose consciousness, and eventually die. This revelation was a bitter-sweet pill for AOC, on one hand, he had solved his first homicidal case on the other hand he had lost someone dear to him.

The trial was a harrowing experience for AOC, even as the lead detective on the case. He had to suffer the heartache of testifying in the courtroom with his eyes locked on Chizzy every single time he was called to the stand. The confession proved to be the major evidence used against Chizzy. AOC had watched as the judge delivered the verdict—a life sentence. Justice, in AOC's eyes, had been served.

Over the years, AOC focused on his work as a Detective, channeling his grief into his career. He became renowned for his commitment to justice, his unwavering pursuit of the truth, and his dedication to upholding the law. He also immersed himself in politics, driven by a desire to make the world safer for every other young lady like Nofisat.

As time passed, AOC's life took a new turn. He became a prominent figure in the Police Force and rose to the rank of Commissioner of Police, his dedication to the principles of justice resonated with the public. AOC always felt he could have more impact as a political office holder and that prompted him to opt for an early retirement and go into politics full-time, after two failed senatorial bids, he found himself running for the highest office in the state—the governorship. He campaigned tirelessly, promising to transform the security forces in the state. The day AOC was sworn in as governor was a moment of triumph. He had achieved his dream of making a difference, of using his power to protect his fellow citizens from harm. But the past was never truly behind him. It lingered like a shadow, waiting for the right moment to reemerge.

A letter arrived at the governor's mansion one bright morning, bearing the name of Charles Aguda. AOC's heart skipped a beat as he recognized the name of the man who had taken his dear Nofisat's life. It had been 25 years since his conviction, and here he was asking for clemency - a request to reconsider his sentence. AOC hesitated, his emotions in turmoil. He had long ago buried the pain and anger associated with Nofisat's death, but now, they resurfaced with a vengeance. How could he even entertain the idea of granting clemency to the man who had taken away someone so dear to him?

That evening, as AOC sat alone in his office, the letter from Charles in his trembling hands, he couldn't help but remember the ideals that had driven him into politics—justice, fairness, and a belief in the possibility of redemption. He knew that his decision would not just affect him but also the people he had sworn to serve. After a restless night and a conversation with his wife Teniola, AOC decided to visit Charles in prison. He needed to look into the eyes of the man who had taken Nofisat away from him, to understand if there was any truth to the plea for clemency. It was a decision that weighed heavily on his heart, but he knew it was the only way to find closure and make an informed choice.

The prison was a stark, unforgiving place, a stark contrast to the elegance of the governor's mansion. His convoy of exotic cars had lined up outside the prison entrance as he emerged from his Mercedes Benz and was led through a labyrinth of corridors until he arrived at a small, dimly lit room. Charles, now an elderly man with graying hair, sat on the other side of the glass partition, shackled and alone.

Their eyes met, and AOC felt a wave of anger and grief wash over him. Charles, however, looked haunted, his eyes filled with remorse. AOC could see the years of suffering etched into his features

"Governor Caesar," Charles said, his voice tinged with sorrow, "I know I can never make up for what I did. I've spent every day of my life in here regretting my actions. I've taken every opportunity for rehabilitation, trying to atone for my past."

AOC struggled to find words, torn between his desire for vengeance and the belief in the principles of justice he had fought for his entire life. *"Why now?"* he finally managed to ask. *"Why this plea for clemency after all these years?"*

Charles sighed; his eyes cast downward. *"Shortly before I was convicted, I had a brief relationship with a woman, and she got pregnant and bore me a daughter. I did not know about the child until I was here. I've watched my daughter grow up without me. I've seen the pain in her eyes every time she's visited me behind these walls. I've heard about your dedication to justice, Governor, and I thought... maybe, just maybe, you could find it in your heart to give me a chance to make amends."*

AOC left the prison that day with conflicted emotions. He had expected to find a monster, an animal, a man incapable of remorse. Instead, he had encountered a broken soul, someone who had been haunted by his actions for years. The visit had left him with more questions than answers, but it had also opened a door to the possibility of redemption. Over the weeks that followed, AOC wrestled with his decision. He sought the counsel of trusted advisors.

"Sweetheart," Teniola said one evening, her eyes filled with compassion, "I know how dear Nofisat was to you, and I know how her death has impacted your life till this point, but if there's a chance that Charles has truly changed, that he can be a better father to his daughter, maybe you should consider it. It's what Nofisat would have wanted—for you to find healing and forgiveness."

AOC nodded, touched by his wife's wisdom. *"I don't know if I can ever truly forgive him, Teni, but maybe I can find it in my heart to offer him a chance at redemption. For his sake, for his daughter's sake, and the principles of justice I've always believed in."*

With his decision made, AOC met with the state's Head of Prisons and the Pardons board and approved Charles's request for clemency alongside nine others in celebration of the state's anniversary.