Authentic Mama



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Na condition make crayfish bend!

Popular Nigerian proverb

Chapter 1

Dear Paulina

‘Oji bole! Ashawo! Harlot! Home breaker! Husband snatcher! Woo!’ the thin woman clapped her bony hand over her mouth as she struggled to hold on to her falling wrapper with her left hand.

‘Husband loser, do your worst, make I see!’ the fat woman with the bright red lips clapped back at her, responding as she bounced up and down, trying to shake off the hands stopping her from breaking her skinny opponent to pieces.

Bystanders had gathered as usual in the front yard of Iye Baby’s flat to watch and enjoy the drama unfold. They clapped their hands, jumped up and down and laughed in excitement as the women fought. The women locked their arms and heads together like two angry rams in a fight while some of the onlookers tried to hold them apart preventing them from harming each other any further, lest they strip each other naked or claw each other’s eyes out. Some women in the crowd tried to chase away their children and husbands from watching the embarrassing scene.

‘Tell this woman to leave my husband alone o!’ the thin woman spread her hands screaming and panting as strong hands held her back again.

‘Shuo! Abeg tell this bonga fish to learn to dey take care of her husband, make him no dey come find me!’ the fat woman screamed in mockery, her heavy breasts heaved up and down as the strong hands around her held her back from charging towards the thin woman again.

These hands holding her had their motives. Some were to hold her back from the fight, some used the opportunity to quickly grab her massive breasts and others squeezed her generous buttocks in the pretext of stopping the fight. Her skimpy blouse was torn and her red bra and ample cleavage were showing, but she didn’t

care as she struggled to free herself so she could give her opponent a good beating before finally sitting on her to teach her never to come looking for trouble in her yard again.

Such scenes were not unusual in Iye Baby's yard and the reasons were always either over men or money that she owed.

Iye Baby prided herself on her ability to take good care of her men and get anything she wanted for her excellent services. Her residence and the location of her beer parlour business were the evidence of the influence of the men in her life.

As a woman who had never been married to a soldier, her accommodation in the army barracks was made possible by the Major she had be-friended when she was younger and even though he had long since died, she still maintained her status as a tenant in the barracks. After all, she was a woman who ran a beer parlour that prepared delicious delicacies and employed voluptuous street girls to take good care of her customers. She also made a living from being the mistress to certain men of means. It didn't matter if they were married or not, as long as they gave her money, respected her and took care of all her needs.

She had a number of regular Ogas that everyone knew about. There was Oga Commissioner, a police commissioner who visited her beer parlour only on weekday evenings as he went to see his family who lived eight hours away at weekends. Her girls liked him because he was a lively man and left generous tips. He was light skinned, tall and well-built and Iye Baby enjoyed his company the most because unlike many of her regulars, he was clean and handsome and didn't want sex all the time. Sometimes he just wanted to lie in bed with her and talk about his day, her day, her children and other things going on in her life while he played with the beads around her ample waist. He never spoke about his family, as a respect to them, and she never asked any questions about them. He knew about Iye Baby's other men and it didn't seem to bother him. Her ability to make every man feel special was one of her gifts.

Oga Commissioner was sweet to her and somewhere in her busy heart she had a soft spot for him and felt guilty because she liked him a little more than all her other regulars, even her young men, whom she fondly referred to as her sugar boys. Thanks to him, her only son Solomon was recruited into the police force and the young man was now a proud sergeant.

Oga Engineer was different; he only visited at weekends when he was in town, working on one of his numerous projects. All he ever ordered was fish pepper soup, which he washed down with bottles of Gulder and smoked cheap cigarettes. He was scruffy and as skinny as a rail with bony features. He didn't talk much and no one knew anything about him, but Iye Baby had her ways. She had singled him out for reasons best known only to her. Her girls gossiped that it had to do with the myth that skinny men had the biggest equipment to compensate for their thinness. Unfortunately, they could only speculate as none of them had the guts to eye up their Madam's men. There was a silent understanding that the men were strictly out of bounds.

The first time, she had invited him to her special room upstairs and given him a touch of her magic, he had not only gone away singing like a canary but came back for more the next day. With him, she tried to make sure that he only got to enjoy her when she was in the mood for him and not every time he craved her lusciousness. That kept him on a short leash because he was tight with money and could be a slave driver in bed. It had been a while since she was with a man as demanding as him. Sometimes, after her sessions with him, she would get so tired and have to rejuvenate with a mix of thick milk and Bournvita.

Oga Barrister, another regular, talked, ate a lot and never left tips. When he was given the bill to pay for his food and drinks, he always argued and ended up quarrelling with Iye Baby's girls after scrutinising and recalculating everything he ordered.

In the beginning, their relationship had started out well because he was a good charge and bail lawyer and had come in handy on the many occasions that her girls had been arrested by the police, whenever they carried out their occasional raids. But as time went on, she noticed he began to take her for granted. He assumed that since he bedded her occasionally and left brown envelopes behind this entitled him and his lousy friends to a free meal ticket at her bar.

He got away with it a few times in her absence, but was not so lucky on one occasion when he brought his friends along and practically ordered the whole kitchen and then refused to pay, bragging to her girls that as Iye Baby's boyfriend, his money went into the running of the business. She was called from her VIP room upstairs where she was busy with a client and was displeased by his noise making. She had instructed her girls to hold on to Oga Barrister's and his friends' trousers and belts until they paid, after that she made it clear to him

that she did not mix her business and pleasure with charity. If you ate or drank at her parlour, you paid, whether you were her lover, brother, sister, neighbour or whoever you thought you were. Her children and staff were the only ones who ate for free.

She met Oga Commissioner after that and all her dealings with the police were smooth sailing, so she had no more use for Oga Barrister and put an end to his sexual privileges. However, he didn't know this and thought she was just stalling like women did, but when he got tired of visiting and not having any more privileges, he stopped, as he was too stingy.

Chief was the richest of them all. He had four wives and every time he came to Iye Baby's, he was quickly led upstairs to the VIP room where she gave him special attention. Apart from being polygamous and elderly, he wanted to marry her and give her a better life. She always laughed when he reminded her that she was the woman he wanted as his fifth wife. Iye Baby found him amusing because he spent a lot and talked a lot. Maybe with a little education he would have been richer because his inability to read left him defrauded by his cheating accountants. But being a jolly old fellow, he took life easy, often seeming like he had no care in the world.

Marriage was one road she had vowed never to travel down again as she had been treated badly and had landed on her head with her feet high up in the air!

Even though many men ogled her voluptuous curves, Iye Baby chose her lovers carefully. They had to be men of means, who could take care of all her material and social needs. Her association with them had to give her a way into high places, life's goodies and other commodities she wouldn't usually have access to. Like the time she needed to get a visa – she had an ambassador as a boyfriend who had made things easy for her. Even when she needed to change her old pick-up van, the men in her life had been benevolent enough to give her money to purchase the blue Volvo she now drove.

When a disgruntled wife had sent hoodlums to raid her parlour on one occasion, Oga Commissioner was there to handle matters. He had gotten his boys to find the hoodlums, give them several strokes of the koboko, lock them up in a cell and throw in a can of tear gas. When they were released choking and begging for mercy, they ran away and were never seen in Nimbe again.

There was even a time she had dated a white man called Mr. Holloway. He had given her a silver lighter for her cigarettes saying it wasn't lady-like to light cigarettes with a match. Even though she didn't smoke as much anymore and the relationship had ended a long time ago, she still kept the lighter as a memento of her good times with him as he had treated her like a queen.

She met him when she had supplied drinks to a function he and his business associates had organised at Nimbe town hall. That day she was dressed in black tights and a bright red flowing kaftan, and he had noticed her while he was chatting to one of his associates. He followed her to the truck where she stood paying the boys who had helped her unload the crates and boxes of beer and alcohol and started to chat with her. He didn't seem to mind that she spoke bad English or that she was fat and over-made up with talon-like nails. She used to think that white men only fancied skinny and bony women with flat chests and bottoms. This white man was different. He had lived in Nimbe for more than ten years and his taste in women seemed to have changed.

Mr. Holloway travelled a lot when they were dating, so any time he came into town, his driver would pick her up and drop her off at his hotel for their little rendezvous. He liked her feistiness and lavished her with lots of gifts, money and admiration. He didn't treat her as a loose woman like some other men tried to, and she wasn't sure if he had a wife. She didn't care anyway. She liked him and was amused by his gentle ways.

She remembered on one occasion that she had insisted on eating roast fish at a popular place on Nimbe hill and he had reluctantly taken her there just to please her even though he wanted to spend the day lying in bed with her. He had ordered a bottle of beer for himself and she had chosen to have her fish with a large bottle of stout. As they sat chatting, she heard someone angrily shouting her name. They turned in the direction of the voice to see a short round man charging towards them.

Mr. Holloway looked confused, Iye Baby recognised him. They had dated briefly months before and she had ended the relationship because he was terribly possessive and his wife kept coming to fight with her at her parlour. She turned away as Mr. Holloway filled her glass with more stout and she took a long drink silently praying that the foolish man would walk past. He walked up to them and stood glaring at her.

‘Paulina! Who is this?’ he pointed at her companion almost poking his stubby fingers into the white man’s eyes.

‘How that one come concern you na?’ she said, eyeing him angrily.

‘I say who is this?’ he pointed rudely at Mr. Holloway again.

‘My boyfriend,’ she snapped, still sipping her drink calmly.

In a flash he grabbed the white man and tried to wrestle him to the ground. All she could do was try to pull him away before he hurt her boyfriend. She was so angry, why couldn’t some men handle rejection? As the two men struggled, others came to her rescue and pulled the angry man away. Mr. Holloway had turned red and was rubbing his neck in agony. He turned to her.

‘What’s going on here Pauline? Do you know this man?’

She wasn’t given the opportunity to answer as she saw the man pick up an empty beer bottle, crack it against the wall and chase Mr. Holloway down the hill with it. The poor man ran for his life with Iye Baby and others running after them. They were lucky to run into a soldier who quickly called the antagonist to order by threatening to take him to the barracks for a lashing.

Mr. Holloway was traumatised for the next few days and she did her best to show him how sorry she was. She was touched how he had tried to stand up for her; no one had ever done that before. Unfortunately, a few months later, his business had got him into serious trouble with the government and he had gone to prison. He had been kind enough not to mention her name when the police came calling. He had been taken out of town and that was the last she heard from him, she didn’t even know if he was released, and, even if he was, would it be wise to be associated with him? Would he still be interested in her? Every woman needed the occasional pampering and love and she was no different.

Iye Baby’s wardrobe varied. On the days she had to visit important places like offices for her business, she tied her iro and buba with a matching gele and accessorised with gold earrings, necklaces, bangles and rings to give her a conservative appearance. She also wore this apparel to church and formal occasions like weddings. On regular days, she would be spotted in jeans or leggings and figure-hugging dresses and blouses, stretched over her ample bosom, protruding belly and large bottom.

She often made unsuccessful attempts to hold her belly in with a girdle, but a steady diet of beer, nkwobi and isi ewu, didn't help matters. She didn't care, these were her assets and selling points and she flaunted them as there would always be men who enjoyed a little flesh and jiggle. She wore colourful beads around her ample waist and many believed that this was the source of her charm and the reason why men found her irresistible – to hell with all the angry wives and jealous girlfriends. They didn't possess her skills and magic. If they were too lazy and stupid to take care of their men, she was available to do that for a good fee. It wasn't her duty to teach them how to do their jobs. Foolish women.

Chapter 2

Sisters Keepers

At 16, Paulina's parents married her off against her will to an old man and she had quickly borne him three children. By the age of 20 she was done and now, Solomon her first born and only son, fondly referred to as Sergeant Solo was married with two children. When he wasn't working or at the local gym lifting weights, he spent his time smoking and threatening to lock up 'bloody' civilians. Despite his flaws, she was proud of him.

Baby, her second child and eldest daughter spent her time lazing about. All attempts to get her to finish secondary school had failed and she was too lazy to learn a trade. She admired her mother and wanted to be like her, and despite her mother's advice, had been stupid enough to get pregnant with the first boy she had sex with.

Destiny, her youngest child was different. She was a nursing student and quite ambitious. She had dreams of leaving Nimbe when she finished her nursing course. Even though she wasn't proud of what her mother did for a living, she loved and respected her and was ready to stand up for her.

By the age of 22, Paulina's marriage ended when her husband decided that he wanted to marry a younger woman, so he threw Paulina out with their three young children. She was devastated, hungry, poor, uneducated and helpless. She didn't understand why her husband had treated her this way, as she had been a good wife. She had borne him a son as all men desired and had never been unfaithful to him, so where had things suddenly gone wrong?

She didn't give up without a fight. She cried and begged her husband to take her back and forgive her shortcomings if there were any and even agreed to take second place to his new wife who was much younger than her. He refused and instead returned her bride price saying he was not interested in being married to

her any more.

She was convinced that his new young wife had used juju on him and that was why he was acting so crazy, so she went back to his house to appeal to the girl, who in turn had pointed a long vulture's feather at her and warned her never to return or she and her children would be dealt with. She had gone back to her parent's home with her three children and her best friend Taibat had come to her aid.

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As children, Taibat and Paulina were neighbours, whose mothers sold garri and santana together in the market. Growing up with limited resources, they accompanied their parents to the farm to help harvest the cassava, which they carried in large baskets on their heads to the stream, and washed it with hard sponges until the tubers were shiny white. They packed some of the cassava, which was destined to become garri into large bags and carried it on their heads to an engine nearby to grind it to a powder, then left the cassava for the santana in bags by the stream to ferment, carefully wedged against rocks so the bags wouldn't be washed away

The large bags of ground cassava were squeezed by a huge machine overnight, then in the morning, the ground cassava which had turned into a slab, would be taken straight to their backyards. Here, they would fry it in their mothers' large pans carefully balanced on three stones over a wood fire. After frying, the ground cassava would be strained through a sieve and spread out to dry before being sold in the market.

They did this job for years until Paulina's father became very ill and all the money her mother made from her business went into paying his hospital bills. As the oldest child, young Paulina had to drop out of secondary school to help look after her younger brother

When the hospital bills couldn't be paid, he was discharged and brought home for herbal treatment. He was so emaciated he lay ill and dying in bed and she watched her mother suffer through it all. The church helped in their small way, by bringing food and some money, but it was never enough. So when the marriage proposal came from a friend of a friend in the city to marry off Paulina,

she agreed, much to her parents' relief. According to them, the man had seen her on her way to the market many times and made up his mind to marry the voluptuous teenager.

Shortly after Paulina got married and left home, Taibat lost her parents in a motor accident and her and her siblings had to go and live with an uncle. His wicked wife reminded them every day that they were an unwelcome burden to her family. She made them eat her children's leftovers from a metal plate on the kitchen floor, sleep on a mat under the staircase, and she beat Taibat at every opportunity. After a few years, Taibat got tired of this and decided to return to her parent's empty home with her siblings. It was better for them to suffer at home than to tolerate the harsh maltreatment from her uncle's wife.

On returning home, Taibat befriended Chinedu, a bus driver who helped her take care of her younger siblings. He was much older and she would have loved to be his wife, but he was already married with six children. He was also Catholic and did not want a second wife nor a divorce, but as Chinedu was in love with Taibat he was generous enough to send her to a sewing institute to learn how to sew. He also bought her a sewing machine as her freedom gift after her one-year training was completed and threw a small party for her, inviting his fellow bus drivers and their girlfriends to drink and eat at the popular bar he hung out at occasionally.

When she found out she was pregnant, she was happy as she thought that would motivate him to marry her. A baby could bring a change of heart to even the stone-hearted. She hurried home from the Health is Wealth' chemist, the local pharmacy, that afternoon with the test results, made lunch for her younger siblings who were due back from school and then took her time to prepare Chinedu's favourite pounded yam and ofe nsala with the chicken she had bought the day before.

When Chinedu arrived at the house that evening, he parked his bus some distance away like he usually did and walked down to her house swinging the bag of goodies he had brought. As he walked through the gates, her younger siblings ran out to welcome him, at the same time grabbing the bag from him in excitement. He strolled into the house and made himself comfortable in the tiny living room. He took off his shirt, opened the first few buttons of his worn jeans and sat down to the hearty meal she had prepared.

She sat watching him wolf down the large balls of pounded yam as he chewed noisily. He was a bushman with unrefined manners but he was kind to her and had come to her rescue in her time of need. In her young heart, she believed what she felt for him was love and the best way to show it was by marrying him and giving him many children, starting with the child she was carrying. When he was done chewing the chicken bones and cleaning the plate till the 'made in china' inscription at the bottom stared back at him, he took a long drink of cold water, belched loudly and leaned back on the couch satisfied. She smiled at him and rubbed his hairy back and then his protruding hairy belly. It was so hard it felt like it could burst open if she rubbed it too much. She handed him water to wash his hands and then a toothpick and thanked him for eating her food and promised to prepare more mouth-watering dishes for him.

He smiled, 'Chei! This girl you no go kill me with better food o. This na why I like to chop for your house before I reach my house! That my wife useless no be small, she no sabi cook better food at all. I work pass donkey to make sure say she and all our pikin fit chop belle full and the yeye woman still no dey appreciate my hard work!' Saying this, he smiled pulled her towards him and knowing what he always wanted after a good meal she resisted. On other days she didn't mind as it was a small price to pay for all the help he was offering her, but today she wasn't in the mood for his loving and sweating and panting all over her.

She sat up and facing him, broke her good news to him. He almost fell off the couch in shock. He started to choke and cough. She quickly poured him a cold cup of water and watched him gulp it down. When he was done, he asked her whose child it was, denied the paternity, accused her of cheating on him, then threw a bundle of notes at her, telling her to go and have an abortion saying that she could not be pregnant at the same time as his wife and stormed out of the house. She stood confused in her tiny living room staring at the dirty notes scattered on the floor. What did he mean by his wife being pregnant at the same time as her? Didn't he say he loved her so much he couldn't stand the sight of his foolish dirty wife? If she was pregnant like he insinuated, that meant he had lied to her and had been sleeping with his wife all the time he had been with her.

That was the last time she ever saw him. She was back to square one with her siblings, poor, helpless and now pregnant. She didn't have the guts to find out where he lived to either make trouble or tell his wife. The women in his neighbourhood would disgrace her and show her no mercy by giving her a good

beating after which children would sing mocking songs running behind her as she walked down the road and she couldn't bear that.

She went to see Dr. Maduka the owner of the Health is Wealth chemist to discuss having an abortion with him. He wasn't really a doctor nor did he have any kind of medical training. He had worked in the teaching hospital dispensary assisting different pharmacists for over 30 years and when he retired from the civil service he felt he had enough experience to treat people!

To the illiterates of Nimbe city, he was as good as a doctor since he owned the largest chemist in town and it was accessible to everyone. He administered drugs, gave injections, took deliveries, carried out abortions and male circumcisions, and treated bullet wounds and sexually transmitted diseases without asking questions. Even though he knew he had no right to do what he did, he had to feed his family and if his patients were not complaining, and the law didn't bother him, so what the hell?

He felt sorry for her as he had known her parents and also watched her grow up. He advised her to keep the pregnancy, even though he knew he could make some money by advising her to have an abortion in the back room of his chemist.

'What if this is the only child God wants you to ever have?' he enquired kindly. 'Your parents were good people and I don't think they would want any misfortune to befall you my daughter. You have made a mistake let that be your lesson. Your unborn child shouldn't pay the price for it.'

She had buried her face in her small hands wailing. Who would marry a woman with a child? But after a lot of thought she decided to keep the pregnancy and had a very healthy daughter nine months later in the back room of his chemist. She named her Chinelo.

In the years that followed, she got married twice and both marriages ended because she couldn't bear any more children. After her second marriage had finished, she accepted that Chinelo was the only child God wanted her to ever have. Dr. Maduka was right.

She brought the child up with an iron fist. 'No spreading your beautiful legs for any man until you had been joined before God in holy matrimony,' she said. Her slogan for the child was 'Do as I say and not as I do!'

She had also kept a sharp eye on her too, silently praying she would have a better life than hers. After Chinelo finished secondary school, Taibat sent her to Nimbe Nursing School. Education was one of the strongest keys to success and the girl knew better than to defy her mother.

As marriage was not for Taibat, she decided to live her life to the full and never date a poor man like Chinedu, the only love of her life again. Poor men were a huge waste of time, cooking, energy and emotions. She decided to raise her standards to the kind of men she dated and thus made a comfortable life for herself. Since tailoring was the main trade she had learnt, Taibat opened a high-class tailoring shop and employed excellent hardworking tailors who made highly customised clothes for the upper class residents of Nimbe. She sold the sewing machine Chinedu had bought her years ago, which also made it easier to put that heart-breaking experience behind her. If her daughter ever asked about her father when she grew up, she would tell her he had died in a ghastly motor accident, which had torn him to pieces!

It was at this time in her life that Taibat reconnected with her childhood friend, Paulina or Iye baby as she liked to be called. Iye Baby had been thrown out of her husband's house, with little education, no skills and no money, so as a good friend, Taibat told her about the secrets to her success. She watched Paulina preach and swear, circling her hand over her head several times, claiming she was a god-fearing woman and that sex with any man who was not your husband was a sin. Taibat laughed and resolved to watch to see how long her self-righteous friend could live in abject poverty and watch her children go hungry. She knew it was only a matter of time before Paulina would be singing a different tune. After all, where was God when bad things were happening to good people in the world?

After years of living from hand to mouth, begging, being insulted by women who called her a wretched divorcee, and tired of help from Taibat, Paulina decided to succumb to the amorous advances of Major whom she had met at his office in the army barracks when she had accompanied a relative to sort out a case. She had met him in her time of need and after he had finished chasing her, lavishing her with gifts and promises and finally making her his mistress, she had told him her sad story. In sympathy he had personally organised a shop for her, which she turned into a beer parlour and a two-bedroom flat in the army barracks where she had lived rent free ever since, even after he died.

For Paulina, realising that treating men of means well and making them feel like kings could take care of her needs, she made sure she excelled at her skills. Taibat had taught her well and so whenever her well-paying men came to visit her at her small flat, she cooked for them, massaged their backs and feet and praised them endlessly. Boosting their egos was something she guessed their high and mighty educated wives never did, otherwise they wouldn't get so excited when she lied to them the way she did all the time.

For her bald and overweight clients, she praised their bald heads and rubbed their pot bellies, tickling and pulling the hair gently with her red nails and made them believe their defects were the best assets God had blessed them with and the best thing that ever happened to women. For her skinny clients, she sang their praises and over-looked their bony frames and thin legs. When all was done, they handed her brown envelopes full of money. She had no fixed price, so the contents of the brown envelopes varied. A client's conduct on his first visit to her apartment determined if he would be invited back and the services he would get. Poor tippers were never invited back and those who would not pay for her services were embarrassed and thrown out. This money took care of her needs, paid her daughter's school fees and also fed other relatives from her extended family.

One of the down sides to the business of having other women's husbands and boyfriends as lovers, was that when the women found out about her, they came to fight with her at her home or bar. She had been involved in so many fights with different wives, girlfriends and in some cases concubines like herself that sometimes she couldn't even remember who their husbands or men were, or if she had even had anything to do with them.

There was one wife who had threatened to stab her, another to have her business shut down and another to run her out of town. Even the police came calling unannounced from time to time. They would raid her parlour claiming they were looking for crime suspects and would round up her girls and lock them up. She would have to go to the police station across the road from her and bail them out by bribing the duty officers. The list of threats to her line of business was endless.

The worst was when the wife of a naval officer hired thugs to break into her parlour. They destroyed things and then found her house and beat her up. She found that particular incident humiliating and annoying because she had only

had drinks with the man, and they had not progressed to the point where he would know where she lived, and he hadn't even given her any money. A vicious person had probably gone and lied to the officer's wife who had in turn hired the wretched thugs to beat her up. When the officer turned up after the incident Iye Baby asked her girls to embarrass him so much by screaming at him and holding him by the belt that he never returned.

Another angry wife had emptied a plate of cooked beans on her head one evening, ruining the plaits she had just had done a few days earlier. Such embarrassing scenes had caused her to be alert and on her guard at all times, as some of these women were unpredictable. Because of this, Iye Baby employed streetwise and rude girls who were ready to fight with anyone anywhere, so trouble-making and fraudulent customers were kept well in check.

Iye Baby was also the President of the Imose Sisters Association of Distinguished and Accomplished Ladies. An association of mature business women, traders and restaurant owners.

In the beginning when there were only six members, it was the duty of each member to host the group meeting every two months. When the group's membership grew to 12, the hosting was once a month, then as the membership increased the meetings were every Sunday evening.

When the women gathered, they discussed many issues like market rallies, who owed monthly levies, the next cause of action to promote their organisation, money to be contributed to support members who had lost loved ones, members whose children were getting married, visits to orphanages and donations to widows. They also saw to it that the weekly money contribution was handed over to the appointed accountant who was a retired primary school teacher and now bar owner, who after putting the money together took out the club levy and then handed the rest over to the member whose turn it was to collect her osusu that week. As a club, their main objective was to support each other's well-being and growth as sisters especially because other self-righteous married women discriminated against them.

Since Iye Baby was made the president at the beginning of the year, the club had experienced rapid growth and even publicity with a dedicated space in the Nimbe Times events section. With the influence of Chief, they had been featured on TV a couple of times when they went on their market rallies and visited

orphanages and widows. They had also attended more ceremonies and parties than in any other tenure and best of all, everyone was preparing for Baby's wedding which was only a few months away, and Iye Baby was planning to make it the talk of the town. All these events were faithfully covered by her personal photographer, the popular boss of Make Me Shine Photos – the most expensive photo studio in Nimbe. This week it was her turn to host the meeting at her house and she intended to outdo all the other women.

She was also an active member of the Christian Women's Fellowship at her Church of Miracles and Wonders and paid her tithe regularly. She helped out when she could and frequently sent food and other things to the pastor and his family despite the grumbling of other church members about her lifestyle. Truth be told, even though she was a sinner in their eyes, she contributed far more in cash and in kind to the church and Nimbe community than they did in all their holiness.

When some of the women had tried to make trouble for her, the pastor had explained to them that the church was God's house and a place where lost souls found peace. It wasn't a place for anyone to be discriminated against and couldn't they see that she was making a great effort to please the Lord with the things she gave to Him? Her weakness for adultery, fornication, foul language and fighting should not be used against her as Christian, and to crown it all, God loves cheerful givers. That shut them up for a while before the grumbling started again.

This morning she had been busy taking stock of what needed to be supplied to her beer parlour in preparation for when they opened up for business in the evening when this skinny woman stormed into her yard and tried to fight with her. She couldn't even remember who her husband was. He must either be a non-tipper or a light tipper. How on earth was she expected to remember such a client when the thought of poverty left a bitter taste in her mouth? When the woman's raving and ranting got louder, Iye Baby had tried to ask her to leave her compound in her nicest voice as neighbours started to gather.

'My sister,' she had pleaded calmly. 'Abeg carry your wahala commot for my compound, you know say na barrack we dey so.'

Instead the woman grabbed her and tried to start a fight with her, 'Who be your sister? Ashawo! Harlot!'

Irritated she replied, ‘Yes, them no dey forbid. Ashawo na the oldest work. E dey Bible sef! I don warn you make you commot for my compound or I go show you pepper. You still dey try me!’ Iye baby wagged a warning finger at her.

Iye Baby laughed at the thought that she could easily break this woman with her weight. All she had to do was sit on the haggard and that would be it. And so they fought and tore each other’s clothes until the neighbours came to prise them apart.

After the woman was pacified by the neighbours and left Iye Baby let out a long hiss and went back to her flat to get dressed for market. She preferred to do her shopping herself, as she didn’t trust her staff with her hard-earned money. They were all prone to dishonesty so it was better not to tempt them. Sometimes her older daughter Baby helped out, but since she had met Octavius, she was always hanging around his barbing saloon and was never there when her mother needed her.

She shook her head at the thought. She had advised that foolish daughter of hers to make sure she hooked a rich husband by getting pregnant. Instead she had chosen to fall in love with the short bowlegged Octavius, a common barber and son of her business rival and archenemy. When she had found out that Baby was pregnant, initially she didn’t mind until she found out who the father was. How she had screamed at the foolish girl. Hadn’t she taught her right? At her age wasn’t she wise enough to insist that the young man use protection? Instead she had cried explaining that Octavius had told her not to worry as a bottle of Sprite would prevent unwanted pregnancy!

She had pulled her ears and screamed, ‘Them no dey tell pikin wey get sense make e commot for inside smoke! You be big mumu!’ Iye Baby shook her head, why was the girl so stupid?

Octavius spent his time with his gang of misfits smoking weed or betting and playing snooker in front of his shop. Just the other day he had lost a bet and because he had no money to pay it and couldn’t borrow from his mother any more, he had convinced Baby to bring her mother’s fridge to use as collateral until he could raise the money! The foolish girl had done just that and when her mother discovered that her bedroom fridge where she chilled her beloved bottles of Star was gone she had almost brought down the roof. She thought her niece Fine Girl had sold it. It was only until her neighbours had come to the poor girl’s

rescue and explained to Iye Baby that they had seen Baby, Octavius and a few others with the fridge at his saloon.

Iye Baby had then gone there in anger, met both of them and sighted the fridge carefully positioned in a corner. After much talk and negotiation she ended up having to pay off Octavius' debt because of her stupid daughter. Now that the foolish girl was pregnant, and insisted that Octavius was the love of her life, she must marry the good for nothing boy. Since it was Baby's heart desire, who was she to object? She hoped her youngest daughter Destiny would be wiser. At least she was wise enough to want to be a nurse and as a mother, she didn't mind paying her fees and upkeep for the Nimbe Nursing School. It was all for a good cause, the girl had chosen well and she would not discourage her.

As soon as she stepped into her air-conditioned room, her niece, Fine Girl, who also doubled as her maid brought her a cold bottle of Star and poured the drink into a mug for her.

'Aunty Pauli sorry o,' she tried to sympathise with her over the fight.

She was the daughter of Iye Baby's only brother and after he spent more time having children than taking care of them, she had decided to take in his eldest daughter as a way of helping. Her real name was Susannah and the gist was that when she was born she had been so ugly that she had been nicknamed Fine Girl by her stepmother, to spite her own mother. She had turned out alright though, tall and with a figure to die for, but the name had stuck. Fine Girl wanted a better life for herself and fighting over men and money wasn't what she envisioned for her future. For now she would serve her aunty and patiently finish secondary school, maybe her aunt would be kind enough to send her to Nimbe Nursing School like Destiny.

Iye Baby flung her already torn blouse into the clothes basket in the corner of her small living room and sat down in her red bra on the couch. You could only tell it was a bra from the parts of the fabric which held her large breasts in place, otherwise the strap and other parts had been swallowed up in folds of flesh on her back.

'No mind the foolish woman, I know even remember who her yeye husband be sef. Abi na that man wey resemble vulture wey come our shop yesterday?' she frowned. 'That suffer head wey no fit pay for the ordinary bottle of Gulder wey e

drink!’ She hissed in sarcasm and took a long drink of her cold beer. She wiped the froth from her lips with the back of her hand and let out a large belch. ‘Thunder fire the woman head one hundred times, native goat! E no go better for her,’ she cursed.

As she silently sipped her beer, she frowned at the thought of the gist spreading, tough as she was, she didn’t like bad news about her circulating. It wasn’t good for business. Unfortunately she knew that the event of that morning’s fight would spread far and wide, some of the spectators were bound to give Iya Labake a.k.a BBC, the gist and that was all she needed for it to be broadcast around town.

She wasn’t a bad woman but her penchant for gossip was terrible. She was glad at least that the trouble had ended before the nosy woman had heard and found time to run across the road to find out what was going on. With the likes of BBC around, people didn’t need to bother with radios or TVs for information.

‘Amebo,’ she hissed again at the thought.

Fine Girl stood silently in the corner listening and shaking her head in agreement and sympathy. There was a knock on the door.

‘Who be that!’ Iye Baby yelled. Visitors were the last thing she needed this morning.

‘Mama na me o,’ came a male voice.

She smiled and gestured to Fine Girl to get her another blouse and her large blue can of sweet smelling Saturday Night powder before going to open the door for her guest. She waddled to the full-length mirror, quickly pulled on her blouse and poured a generous amount of the sweet smelling white powder on her palm and quickly dabbed it on her face and armpits, then took one last look at herself in the mirror to make sure her hair was in place.

Fine Girl opened the door and a tall, dreadlocked, light-skinned young man with sunglasses stepped in.

‘Valentine!’ Iye Baby screamed like a teenager as she spread her plump arms.

‘Mama the Mama! Authentic Mama!’ the young man cooed hurrying towards

her.

Fine Girl quietly retreated to the backyard. Tough as her aunt was, her Achilles heel was younger men. She could never have enough of them. She chased them, dated them, spent money on them and then they stole her money and ran off with young girls. The last one had run away with her car engine and she guessed he had sold it in the spare parts black market. Even though she was yet to learn her lesson, she had at least tightened her grip on her money and valuables and didn't leave them lying around like she used to.

Valentine a.k.a Sweet Banana was her newest sugar boy and seemed to be the leachiest of the lot. He had also stolen money from her on different occasions, dated younger girls, chased her female staff and even tried his luck with Fine Girl. The list of his atrocities were endless but he always came crawling back and begging to be forgiven and she always gave in and took him back. Fine Girl couldn't see what her aunt saw in the tall, light-skinned, skinny, pimple-faced, dreadlocked, one-eyed young man.

He had been born in the Nimbe slums and spent most of his life there. The youngest son of a family of 11, his uncle had sent him to the polytechnic where he claimed he had gained admission to study electrical engineering. For five years he took money from his uncle to pay his fees and upkeep and when his mates graduated, he came home with a certificate and photos from school.

For his National Youth Service, he claimed he was posted to Lagos and when he visited his family back in Nimbe slums, he spent the whole time wearing his complete NYSC kit. He wasn't a charmer but he had his way with women. They came to him easily and he used this to his advantage. It made life easy for him so he didn't see any reason to earn a living doing any form of hard manual work. If women chose to obey him and be slaves to the pleasures of the flesh, he would be there to offer his services and also indulge them. He had nothing to lose.

His uncle had tried to get him a job after his graduation, but after his certificate was rejected several times, the old man personally went to the school, only to find out his nephew had never been a student. All those years that Valentine took money from him for school, he spent his time living off girls and servicing older women in town. The NYSC kit he had worn belonged to someone else. In anger his uncle washed his hands of the good for nothing man and he had to fend for himself.

Rumour had it that he was good in bed and that he had lost his left eye in a fight over a married woman who wouldn't leave him alone. Others claimed he had lost it on one of his stealing sprees that went wrong. Apart from living off women, he was also a struggling reggae musician who ironically had a great voice. He had started out as a choirmaster at church but was thrown out after it was discovered that he had other interests and most of his ministration was carried out on the young choir members he had impregnated. He had run to the church of Miracles and Wonders and helped out as the pianist for the weekday services.

Occasionally he entertained at weddings, burials and other parties for a pittance and went by the stage name Sweet Banana. Maybe it was this name that got him all the women he lived off since. He was always deep in debt and occasionally went to hide out at his sugar mummy's place in the city. Hearing him sing could melt the heart of the devil and any woman.

Valentine usually entertained with his band, a fellow group of losers and slum dwellers, and his pet monkey that thrilled guests with its dance moves. When people threw money at him, the monkey was trained to pick up the notes and hand them obediently to its master. It was at one of these parties he had met Iye Baby. She had heard about him and his skills in bed, but their paths had never crossed at church because they attended different services. She couldn't believe her luck when she was told he would be entertaining them at the party.

When Iye Baby first set eyes on him, she was taken aback by his looks, but by the time he started singing and twisting his tiny waist provocatively, she was pulled off her seat and opening her large purse, sprayed clean naira notes at him and his band, winking at him from time to time. He sang her praises as the money flowed and even jumped off the stage to dance behind her. She wriggled her ample bottom as he held on to her waist in a tasteless and vulgar movement. She had smiled in satisfaction as she felt him grind back and forth. The next day, he was in her bed doing what he did best and had her screaming like a young girl. Word on the street was that he also doubled up as a petty thief when he didn't have any singing gigs and his stupid pet monkey came in very handy then too.

When he started sleeping over at Iye Baby's place his pet monkey came as well – the same monkey Fine Girl had to feed every day. But as Iye Baby was a good aunt as she had taken care of many of her nephews and nieces, Fine Girl just

eyed him suspiciously as she took away the glass and half-drunk bottle of Star.

Valentine like many other young men in the Nimbe slums had only one ambition, which was to travel to Europe one day, and Fine Girl was sure that for him, her aunt was his visa out of Nimbe city. He would hang on to her for as long as it took her to use her influence to get him an international passport, visa, ticket and pocket money.

‘Sweet!’ Fine Girl screamed browsing the backyard for the monkey. ‘Sweet!’ she screamed again.

She placed a plate of leftover food on the floor as she searched for the monkey. Then she saw it hopping towards the plate in excitement, she hissed and slammed the kitchen door.

Chapter 3

Rivals

Nimbe city was a small rocky and bubbly town, made up of a mix of civil servants who worked outside the city, military men, business men and women, prostitutes, slum dwellers, thieves, wife beaters, witches and layabouts. It had three districts, the top district located at the top of Nimbe hill where the GRA or the upper class, educated and the elite lived and worked. The middle district where the lower class and the rustics dwelt and the third district, which was practically the bottom of the food chain and at the bottom of Nimbe hill where the poorest of the poor lived.

The slums of Nimbe were made up of wooden shacks, filth and large refuse dumps which doubled up as toilets. Here mosquitoes bred in the filthy gutters and grew fat on the inhabitants. The thieves, prostitutes, hooligans and other miscreants of Nimbe lived here with their families. The only population according to the people of Nimbe, which cut across all three districts were the witches and wizards as these beings had no boundaries!

Weekdays in Nimbe were busy. The inhabitants woke up early to the noisy sound of the cockerels crowing. Mothers got their children ready for school and after shoeing them out the house, the little ones would always be seen crossing the road at the zebra crossing and then stopping at Aunty Blackie’s at the junction to the army barracks to buy her tasty akara wrapped in old newspapers before heading off to school. While the adults went about their morning business, either opening up their shops or travelling to their offices in other cities, only a few went past Auntie Blackie’s without stopping to buy her akara. Even though people claimed Blackie was a witch because her akara was so tasty and irresistible, it didn’t stop or hinder the woman’s business. Nothing beat the taste of Aunty Blackie’s akara with fresh baked bread and a large cup of hot tea to start the day!

At weekends, the city came alive. Fridays were usually half days and after Friday prayers at the mosque, everyone hurried back to their beloved Nimbe to start the weekend, which ended at midnight on Sunday. Bars and beer parlours were usually the centre of activity and Iye Baby's business was not left out where she dwelt as an upper class rustic in district two of Nimbe city.

Love Your Neighbour Bar and Beer Parlour was the most popular place in Nimbe and Iye Baby had chosen that name in gratitude to her best friend Taibat for all her help and friendship over the years. It was located in a two-storey building just across the road from the army barracks where she lived.

The signboard hung large and imposing on the railings of the top floor with coloured lights drawing attention to the bold letters and at the entrance there was a smaller hand-painted sign that read 'DO NOT UNIRATE HERE'. Of course it was supposed to read 'Do Not Urinate Here'. It had been put there by her son Sergeant Solo and even though Taibat had pointed out the error and Iye Baby had promised to correct the spelling, she never got round to it.

Iye Baby's bar was the go-to spot in town for the best isi ewu, nkwobi, goat meat and catfish pepper soup, point and kill with chips, ram and chicken suya, roasted plantain and yam with palm oil sauce and other local delicacies. She had initially started out in a small shop in the barracks, before she moved across the road to the present building. In the beginning, she had occupied the whole ground floor and when the building was later put up for sale due to a dispute among the children of the polygamous landlord, she had quickly bought it for a good price.

Over time, she changed the leaking roofing sheets and repainted the building from dirty brown to white, which she touched up from time to time to keep the place looking inviting. She also knocked down the fence in the front to create more space. In the evenings a mix of plastic and cane chairs and tables were arranged in front of a large flat screen television, which was carefully enclosed in a metal cage with a large padlock for the customers who came to watch football. Canopies were also set up in the rainy season to keep her customers and football lovers happy. The criteria for occupying one of these seats when there was an important match was that you had to buy at least a bottle of beer or a soft drink. Nothing was free.

The customers were usually attended to by a mix of efficient and loyal girls and boys. Iye Baby employed two skilled Hausa men who prepared ram and chicken

suya every day. She had suppliers for healthy rams, goats, cows and chickens who brought them to her house each morning on their way to the market so she had her pick of the fattest. Her point and kill section had an old bath filled with large live catfish. Clients pointed out the fish they wanted to the boy and girl who were employed to look after this section, then it was caught, roasted and served with chips.

The ground floor of the building was used as a restaurant for those who didn't want to eat outside, while the top floor was reserved for special guests like Chief and other men of means. It was fully air conditioned, had a comfortable couch, a bed carefully placed behind a heavy curtain and a large flat screen television. Here such clients were served by Iye Baby's special girls and also personally attended to by Iye Baby herself.

Many of the girls were tall, light skinned and voluptuous, just the way the clients liked them. These girls were at their beck and call and catered to their every need. Any other service outside food wasn't Iye Baby's business. This was left for the girls to deal with themselves. As long as they didn't trespass on her personal client list that was fine by her.

The kitchen was a large open space at the back where Iye Baby employed women to cook and keep the place clean. She tasted the food before it was served to the customers then she would retire to her special corner where she sat occasionally with Taibat drinking and smoking cheap cigarettes. At other times, she went round to greet her customers and to keep an eye on what her staff were doing. Employees no matter how dedicated or well treated could never be trusted.

Her main rival, business competitor and archenemy was Oyibo who owned the Mind Your Wife and Beer Parlour down the road. She was an albino, born and brought up in Lagos, but marriage had brought her back to her roots in Nimbe and she had stayed on after her husband passed on. Oyibo and Iye Baby were complete opposites. She was tall like Iye Baby, but where Iye Baby was fat and jiggly, she was slim and athletic; where Iye Baby was crude and unrefined, Oyibo was refined and calm. Iye Baby spoke pidgin English while Oyibo spoke proper English.

Her real name was Victory, but she has been nicknamed Oyibo because she was an albino with the whitest skin ever. She had wanted to be an athlete in her

younger days but her albinism and poor eyesight had been a deterring factor. She couldn't see well in the sun as the rays went straight through her eyes and her pale skin easily got bruised and freckled. As a child her teachers made sure she stayed away from the fields as grass irritated her skin, so she studied to be a teacher then got married and had two sons, Octavius and Happiness who had narrowly missed their mother's albinism, but had reddish skin and hair. After teaching for many years and losing her husband to diabetes, she decided to open a restaurant, which gradually changed into a bar and beer parlour, just like Iye Baby's.

In the beginning, Iye Baby and Oyibo had started out as good acquaintances and went as far as going drinking together and even sharing men, but when many of the men seemed to prefer Iye Baby's voluptuousness and crudeness, Oyibo got jealous. She didn't understand what men saw in this obese and unrefined woman; the men were simply not interested in seeing beyond her yellow hair, pale skin and skinny frame. Then there were also problems with customer loyalty and to top it all, their children had decided to get together! The list of grudges on both sides was endless. When they had finally clashed and Oyibo had borne her soul in anger at the unfairness of her rival, all Iye Baby had said to her in her bad English was, 'Oyibo, wetin dey vex me with you, be say you no just get any word of polite for your mouth and if you no take time, I go show you pepper. Make you red pass as you read so!'

With that Iye Baby had waddled away with her knock-knees and the friendship ended right there.

So she and Iye Baby had never really been true friends and as they were both in the same line of business and fought over some of their shared clients, it made matters worse. The only things they had in common were the membership of the Imose Association of Distinguished and Accomplished Ladies and the Christian Women's Association. The other situation that they could do nothing about was that Baby had decided that of all the eligible bachelors in Nimbe she wanted to marry Octavius.

Oyibo drove a black jeep and was always dressed in tight jeans, brightly coloured bohemian blouses and large sunglasses. Her yellow hair was always well relaxed and tied in a bun at the top of her head. She took excellent care of her skin and stayed out of the sun as if it was a plague. Unlike Iye Baby, she would never date younger men. It was disrespectful and shameful to her since

she had two grown-up sons. Heaven forbid that. She liked her men older and more mature with a clear understanding that they were both in a relationship to strictly satisfy each other and to have a good time, but with no strings attached.

Between Iye Baby's and Oyibo's bars was the Mother is Good restaurant, which just served amala with different soups, assorted meat and bush meat. It was owned and run by Iya Labake who had been nicknamed BBC for her reputation as a known gossip. She thrived on gossip and with her around no one needed a public announcement system or listen to the radio for gist to spread! She was good-natured and jovial, but her only weakness was gossiping.

Iya Labake was married to a soldier and had nine children. Iye Baby and Oyibo did not consider her amala place a threat to their businesses so they made friends with her. However, she did an excellent job at spreading stories and updating both parties about the antics and plans of each other. She never had problems with angry wives, girlfriends nor mistresses as she was faithful to her husband, but she did fight with him from time to time when he came home drunk or from the arms of another woman. Their fights were always funny because her husband was a tiny man and it was easy for her to fling him to the floor and pin him down with her massive behind. On other days she would chase him through the barracks with a broom and they would end up at the quarter guard where the soldiers usually hid the poor man behind the counter until BBC left! The only time people came to her restaurant to make trouble was when she had spread false rumours. It wasn't strange to hear her apologise and blame her flippancy on the devil!

Chapter 4

Presido

‘Imose sisters!’

‘Presido, Presido!’ the women clapped in reply.

‘Beautiful sisters!’

‘Presido, Presido!’

‘Sisters keepers!’

‘In sunshine and rain!’

‘Distinguished and accomplished women!’

‘Together as one!’

They sang the club anthem after which there was a standing ovation as the microphone was handed to Iye Baby.

‘My humble sisters. I welcome una to this meeting for my house today. We thank God for safe journey. God bless una,’ she waved the microphone, with her well-manicured nails and heavily jewelled hands.

It was her turn to host her Imose Association of Distinguished and Accomplished Ladies and as the president, she had personally seen to it that her compound had been cleaned and a small canopy with tables and chairs was carefully positioned in front of her door. All the distinguished sisters were comfortably seated and dressed in their club uniform of a bright blue lace blouse, red gele and red George wrappers. Their beautiful geles were carefully tied at strategic angles, each in an attempt to outdo the other.

Taibat as the public relations officer, read out the announcements for the day and Oyibo as the accountant, gave account of all the monies that had been collected so far, called out the name of the women owing their monthly levies, and then announced the total amount the club had in the bank.

The club member to collect the contribution that day was a widow who had lost her husband a few months ago. Things had been tough for her and the women hoped that the money would be enough for her to sort out her problems as her in-laws had taken everything because she had borne her late husband no sons. This money would help her start a small business and pay her rent. As the women clapped, BBC and Aunty Blackie saw to it that refreshments were being served by Fine Girl, Destiny, Chinelo and two girls from Iye Baby's bar. As usual Baby was nowhere in sight. The hostess cleared her throat and picked up the microphone again.

'My sisters una know say my daughter Baby marriage dey corner and I don dey plan as the party go be. E get cloth wey I want make all we sisters wear for the marriage.'

Oyibo put up her hand. 'Presido, I believe the wedding you are talking about is the one between Baby and my son Octavius. You can't impose any cloth on us. I thought as prospective mothers in-law we are supposed to sit down to discuss the wedding and all the logistics since we are the ones carrying the burden of the occasion.'

Iye Baby glared at her, why did this foolish albino always have to challenge her with big words? 'Madam Oyibo, na me be the mama of the bride so na me get the party. Na una dey find wife, so na una hand of humbleness go long pass!'

'How is that possible? I am the mother of the groom and I agree we are the ones coming to take a wife. In all fairness, I think we should work together. It would also be fair if we vote either in support or against the buying of this new cloth as many have financial commitments and imposing wrappers on us isn't fair.'

Iye Baby eyed her from the high table where she was seated. This albino got on her nerves and why was she trying to annoy her with her high and mighty English? It was best they did things separately. Let Oyibo cater to her guests while she catered to hers. All she knew was that as the president of the club the women would either wear the cloth she planned to sell to them or maybe in the

interest of peace simply wear the club uniform to the wedding.

Silently she prayed for the grace not to pounce on the red woman. ‘Okay make we discuss the matter later.’

‘Imose sisters!’

‘Presido, Presido!’ the women clapped in reply.

‘Beautiful sisters!’

‘Presido, Presido!’

‘Sisters keepers!’

‘In sunshine and rain!’

‘Distinguished and accomplished women!’

‘Together as one!’

The meeting carried on with Iye Baby announcing to them that their next market rally would be aired on TV and some of them would be interviewed alongside her. The women hailed and cheered in excitement. She gently reminded them of Baby’s wedding again and appealed to them all to cooperate to ensure that the wedding went smoothly. After some arguments, discussions and more announcements, the women sang and danced, drank lots of beer and palm wine, said their closing prayers before all departing, each carrying a bag of leftover food and drinks.

Valentine was seated on Iye Baby’s Volvo with his dreadlocks tied in two pony tails when she came out. She frowned when she saw him. Not that she wasn’t happy to see him but this evening she had tactfully dismissed all her clients and kept it free for Oga Commissioner. It was also an opportunity for her to ask him for some money since Baby’s wedding was just round the corner. Unlike his usual routine, he hadn’t gone home this weekend and since he was spending the weekend in town, he had called her up to ask her if it was okay for him to come round after her club meeting on Sunday. Without thinking, she had agreed and asked him to come to her house. He was one of the few clients she welcomed to her home apart from Valentine and Chief.

‘Wetin?’ she snapped as she approached her car with her keys in her right hand. She had to rush out to get a few things before Oga Commissioner arrived and the girls had already cleaned up after the women.

‘Mama the Mama!’ he hailed her holding his hands up in the air smiling. ‘Authentic Mama!’

He would have loved to hold her like he usually did, but as a sugar boy, there were unwritten rules and one of them was that you were careful not to show your affection in public. You had to be as discreet as possible even though your relationship was obviously public knowledge. Her eyes darted left and right to be sure the other women and neighbours were not within hearing distance.

‘I say wetin you want? I no tell you say make you no dey come find me for my club meeting? Which kind see finish be this na?’ she frowned.

‘Abeg no vex’, he hurried behind her. ‘Ground no just level your boy.’

‘Ehen, how that one come dey tear my pant na? Wetin concern old soldier with overload?’

She eyed him in irritation wondering how that had become her business, as she stepped into her car. Hadn’t she given him money just the other day? He was always broke. What on earth did he do with all the money he made from his music and his other sugar mummies? Even though he denied it, she knew about many of them, not to mention the girls at the slum where he lived. As long as he didn’t spend her hard-earned money on them or transfer any STDs to her, she didn’t care.

‘Ah, Mama no vex, abeg find something for your boy na,’ he pleaded holding on to the door of her car.

She closed her door, almost shutting his fingers in it. Valentine was unpredictable and there was no telling the embarrassment he could cause her. He stood there with his heavily pimpled face and the usual dark shades covering his bad eye. She sighed and said a silent prayer, hoping this boy would not be the cause of her downfall someday. She rummaged through her bag and brought out a stash of notes.

‘As you go manage this money, na your wahala be that. No ever come find me

here again, when I dey do meeting!' she warned throwing the money at him and driving off.

As she drove off she saw him from her rear view mirror hurriedly picking up the money. 'Stupid boy,' she hissed. Lately someone had gossiped to her that he had a new girlfriend called Evangeline a nursing student on the other side of town. She hoped he wasn't spending her money on his little sideshow. She didn't mind her older men having other women in their lives, but her sugar boys were hers to tame and control. Woe betide that Evangeline girl the day she would catch her. She made a mental note to ask Destiny or Chinelo to help her find out about the girl. Since there was only one nursing school in Nimbe that had to be where she studied.

For the past few months, Chief's third wife, Morenike, and Oga Barrister's wife had been coming to her bar to make trouble for her and to harass her customers. Why wouldn't the foolish women understand that it was a man's world and men would always cheat no matter what? Why couldn't they just be content with their men providing well for them and their children and turn a blind eye to their weakness? No woman could have it all! A man who provided was bound to cheat while those who were faithful never had enough money for their families. Such was the foolish wisdom of married women.

When she was married, if cheating was all her husband had done and still taken good care of her and her children, she would have stayed and prayed for him. Instead she had been thrown out and another woman had proudly taken her place.

She got home just in time to shower and get dressed in a short skirt and butterfly blouse before Oga Commissioner arrived. Her feet shone from the Stella pomade she had applied generously.

Oga Commissioner parked his black jeep behind Iye Baby's flat and Fine Girl went to welcome him and help him with the bags of goodies that he had brought. Iye Baby watched him walk gallantly towards her flat. No doubt he was a handsome man and his wife was lucky to have him. She hoped the woman treated him like a king, just the way she did. On second thought, if his wife treated him well, he would go running to her at the weekend and that meant bad business for Iye Baby. She quickly touched up her hair with her well-manicured nails and went to welcome him.

‘My Commissioner,’ she smiled hugging him.

‘Paulina,’ he smiled hugging her and feeling her ample bosom and the beads around her ample waist.

He felt so good to touch and he smelt really nice, sometimes he reminded her of Mr. Holloway. She would have loved to be his number one and the only woman in his life! As she walked him to her door, she couldn’t help but notice the disapproving glare from a young woman bent over a dirty stove with a baby tied firmly to her back. A wheelbarrow with empty plastic bottles was parked in front of her flat next to her husband’s motorbike.

Her name was Promise and she lived in the flat facing her in the same yard. Her husband was a young soldier who had been nicknamed Action by the neighbours because he was a hopeless drunk with a bad temper, who spent his time beating up his girlfriends with his army belt, after which the neighbours would hear him quarrelling with them at midnight when he wanted to sleep with them and the girls refused.

The flats were close together so everyone heard everyone else’s business. Marriage hadn’t changed anything. He had married Promise a little over two years ago and she already had three young children. Despite this, he still beat her black and blue every other day. She sold sweet kunu and zobo in plastic bottles, which she pushed around Nimbe in a wheelbarrow every day except Sundays.

She set off in the mornings with her baby on her back, calling out, ‘Cool your body. Your body must be cool. Buy your sweet kunu and zobo here’ and returned in the evenings. Money was never enough.

In the beginning, neighbours had been sympathetic to her plight especially as her pregnancies were so close together although this didn’t stop Action from battering her or forcing himself on her every night. When the battering didn’t stop and the young girl didn’t seem ready to leave or inform her parents about the hell she was going through, they left them alone.

When Iye Baby and the Imose sisters had shown genuine concern and tried to help her out, the ungrateful little wretch had reigned insults on them and told them to their faces that she couldn’t take advice from expired old whores and that it was better to be married than be a loose woman. If she felt she needed help, she would run to the local church.

The older women had been taken aback by the insults from the bleeding, badly beaten up pregnant girl curled up in a corner. The young did not respect the old no matter what any more, so the women apologised to her for their concern and waddled away in sympathy. Through all the frequent beatings that followed, Iye Baby like other neighbours, turned deaf ears to the screams and the girl suffered in silence. At least Iye Baby knew that no one could maltreat any of her daughters, as she would personally deal with him and have him beaten up!

Here was Promise, bent over a dirty stove and her malnourished child tied to her back while the other scrawny two played in the dirt, and she had the guts to judge her for being a loose woman! She could have laughed out loud at the hypocrisy of such judgement and the double standards that existed between the married and unmarried. The silly girl started singing aloud a mocking song about the miserable end of a wayward woman and women who got pregnant out of wedlock. Iye Baby shook her head, glad that Oga Commissioner hadn't noticed.

Her eyes caught that of Aunty Blackie her neighbour on her left and the woman waved to her. She waved backed. Nimbe people had labelled Aunty Blackie a witch because she had lost her husband and two children in a ghastly motor accident where only she had survived. They claimed she flew at night because her skin was shiny ebony and the tasty akara she sold at the junction was so irresistible because she prepared it with the blood she sucked when she flew! Iye Baby marvelled at the craziness of idle gossip and how ridiculous stories spread like wild fire. If Aunty Blackie was a witch and they all ate her goods that meant all of Nimbe was possessed! Why wouldn't people simply mind their business and let the poor woman grieve in peace? Well as an Imose sister she had some sort of protection and no one could oppress her.

She shut her door and faced her guest. There was too much in the world to worry about and for now she had stopped caring. Here and now was all that mattered.

Chapter 5

Shine Your Eyes

‘Hmm na good idea be that o and na better money all this Oyibo miss road dey pay!’ her eyes sparkled with excitement as she strutted back and forth with a cigarette in her hands.

‘Yes my dear friend. That is the reason I came to you with this business proposition.’ Taibat sat across the table facing her best friend upstairs at her bar. She was dressed in a well-cut red suit, killer heels, a blonde wig and her perfume was rather overpowering.

‘No wahala, that one no be problem at all, at all. My girls na the best in town. No other girls fine like them and them no dey disappoint. Them sabi well, well.’

They had done business together for more than ten years and shared the profits fairly. Taibat trusted her best friend with her life. It was easier to bring business to her than take it to Oyibo.

Today she had come to discuss a business proposal with Iye Baby. A friend of a friend who was a good client of hers was hosting a party for white expatriates on his large boat and these dirty old men needed beautiful light-skinned voluptuous girls who would party with them. That wasn’t a problem; the only condition was that the girls had to be naked throughout the party after which they would be paid $500 each in hard currency. Taibat would give the girls $100 each and split the rest 60:40 with Iye Baby. That was fine by her and since Taibat had brought the business to her, it was only fair that she took the larger share of the money.

Unlike in the past when she got paid upfront before rendering services, the client had promised to hand the cash to the girls when they showed up. It was a big risk to offer services before getting paid in this line of business but since she seemed to know the client, this was fine with Iye Baby.

Iye Baby made a mental note of the girls she would select to go on such an important assignment. She couldn't send any daft girl or the ones with sticky fingers and a penchant for stealing from clients. That was bad for business, as word couldn't be out on the streets that her girls were thieves. She would lose a lot of money, as no one would ask her to supply girls to their parties. She employed smart girls and she trusted that they wouldn't disappoint her. She was glad Oyibo hadn't been told about the business otherwise she would have beaten her to it by sending those skinny ugly girls she employed at her bar. These clients wanted real women and she would give them just that. The party was the following night and a bus was needed to pick them up from Iye Baby's place, but she could arrange that at short notice.

She called out to one of her girls to serve them and the girl quickly came in with two large bottles of stout and fresh fish pepper soup. Iye Baby waddled to the couch and sat beside her friend. Taibat had been more than good to her all these years and sometimes she cringed at the thought of what her life would have been like without the help from her. Maybe she would have been out on the streets begging or if she was lucky she might have ended up as a petty trader! Today she was a big woman, a car owner, a business owner, a mother and best of all highly connected. What more did she want from life? Maybe a steady lover, but a husband? Love? Not at all!

From her upstairs couch, Iye Baby had a good view of the road and her business activities below. She could see Promise pushing her wheelbarrow down the road calling out 'Cool your body! Your body must be cool. Buy your sweet kunu and zobo here!'

She saw Oga Barrister sit his stingy self in a corner. She had told her girls to always tell him that she was not around any time he came to the bar and also to make sure he paid for his meals before he was served. Chief had been away on business and would be coming to see her that evening. Tomorrow being Saturday was strictly for Oga Engineer and she had her church activities lined up for Sunday, as it was harvest Sunday. She sighed at the thought of how busy her weekend was.

As the two women sat chatting, Chief arrived. She saw his driver park his Range Rover sports car next to hers and then watched him retrieve Chief's briefcase from the backseat of the car. They came straight up to her private room. She quickly adjusted her hair and went to welcome him.

‘Chief, Chief,’ she went to embrace him.

‘My Pauli, Pauli,’ he smiled.

‘E don tey wey I see you! You just abandon your baby,’ she complained.

‘Ha, I no go fit abandon my baby, na work no let me see road.’ He took off his heavily embroidered cap and placed it carefully on the table while she helped him out of his agbada.

His driver placed his briefcase by the couch and quickly hurried away as Chief exchanged pleasantries with Taibat before pulling Iye Baby onto his lap.

‘You know say I don miss you well, well’. He patted her massive bottom. ‘I just come here straight from my journey for your magic touch before I reach house. All those my useless wives no just get sense. Them no know how to treat a man.’

She feigned anger, as she rubbed his pot belly. ‘Na so all of una dey talk but una actions dey tell me different story.’

He wrapped his arms around her, placing his head on her bosom, ‘No vex my baby, I don come back and I must compensate you for my absence.’ He touched his briefcase. ‘But you too must show me say you miss me,’ he winked at her.

‘That’s not a problem Chief, just make sure say you ready for me with plenty money. Pepper must rest o.’

She smiled happily, that was what she loved to hear as Chief was a generous man and today she was also going to make sure he put down his own share of the contribution towards Baby’s wedding.

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When Taibat left the two lovebirds, she headed next door to the Mother is Good restaurant for her occasional plate of hot amala and gbegiri. As soon as the gossip saw her approaching, she quickly led her to her usual spot at the back and had her girls serve her. From the sparkle in her eyes, Taibat knew she was bursting with gossip. She eyed the woman cautiously, as she took a bite of the

spicy goat meat that had been served to her as a starter.

The woman took the seat opposite her, ‘Welcome my friend.’

Friend? Taibat wondered. The last time she checked, they were just acquaintances. BBC cleared her throat.

‘I heard about the naked party.’ She winked mischievously. Having never had the opportunity to enjoy herself like other girls when she was growing up, she kept herself going with gossip. It had helped her live out her fantasies.

Taibat was quick to hide her surprise. News travelled fast in Nimbe and there were no secrets.

‘Really? What naked party?’ she busied herself biting into her goat meat.

‘Ah, Oyibo has been talking about the party since yesterday o it seems all these white people are having a party on one of their big boats and they need naked girls to attend the party. She was not happy that she didn’t get the contract, so she can’t send her girls.’

Taibat made a mental note, so Oyibo had heard about the party already. Trust the greedy woman to want to be in on any money-making venture. She, too, had to be careful, as anything said to BBC became public gist.

BBC was still chattering on like an excited monkey, ‘The whole of Nimbe city has heard about the party. I was just hoping they would hire me to cook for them so I can also see what is going on in that boat and see if I recognise any of the wayward girls and women who would be selling their bodies to white men!’

So you can broadcast it to the whole nation, Taibat thought amused, the nickname BBC suited her, anything less wouldn’t have done enough justice to her reputation.

’You are right, all these young girls these days have no dignity.’

‘Yes o,’ the woman clapped her hands. ‘I hear you and Iye Baby are organising girls for the party?’

She had hit the nail on the head, so that was the information the gossip was

fishing for? She raised her pencilled eyebrows, ‘Me? How can I? I am just a fashion designer and by the way, I am just hearing of this party from you now. Iye Baby hasn’t heard, you know she is a bush woman.’

Iya Labake giggled, glad to be the source of such hot gist. ‘Yes o, very bush. Well the gist is that a lot of money is going to be paid to the girls who are selected to attend this party. Foreign currency, dollars, plenty money.’

‘Na wa o, almighty dollars!’ Taibat feigned amazement.

The other woman nodded in agreement, clapping her hands ‘I just thought I should let you know what’s going on in town, as my friend.’

‘Thank you my dear friend,’ Taibat smiled as the other woman stood up to attend to a hungry customer.

A girl set her amala and gbegiri before her and held out a bowl for her to wash her hands. As usual the meal looked inviting, with large pieces of kpomo, saki and plenty of orishirishi ready to be devoured. She washed her hands and dug into the food smiling, BBC had a good hand for the local delicacy.

‘Abeg bring me a large bottle of cold Gulder there!’ Taibat called out to one of the serving girls.

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Iye Baby was busy making Chief happy in her specially air-conditioned room upstairs when she heard a noise outside. Her girls seemed to be quarrelling with someone and there was also the sound of breaking plates and glasses. She pushed Chief off her and hurried to her window carefully parting the curtain so she could see what was going on. She hadn’t bothered to cover her dignity with a wrapper. Much to her annoyance she could see Oga Barrister’s wife breaking plates and glasses and screaming at one of her girls. From her strategic position, she could see Oga Barrister running away from all the trouble. He quickly stopped a motorbike, hopped on and took off. The second woman was Chief’s second wife Morenike. She was screaming at Chief’s driver and asking him where her husband was. He stood numb trying to protect his face from her endless clawing.

‘Chief na your second wife!’ she whispered from the window.

‘What? Morenike? That foolish woman.’ He struggled to pull on his trousers, he never wore boxers or any sort of underwear. ‘Na she first marry husband?’

As she got dressed, she advised him to get dressed too and stay put in the room while she went downstairs to dismiss the annoying women embarrassing her customers. She quickly put the finishing touches to her dressing and makeup and slipping into her multi-coloured rubber slippers, strolled downstairs.

As soon as the women saw her, they faced her, clapping their hands and reigning insults on her.

‘Ashawo! Harlot! Husband Snatcher! Gboko! Devil woman,’ Morenike Chief’s second wife screamed at her in a mixture of pidgin English and Yoruba.

‘Yes! Wicked woman, leave our husbands alone! Let them be!’ Oga Barrister’s skinny wife yelled at her, carefully hiding behind Morenike.

Iye Baby sighed, ‘Una see una husbands for here?’ she enquired spreading her hands. ‘Abeg, next tomorrow na Sunday and as a good Christian woman I no wan fight or quarrel. I no like evil things.’

‘Who be your sister? Where my husband?’ Morenike tried to grab her but was held back by strong hands.

‘Woman, my husband doesn’t give me money any more. My children’s school fees haven’t been paid,’ Oga Barrister’s wife pleaded.

Iye Baby eyed both women, ‘As I talk before, una husbands no dey here. Madam,’ she pointed at the larger woman. ‘No break my plate and tumbler again because na money be that. Bye bye.’

Not satisfied, the two disgruntled women went round the bar, breaking things and destroying what they could, while Chief remained hiding upstairs.

Iye Baby frowned and sent for her son, Sergeant Solo and by the evening both women were standing in handcuffs behind bars at the police station. She made sure Chief dropped his brown envelope before sneaking away.

When Iye Baby drove to the police station later and saw the two women sitting on a bench behind the counter with heads bowed, she laughed.

‘Shebi, I warn una say make una no try me and I talk say I go show una pepper? I don talk am plenty times say, ashawo na the oldest work and e dey for Bible. So wetin come be the matter? Dis na the last time wey I go warn una, if una ever try me again, I go show una say I be authentic mama for this town and na me get Nimbe city!’ Iye Baby boasted shaking her keys at them.

She waddled out of the station and paused at the entrance to slip a stash of notes into an officer’s hand, ‘make una take this small something buy drinks.’

‘Mama the mama! Authentic mama! ‘The policemen hailed her in appreciation of the money she had left behind.

She smiled in satisfaction as she drove off. Let Chief and Oga Barrister get bail for their foolish wives. Life was good and Nimbe was hers to rule and conquer.

By the evening the next day, after a busy time at the market shopping for Baby’s wedding and spending the rest of it with Oga Engineer and his tireless demands, a white bus arrived at Iye Baby’s house and all her selected girls boarded it and headed for the boat party to have a good time and make some money.

She bade them farewell and stopped to chat with Aunty Blackie who was returning from a function, as she was all dressed up. Everyone could hear Promise screaming from her apartment and the children crying as Action beat her with his belt. Both women looked at each other and shrugged before wishing each other goodnight as they parted ways and headed to their own flats. So much for being in one’s matrimonial home! Soon Dr. Maduka would be called upon to treat her marital wounds!

Chapter 6

Story, Story

‘Wetin you mean by that? I resemble mumu for una eye?’ Iye Baby stood in her transparent silk nightgown with her long breasts almost reaching down to her waist, her girls stood shaking before her in her small living room.

‘Madam we are telling you the truth, that was what happened,’ the girl with the blue lipstick tried to explain.

‘Hear me, if una no vomit all my money now, now, all of una go sleep for inside cell!’ she wagged her talon-like red nails at them.

‘Madam she is telling the truth,’ another girl with long plaits came to the other girl’s defence. ‘They took back all their money.’

‘Thunder fire una yansh and head there. Na kobo, kobo ashawo una think say I dey do for this town? Una no know say na sense them dey take do this ashawo work?’ Now she was really angry. What did these girls take her for? Did they think she was illiterate and stupid? Every ashawo knew the rules of the business and that was to pay before service. Maybe her girls were trying to double-cross her.

‘Madam,’ the boldest of the girls stepped forward in a green jacket covering her short black dress. ‘Let me explain. When the bus took us from here, they took us to the boat. We were led to a room where we took off our clothes. A man handed each one of us $500 and then we joined the party.’

The angry woman interrupted her, ‘Ehen, so if you say them give una the money, where the money come dey na? Which kind story una stand here dey tell me so? Abi make I take una head knock wall for una to remember?’

The girl continued, ‘After the party, we all got dressed and were led to the door only to meet two bouncers standing there. They took back the money and threw us all out into the street. We had to find our own way home and it was a long walk to town from the boat. The only money some of us have on us is the money paid to us for the small side services we did.’

Iye Baby couldn’t believe her ears. This had never happened before and she knew better than to take their side service money from them. Placing her hand on her head, she screamed at them, ‘Una say bouncer collect money from una? Una no fit fight? Abi una no get sense?’

Another girl tried to explain, ‘Madam this one pass fight matter, if you see their muscle,’ she held up both hands to show Iye Baby.

‘Shut up your dirty stinky mouth!’ she screamed at the girl. ‘If una no talk true I go show una pepper!’ she threatened again.

It was obvious they had either been double-crossed or someone was lying. She sent the girls home to rest and threw on a clean pair of jeans and a blue blouse, carelessly throwing a scarf around her flyaway hair. As she hurried to her car, Fine Girl ran after her with her handbag and car keys.

She had to get to Taibat’s place as fast as she could to tell her the tragic news. A chicken was perched on her car, which flew off as she quickly drove off, nearly knocking over Valentine and a goat by her gate. He tried to flag her down but she kept driving. She wasn’t in the mood for his begging this early in the morning.

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As she watched her aunt drive off in anger, Fine Girl ran to her room, pulled on a pair of tight jeans over her nicely curved hips, powdered her face and headed for the backyard. A young man sat on a large motorbike waiting for her. She smiled at the handsome man, as she couldn’t believe her luck. Having grown up with such low self-esteem, she wondered why such a young man was interested in her.

Okwy London as he was popularly called was the go-to guy in Nimbe for

anyone interested in travelling to Europe in search of the Golden Fleece. He charged his clients a huge sum of money for his services, which included getting an international passport, visa and flight tickets. He had also helped many young girls and women escape from the perils of the Nimbe slums to the red light district and brothels of Europe. Some couples were desperate, so had come to him for help and he had arranged for their wives to go to Europe to work as prostitutes and send money home to their families. His business was to help get people out of the country. What they chose to do for survival when they got there was none of his business.

The gist was that he was once a drug dealer in Europe and had returned to Nimbe to escape from the European police. How prestigious that sounded to many, as they assumed he must have been an important person for the European police to be looking for him. Even though he rode a huge motorbike and seemed to have some money, he preferred to live in the slums which was safer for him. He had relaxed curly hair, loved his bright coloured shirts and always wore a chunky necklace with the map of the United Kingdom as a pendant on it.

Today he had promised to take Fine Girl for a spin on his bike and he sat watching her run towards him in excitement with her threaded hair. He smiled at her. He liked tall women and this was what he needed, a naive young woman who could keep his home just the way he wanted. Not the tramp of a girlfriend he kept in the slums who unfortunately was also the mother of his son.

‘Susan,’ he smiled.

‘Okwy,’ she was panting.

‘Are you ready?’

She looked around cautiously and nodded timidly. ‘Abeg make we no tey o. I no want make my aunty catch me.’

He shrugged, ‘No problem with that.’

He helped her with her helmet and then put his on. She climbed carefully onto the bike and held him tight, he felt so strong and smelt so nice. As he rode down the road she smiled, glad that she had locked the front and back doors. Valentine had stepped out for cigarettes. When he came back, he had to sit outside and wait for her, but that was the least of her problems.

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Iye Baby cruised down the bumpy road trying to avoid the potholes, almost knocking down some goats foraging for food and a man on a bicycle as she headed for her friend's house. This had never happened to her, what was going on?

Taibat was just coming out of the bathroom when her friend barged into her bedroom. Her daughter Chinelo came in with Iye Baby's handbag. Taibat adjusted her large towel confused as her best friend told her what her girls had just recounted.

She laughed as she dried her body. 'That can't be true. I have done business with this man before and this has never happened.'

'I say make I hurry come tell you because I shock no be small,' she panted still in shock.

'You are sure you are telling me the truth?' Taibat raised an eyebrow.

The larger woman frowned, 'Which kind talk be this? I tell you say my girls return from business without money and you dey ask me if I dey talk true. I don ever thief your money before? Na you be the first person wey I dey tell because na you bring the business.'

'Haba, Paulina. I am not accusing you of stealing. I am just saying it is strange for this kind of thing to happen. I have been doing business with these white men for years and they have always paid me good money. How come the only time I brought you into the business, I am hearing stories?'

Iye Baby had never felt so insulted in her life. No one had ever made her feel so small and it hurt that it was coming from her best friend whom she really appreciated and owed so much to. She valued their friendship more than anything else in the world. How could she accuse her of trying to double-cross her? She was many things but dishonesty and greedy were two traits she didn't possess.

'Okay since na now wey you give me business, money come lost e mean say I

be thief? All these years wey we don dey do business together, I don ever thief from you or do like say I get sense pass you? Look my friend, I know say you go school pass me but I no be thief and I no dey cheat person.'

Taibat sighed, she had to get in touch with her contact to confirm what she had just heard, but what if her friend had double-crossed her and was standing here lying to her? People were not to be trusted, as she had suffered her fair share of rubbish from people. Her friend couldn't possibly be lying to her standing here, unbathed and not made up this early in the morning, could she?

Iye Baby stormed out of her friend's house with tears in her eyes. How on earth could Taibat think she of all people would think of double-crossing her? Life was so unfair. Worst of all this could not be a police case, as prostitution was illegal and what would she say to the police? Her son couldn't even help her out here. She would be more than stupid to drive to the station to report that she had sent her girls to entertain at a naked party for white men and they hadn't been paid. The policemen would laugh at her, call her names, mock her and ask if she could service them at their office. She drove home in anger, hoping with all her heart that Valentine wasn't waiting for her. She had to see Oga Commissioner, maybe he could organise an underground raid on those white men.

Valentine was lying naked on her bed when she walked in. He smiled at her as he pulled her wrapper around his tiny waist. She frowned as she collapsed on her bed, why had Fine Girl let him into her bedroom? Didn't she remember that she kept valuables like money and her jewellery here? And these sugar boys can't be trusted.

'Mama, I hear wetin happen, sorry o.' He wrapped his skinny arms around her and kissed her ears. She remained silent. There was no need to pour out her sorrows to him. When he started massaging her back and her arms she began to relax and stretched out on the bed to let him have his way with her. Even though he was a nuisance most of the time he had his uses, like when she was tense and needed to unwind. She relaxed as he took off her blouse and started rolling her colourful beads up and down her ample waist. She closed her eyes this was what she needed right now to cool her anger at her friend. At this moment, she didn't care if he spent his money on the nursing student Evangeline. The girl might not exist for all she cared. Church service was at 10am and she had to be there.

Chapter 7

Saints and Sinners

‘Praise the Lord!’ Iye Baby waved her meaty hands and heavily jewelled fingers.

‘The Lord is good,’ chimed the pastor from the pulpit.

‘All the time.’

‘And all the time?’

‘The Lord is good!’ she clapped her hands in agreement.

The pastor commenced preaching, screaming and sweating over the microphone. He preached about love for thy neighbour and the importance of living a holy life. He condemned fornication, adultery, lying tongues, stealing, fighting and any other negative thing he could think of. Since Nimbe was a small city, many of the inhabitants worshipped at the same church so Iye Baby sat there surrounded by her rivals, customers and clients.

She noticed many of the women eyeing her. She smiled at them. She didn’t care, they were all sinners in God’s eyes and she couldn’t be blamed for her source of livelihood. Life had pushed her into it and it was the devil’s fault not hers. She was nothing but mere flesh and the women too were sinners for not satisfying their men, which was why the poor men came running to her for her magic touch. Man had no right to judge her; it was a sin. The pastor also stressed the importance of tithing that special 10 percent of your monthly earnings. When it was time for the offering, huge baskets were passed around the congregation and they all dipped their right hands into it, offering what they had to the Lord, then they sang praises, worship songs and prayed.

After the service she sat at the Christian Women’s Fellowship meeting. It was

amazing how these church women saw her as the devil. Yet she donated brand-new wrappers to them every year, which they shamelessly wore and also took so many other things from her, which their fellow Christian women were not generous enough to offer them.

One day she would stop all these acts of kindness. They couldn't judge her and at the same time enjoy her generosity. Once again she reminded them about Baby's wedding and appealed to her fellow women for their guidance and support. She noticed the two women she had had locked up by the police the previous day were there and guessed they must have been released last night. Silly women.

She met Oyibo outside the church and tried to discuss the wedding with her. The first stage of any marriage rite was the 'knocking on the door', which was when the groom and his relatives paid the parents of the bride to be, a visit to state their intention. At this meeting, they would be given a date for the traditional marriage ceremony where the bride price would be paid, after which a date would be fixed for the church wedding.

They agreed to do the knocking on the door and traditional wedding together at Baby's father's place, even though he had thrown them out, but he was still her father and people would talk. It was unheard of for a woman to give away her child's hand in marriage. A girl with no roots could be maltreated or insulted in her husband's home.

They couldn't reach an agreement on the choice of cloth to buy for the occasion so they decided to wait until the main wedding to do that. Since this was a traditional wedding, the church and club members could wear their uniforms while others wore what they had. The catering would be handled by both women, BBC would handle the amala and friends could help out with everything else. She silently prayed that the issue with Taibat would be sorted out by the wedding day, as she needed her support.

Iye Baby then drove to her ex-husband's house. She hadn't been there in over 20 years. The place was a dump and he was seated on a plastic chair under the tamarind tree looking like a vulture cleaning his teeth with a chewing stick and spitting out the dregs. She shook her head as she parked her car careful to make sure her tyres turned up enough dust on him. He had an old wrapper tied around his emaciated waist and what was left of his hair was now all white. He coughed

and spat as he saw her, not sure who she was. She looked around, shocked that she had ever lived in such an area not to mention ever married the vulture seated before her.

She stepped out of her car and waddled towards him, ‘Baba Baby,’ she didn’t bother with pleasantries.

He recognised her voice, ‘Paulina?’

‘That’s me.’ She shook her car keys.

He glanced at her car and back at her, ‘E be like say God don bless you. U don dey drive motor. E don tey.’

‘Yes, God bless me as you drive me commot from your house,’ she nodded in sarcasm.

He didn’t reply, instead he called out to one of his scrawny young children playing in the yard to bring a bench for her to sit on, but his wife emerged from the backyard with a bench instead. Even though she was much younger than him, life’s struggle had left their signature on her face and body. Iye Baby couldn’t believe that this was the same woman who had pointed a vulture’s feather at her all those years ago when she had come to beg for her husband to take her and her children back. How she had aged and then Iye Baby’s eyes popped out of their sockets, as she looked at her worn wrapper, which was stained with charcoal. She almost burst into triumphant laughter. How the mighty had fallen.

His wife dropped the bench and walked away without saying hello. Iye Baby ignored her and got down to business. She told him about the wedding and that as Baby’s father, it was only right that the ceremony should be done at his place. His eyes twinkled as he made enquiries about the availability of food and drinks and if he had any financial obligation.

Iye Baby shook her head. ‘We no need your money. Food and drink no go be problem, them go plenty for here well, well. I just want to make sure say you know say your pikin wan marry since na you be her papa.’

He bowed his head in sorrow, ‘Paulina I wan beg you. Abeg forgive me, I know say I do you and my children bad thing. Na my wife fault. Na devil I marry.’

She shook her head, all that was water under the bridge, trust men to blame women for their evil ways. ‘That one na old story, time don pass for all that. Today is a better day and God don do me well.’

He apologised for not having anything to offer her to eat or drink and she waved it aside. Even if she was offered anything, she would politely reject it. She didn’t trust him nor his witch wife with her vulture feather. His poverty also didn’t mean she would give him any money; he was not her charity case. Let him suffer with his wife, some people had to learn their lessons the hard way. She was not the naïve little girl he had thrown out years ago.

As she drove away turning up more dust on him, she whispered a silent prayer in thanksgiving. This wretched dump could have been her home and this could have been her life. She thanked the good Lord for the blessing of her broken marriage that led her to her wealth and freedom.

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‘Imose sisters!’

‘Presido, Presido!’ the women clapped in reply.

‘Beautiful sisters!’

‘Presido, Presido!’

‘Sisters keepers!’

‘In sunshine and rain!’

‘Distinguished and accomplished women!’

‘Together as one!’

They sang their club anthem and settled down to the business of the day. Just the other day, they had gone on their market women’s rally, which was a success and today was their outreach day. They were at the Nimbe city orphanage to donate food, clothes, money and other basic necessities to the unfortunate children residing there. They were all dressed in their club uniform and stood glowing as their beautiful wrappers and headgears shone in the sun. Nimbe Times and Make

Me Shine Photos were there to cover the event.

Iye Baby cleared her throat before speaking into the microphone she had come to love so much.

‘I welcome una to this meeting for this special place today. All of us know say God love a cheerful giver. All the children wey dey this orphanage today na gift from God, Abi no be so?’

‘Na so,’ the women replied clapping.

‘True talk,’ she went on. ‘Some woman dey wey no see pikin to born and wicked woman dey throway the one wey God give them Make we pray for all of them, make the good Lord forgive their wickedness and touch their devil mind. Anybody wey no like us,’ she pointed the microphone at them.

‘Na them sabi!’ the women responded laughing.

‘Who no know,’ she went on.

‘Go know!’ the women cheered.

The women nodded in agreement as the photographers and camera men got busy capturing the event. The women smiled satisfied, their president was highly connected. This would not only appear as a photo splash in their dedicated space in the Nimbe Times but also on TV. Even though the Christian women looked down on their morals and lifestyle, the sisters did not care for they seemed to reach out more to the needy than the so-called self-righteous church women.

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Iye Baby was angry with Oga Engineer, what did he mean that he did not have money to give her towards Baby’s wedding? How did he expect it to be the talk of town? She sat sulking as he got dressed. She had only let him come to her house today because he told her he was expecting some money.

‘Oga Engineer, you no go fit dey use me like this and yet you no dey shake body at all. Which kind thing be this na? This is not a charity something. How you go

dey do credit?' she grumbled. 'You don see where customer dey owe ashawo before? This our work na pay as collect o.'

The skinny man smiled, 'Ha Paulina, relax, I promised to give you the money didn't I?'

'I know, but I think say na today you go give me the money. I need am to go market na.'

He sat next to her on the bed, 'Okay just be patient, I am expecting some money by evening and promise to give you some of it.'

Her eyes opened wide. 'True talk?'

He nodded, 'True talk.'

She smiled satisfied, 'That's why you be my Engineer, na only you dey engineer my body as no another man fit!'

He shook his head as she sang his praises. Women would be the end of men! As she saw him off to his car, she saw Action sitting outside his house playing with his children. She sighed, it was good to know he had a human side when he wasn't drunk and was doing what a responsible father should do by spending time with his children.

Promise arrived with a heavy basket on her head. The girl eyed her as her husband helped her with the basket. So much for the self-righteous, the older woman smiled amused.

Chapter 8

Sweet Evangelina

The next few weeks were busy, Iye baby hired people to help her clean Papa Baby's dump that he called a home. The place was so filthy, Papa Baby's wife spent the whole time silently scowling at the workers as they cleared the grass around the house, trimmed the trees in the compound, cleared all the charcoal away from the backyard, changed the roofing sheets on the house and painted the front of the house white. They also covered the compound with gravel to prevent muddiness just in case it rained. At least that was the part of the house that was going to reflect in the photos so it was best it looked nice and bright. As the days drew closer, the women shopped and busied themselves with organising the celebration and getting the menu, drinks and the dance troupe sorted.

Even though Taibat made all attempts to help out, her glaring distance from her friend was obvious. She had made enquiries about the money and her contact had told her the girls had all been paid for their services. If the girls had been paid, they would not be bold enough to double-cross Paulina so why would Paulina want to cheat her out of the business she had brought her? It hurt. She had done all she could for her friend and brought her up to where she was today. Could she possibly be mean enough to repay her by double-crossing her? She would handle her cautiously and wisely, so she helped out in all the ways she could for Baby was like a daughter to her. She hired a dance troupe to perform at the ceremony and bought wrappers to add to the bride's box for her bride price.

At a time like this, Valentine always came in handy. He ran errands for his sugar mummy in the day and serviced her real good at night until she begged him to stop. That kept her happy and distracted her from his dubious activities. On many occasions, he ran errands for her with her Volvo and often used the opportunity to drop in on Evangeline at the nursing school.

Evangeline's aunt owned a large supermarket where she helped out when she

was on holidays and that was where he had met her on one of the days his sugar mummy had sent him to buy her beloved Pringles. He had set his eyes on the light-skinned petite young girl stacking the shelves and smiled. It wasn't love at first sight, but it was definitely something.

Her long hair was weaved in neat plaits and she had no make-up on. Despite her plainness, she had large bouncy breasts just the way he loved his women. Even though she was short, her light skin made up for the rest. He had walked up to her pretending he was looking for a remedy for his pimples. The girl had cast her doe eyes on the pimpled one-eyed young man and innocently led him to the shelf where they had all sorts of creams, antiseptic soaps and ointments. After picking out some products and handing them to him, he smiled revealing broken teeth, a memento from a street fight.

'Na wa o, see as you just select the creams and soap like say you be doctor.'

She smiled, 'I'm studying to be a nurse.'

'Oh that's nice,' he nodded his head in approval.

She glanced at his basket, 'Is that all you are buying?' she pointed at the basket full of Pringles.

He shrugged, 'Yes na my small sister just come back from boarding school, na the only thing wey she dey chop be that,' he lied. His hand quickly went to his hair to make sure all his dreads were in place.

'You must be a good brother. It's so kind of you to do that for your little sister,' she smiled again.

'Wetin be your name?'

She hesitated before replying softly, 'Evangeline.'

'Wow Evangelina! That's a beautiful name! Na only beautiful angels dey get that kind name,' he tried to flatter her.

She laughed, there was something about him that made her heart race. It went beyond his looks and bad English. 'It's Evangeline and not Evangelina. You are too kind, what is your name?'

‘Valentine.’

‘I see. Are you from around here? I have never seen you here before.’

He put on an air of importance, ‘Yes I dey come here well, well. My Papa na ambassador and my Mama na Jamaican, so I be half caste. You no see my skin colour?’ He stretched out his hand.

‘Really?’ she raised an eyebrow puzzled. ‘So if your father is an ambassador and your mother is a Jamaican how come you speak such terrible English?’

He laughed, ‘Oh that. The problem be say I am so much love my reggae music. I be musician and my music name na Sweet Banana. I dey work on my album and you go soon see me for television.’

Evangeline giggled at the suggestive yet amusing name. ‘Aha, so you are a musician. Television is good. That means you are ambitious.’

‘That’s right.’ He fell in step beside her, gently touching her hand.

She walked him to the till and watched him pay. He counted out some new notes from his wallet and headed for Iye Baby’s Volvo parked outside. She followed him.

‘Nice car, is it yours?’

He nodded, ‘My daddy buy am for me for my birthday last year but I go soon change am.’ He couldn’t believe his luck. Some women were so easy. He had initially thought she was out of his league but here she was eating his lies out of the palm of his hand. Life was good. ‘So where your school dey? Make I come visit you.’

She reluctantly gave him her school address and he promised to visit her during the week as some weekends, she spent with her uncle and he was strict about men coming to the house. That day as Valentine cruised back to the barracks, he whistled and whistled and almost knocked down the policeman controlling traffic at the junction to the barracks.

That was how the relationship had started. The few times they had hung out, she wasn’t so sure, until she heard him sing at one of his gigs. His voice swept her

off her feet. Seventeen year old Evangeline, the hopeless romantic who spent most of her free time buried in romance novels, believed he was a mixed raced, reggae musician son of an ambassador who owned a Volvo given to him by his daddy for his last birthday.

She did her best to overlook his physical and language flaws. To her she had struck gold. Looks were not important, as long as he didn't smell, that was fine by her. Only a few girls at her nursing school had boyfriends with cars who came to see them, and they were usually married men. Her new boyfriend was rich and she would brag about it, but never introduce him to any of her friends. He was her golden secret. She didn't want them snatching him from her! This fantasy and folly was too good to be true as this was her first boyfriend and she believed everything that she read in her romance novels were true and that love came flying at you on butterfly wings.

The first day he visited her at school, he came on foot carrying a bag of goodies. She was happy with the bag but disappointed that he hadn't come in his car so she could show it off. He lied to her that his sister had driven his car out without his permission and all the keys to the other cars parked at his father's mansion had been in the car his father had driven out that day! Her eyes opened wide.

'Your little sister can drive?'

He nodded.

'Oh darling will you teach me how to drive too?' She put her arms around him.

He nodded again 'Sweetie, that one no be problem. I dey busy now. I go teach you when I get time.'

She hugged him in excitement and covered his face and bad eye with kisses.

On a few occasions when they were let out of school, he had invited her to watch him perform at small parties and weddings and other times, he took her back to his place in the slums to listen to music and chat.

It was a wooden shack with a gutter running right in front of it. All the other houses in the slums were also wooden shacks that stank and mosquitoes bred in billions and grew fat on the inhabitants. There were no toilets, so the inhabitants made excellent use of the large refuse dump at the back where they could all be

seen perched in different spots at different angles like toilet flies doing their business. Some smoked weed as they did their business because they believed it aided smooth bowel movements. The bathrooms were makeshift improvised pieces of wood without roofs.

The first day they arrived at his place, he had lied to her that it was a friend's and that he had brought her here for some privacy since his daddy did not allow guests at his mansion.

'You could simply just tell him I am your sister's friend,' she suggested, jumping as a big rat ran past her.

'Ah my daddy dey smart, na sharp guy and I no fit tell am lie.'

They walked past malnourished, dirty, naked children with runny noses playing in the filth and women either busy cooking or going about their daily chores. Some of the young men they walked past were busy playing draughts or sitting in circles drinking or smoking. All greeted him familiarly so she assumed they knew him because of his music career. They arrived at a door with a blue net, where he took out the keys and unlocked it.

It was a small tidy room with a high mattress and a blue light bulb. She didn't want to imagine the activities that went on that mattress. The room had no chairs. There was a large television and posters of musicians and half naked women on the walls. Well-ironed shirts and trousers hung from a rack in the corner and shoes were neatly arranged in another corner. There was also a small fridge with a small fan carefully balanced on it and a cooking stove, pots, a broom, plates and other things were neatly arranged in another corner. He switched on the fan to cool the room and at the same time ease the stench of the gutter out the front. She could also see camphor balls placed in strategic places to ease the stench. Which of his friends lived in this kind of place? She wondered trying to hide her irritation.

She sat uncomfortably on the edge on the mattress since there were no chairs and watched him take off his shoes and shirt. He stretched out on the mattress and reached for her. She pulled away. She had only known him for a few weeks and wasn't comfortable enough to be lying in bed with him yet. He switched on the television and increased the volume. He reached for her again and she pulled away.

‘Wetin?’ he enquired concerned, wondering what was wrong.

‘Nothing.’ She shook her head, pushing his hand away gently.

This wasn’t going to be as easy as he thought, he sat up, maybe he could get her to relax with a soft drink ‘You go drink Fanta?’

She shook her head, ‘Why is the television so loud?’

He smiled, ‘I no want make anybody disturb our enjoyment.’

It was then it dawned on her that he had brought her here with the hope of sleeping with her. That was not going to happen.

He ran his hands up and down her hands and then up and down her legs and then tried to get them under her skirt. She slapped his hands off; he frowned, wondering what was wrong with her. Did she think he had been spending all that time and money on her for nothing? She had to be joking. When she kept resisting, he simply pulled her towards him, pinned her to the mattress with his weight and held her two hands above her head with one hand. She seemed to have forgotten he was a man.

‘Relax na,’ he grumbled as she struggled.

‘Valentine no!’ she shrieked.

‘Wetin dey do you, how I go dey shine car wey I no dey drive?’ He reached for her skirt again with his left hand. ‘I don spend plenty money for your head and you no wan give me the thing?’

‘I’m a virgin! Please don’t do this to me!’ she pleaded.

That got him; he froze and looked down at her. She was crying and extremely frightened. He rolled off her and lay facing the ceiling wondering what he had gotten himself into. He didn’t like all these virgin girls. From experience, they were too clingy; they didn’t understand what it meant for two consenting adults to simply have a good time and then part ways with no hard feelings. They always came back asking for more than he was willing to offer.

This was why he liked his next door neighbour. Even though her name was

Beauty, she was far from it. She was one of the slum girls who had tried to escape poverty by going to Europe. Okwy London had helped her to get to Italy, Belgium and Amsterdam and she had been deported on all three occasions. She had ended up as his girlfriend when she was deported the third time and borne him a son Chi Boy. She sold second-hand underwear at the slum market during the day and roasted fresh corn in their neighbourhood at night.

She was cool that way because on nights when he wasn't with any of his women, he would buy a couple of drinks and knock on her door. As long as the drinks were free, they would both drink and then get down to serious business. After which he would return to his room. He never spent the night at her place and by morning they were strangers to each other. It suited them both as she had a boyfriend just like he had girlfriends. It was also good to be in her good books as her boyfriend would be his ticket out of Nimbe when the time came.

He listened to her sobbing silently and wished he had never set eyes on her. He stood up, got dressed and took her back to school without uttering a single word. As he drove off, he could see her from the side mirror still standing where he had left her looking confused.

Later that night he almost broke the bed and Iye Baby's back as thoughts of the virgin Evangeline filled his head with lust. He imagined what he would do to her when she finally trusted him enough to give him her precious gift; he never knew purity could be such a turn on.

A month later, he was back at her school. He was a man who loved challenges and Evangeline was one mountain he had vowed to conquer. Her virginity was his to take and he would do all he had to do to get it. Even if it meant marrying her as thoughts of her petite frame, light skin, weaved hair, paint-free face and bouncy breasts occupied his thoughts constantly. He jumped into the air and clapped his hands. What would the world be like without women and men like him?

Evangeline was not his only side chick, he had many others scattered around Nimbe. A few of them were single girls who mostly resided around his shack in the slums but mostly they were married women of means who gave him money for his services. They occasionally got into fights over him when they bumped into each other at his place and he would usually run into his room and bolt the door from the inside until the women left. He couldn't ask for more, for now all

that mattered to him was his music, Sweet his monkey, Evangeline's virginity, a passport, a visa and money to relocate to Europe.

Today, his sugar mummy had sent him out to sort out the canopy arrangement for the wedding. She wanted him to make sure the canopies she had booked would be delivered and set up early enough before the guests started arriving and also to make sure Make Me Shine Photos had a stand near a generator for their video coverage just in case the electricity went off. He had taken her Volvo promising to be back in no time. The errands didn't take long, so he cruised to the nursing school. Visiting Evangeline the way he did kept him in her mind and assured him that he would conquer her soon.

As he pulled into the compound, he saw other cars parked outside under the enormous almond trees. He parked the Volvo and strolled casually towards the hostel. There was a girl in tight shorts spreading her clothes outside.

'Good morning,' he greeted taking in a good view of her bent over. 'Abeg I dey find Evangelina.'

She stood up straight adjusting her T-shirt. 'I don't think she's around, she had to hurry home yesterday.'

'I hope say problem no dey?' he looked concerned.

The lady shook her head shrugging, 'No idea, she just took her bags and hurried home yesterday. You can either go to her house or come back in a few days, she should be back by then.'

'Thank you.'

'Who should I tell her came looking for her?'

He waved his hand, 'No worry, I go come back.' He strolled back to the car disappointed and at the same time hoping all was well with her. Not that he really cared but she had to be well for him to fulfil his fantasies.

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Fine girl shivered as she walked home, a nylon bag filled with fresh green vegetables in her hand. Okwy London walked beside her smiling. That was all he ever did. What did he want with a plain girl like her? She looked down at her worn dress and shook her head, all he had ever said was that he liked her and that was all. Today she had rushed out to buy some vegetables and spices for soup from the market, which was not far away and she had seen him as she walked home. She hoped he didn't notice her shivering, least he think she was scared of him. She wasn't scared of anyone at all; she was just shy.

She shook her head at the thought of Valentine trying to bed her on different occasions like he did her aunt. He had to be a fool to ever think she would give in to him even if he was the last man on earth. Not to mention that she had such a handsome and clean young man who cared about her like Okwy London – the man all the young girls in Nimbe wanted. Maybe she should tell her aunt about Okwy London as for Valentine, the kitchen broom was enough.

She frowned, what if her aunt decided that she was interested in him and wanted him for herself? He had money and was young and it was strange that her aunt hadn't slept with him yet as she had almost bedded all the rich men in Nimbe. Maybe he didn't like fat over-bleached older women? Even though she wasn't sure what he wanted from her yet and he made her have the feeling of butterflies fluttering about in her stomach, she wasn't ready to let her aunt have him nor was she ready to share him either.

Chapter 9

Knocking On the Door

As the days to the wedding approached, Iye Baby carried on with her planning. All her regular clients, Oga Commissioner, Oga Engineer and Chief would be special guests and would be seated at the high table with her and Papa Baby. They would attend as her supporters but would be introduced as friends of the Imose Association of Accomplished and Distinguished Ladies.

Her club members would have a specially reserved canopy and so would the church group, friends and other family members. She had invited her pastor too, since he would pray and bless the young couple even though he had frowned that Baby had become pregnant out of wedlock. She had been able to beg and convince him by making a large donation to the church. She would also have to get new clothes for her ex-husband and his scraggly wife and children. She didn't want them looking like beggars at her daughter's wedding and ruining the photos and the photo splash in the newspaper that she had paid for.

Baby on her part sat around hopelessly while people ran round her making plans. She didn't have a mind of her own all she cared about was what her short bowlegged Octavius said. Her younger sister Destiny and her cousin Fine Girl had helped shop for her outfit and had taken care of her hair and nails. Their older brother Sergeant Solo had promised to take time off from his duty to attend the ceremony, and his wife and kids would stay at Iye Baby's place for a few days to help out. They all looked forward to having him home. In his days as a young officer, he spent his time locking up anyone who annoyed him, until he got posted out of Nimbe. He still had friends there and these were the boys Iye Baby used when she needed to deal with the wives of her clients and other annoying women who came to harass her at her bar.

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The day for the knocking on the door finally arrived and Nimbe city woke up to heavy rain. Iye Baby began to panic as she sat over breakfast of a large plate of beans and akamu with plenty of sugar.

‘Which kind bad luck be this na?’ She had consulted the rain-maker the day before and after pocketing her money and bottles of alcohol he had promised to hold the rain if there was going to be any, so what was this?

‘Aunty Pauli na showers of blessings, just no worry your sef, e go soon stop.’ Fine Girl tried to console her as she poured her a glass of cold water.

‘My enemies no go succeed! The devil is a liar!’ she shouted drumming her spoon against the table.

‘Aunty is all right. All this plenty rain na blessing. Nobody can count the blessing of the Lord. The rain go stop before you chop finish.’ Fine Girl stood by the window completely helpless.

She glanced at her niece and tried to smile, wondering what she would do without her. The girl had been a source of comfort to her all these years even more than her children she had slaved for and she made sure she treated her well. She took good care of her, paid her school fees, gave her pocket money and bought her well-made clothes. She prayed she would marry a good man and live a better life than her useless father. She wasn’t sure he would attend Baby’s wedding even though she had sent an invitation to him weeks before. As she stirred the sugar in her akamu, the electricity went off and they were all thrown into instant darkness as all the doors and windows had been shut to keep the rain out.

In a flash Fine Girl provided a lit lantern and placed it in on the television to provide light for the living room. Iye Baby heard Baby complaining from the room the girls shared, as Destiny and Chinelo tried to console her. She ignored them and looked at her breakfast. It was time the foolish girl grew up. Baby had made her bed this way and she was going to lie on it, chuku chuku and all. She was glad at least that she had had the foresight to cover the usually muddy compound of the wedding venue with gravel, so mud would not be a problem for their guests.

After her heavy breakfast, Iye Baby had gone back to bed to relax, since she could do nothing about the rain. By 10 o'clock, the rain stopped, the sun came out and the electricity came back on. She laughed and let out a loud belch and a long fart.

'My enemies don fail o. Wicked people!' she clapped her hands.

She pulled herself out of bed and started putting things together while the bride to be and the others got dressed.

Taibat arrived to help out. Even though they spoke, the other woman avoided her eyes and seemed to prefer sitting with the girls in their room, which was unusual. In the past she would have helped Iye Baby to select an outfit and they would have gossiped all the way to the wedding. All this had to end and they would settle their differences. Taibat was her only friend and she missed their friendship.

As they approached the wedding venue, cars were neatly parked by the side of the road and she could see her son and his friends all dressed in white lace and red caps directing cars where to park. She smiled, she hadn't seen her son in months and every time she saw him he looked better and his chest and shoulders looked larger. She could proudly beat her chest at the thought that even if she was a divorcee and a woman who bedded other women's husbands, she wasn't a mother without a son. Many women were thrown out of their husband's homes or had to put up with other wives and concubines because they couldn't give their husband's sons.

She could see that the canopies were up in the compound and the Sweet Banana band was already entertaining them with Sweet tied in a corner chattering and jumping around. They all stepped out of the cars and took their seats waiting for the groom's people to arrive. Her club members had already arrived in a bus all dressed in their club uniforms, so too had the Christian Women's Association, the pastor and her other special guests and everyone was sitting under their respective canopies.

Sergeant Solo stood at the gate with his friends to keep the rest of Nimbe city out. Some of the uninvited guests sat on the fence while others climbed nearby trees to witness the wedding of the year.

Iye Baby smiled, yes this was it; she owned Nimbe city and all knew it. Make

Me Shine Photos had specific instructions to photograph the people on the fence, in the trees and at the gate to show that Baby's wedding was the talk of town. The wedding photos would be added to the lead story in the Nimbe Times and there would be an additional centre spread for a generous photo splash of the event.

Seated at the high table between her pastor, Oga Commissioner, Chief and Oga Engineer, Iye Baby lustfully watched Sweet Banana twist his small waist as the audience cheered. She sighed at the thought that only she knew what that waist could do and what was hidden beneath. She almost laughed out loud; power was good and she could have any man she wanted.

When the groom's family arrived, the crowd cheered. She watched Oyibo, Octavius and their family members walk towards their canopy. Her two sons had narrowly missed their mother's albinism but they both had reddish skin and red hair with lots of freckles covering their faces. Octavius was short and bowlegged with a huge red beard and moustache while his younger brother Happiness was tall and athletic just like his mother.

She froze when she saw the man standing next to Oyibo; it was Mr. Holloway! Memories came flooding back and she could have wept at the thought of the good times with him. She had never stopped thinking about him and here he was today! She hadn't seen him in almost ten years. He had aged and his once full head of hair was now bald and he had a little belly.

Where had he been all these years? She was just starting her business when they had dated, which was shortly after Major had died. He had lavished her with gifts and affection, but at that time she didn't understand what he saw in her. They lost touch when he went to prison. She had left and never bothered to ask about him, in case the gist spread and the law came calling. He had never known her house or her business. What was he doing here with Oyibo? Trust the stupid albino to come with a white man just to show him off. Didn't she know that they had history together?

He also stopped in his tracks when he saw her, 'Pauline?' he was the only one who ever called her Pauline.

'Mr. Holloway?' she stood up from her seat, almost knocking down the neatly arranged drinks.

He left Oyibo's side and went to embrace her. 'Where on earth have you been my darling?' he looked so surprised to see her.

She giggled like a little girl as she adjusted her wrapper, 'Ah I still dey manage my small shop.'

He looked so happy, 'You know I looked for you when I came back here?'

She looked surprised. 'Nobody tell me.'

She could see Oyibo's eyes shooting daggers at them. This was not the place and time to rekindle old flames but she sure was going to hook up with this old flame of hers even if he was Oyibo's man. After the wedding they would talk.

'No wahala make we gist after the wedding.'

'Sure, sure.' He couldn't take his eyes off her as she led him back to the canopy where Oyibo sat with her guests. Iye Baby welcomed them and got waitresses to quickly serve them food and drinks before the marriage rites began.

She could see Mr. Holloway's eyes following her around as she busied herself and her heart raced. She still had the silver lighter he had given her nicely tucked away in a drawer in her bedroom. She shook her head almost laughing out loud. She wasn't a naïve little girl anymore, so why were her legs feeling like rubber all because she had seen Mr. Holloway after all these years? Their chat after the wedding would determine a lot of things. If he was financially stable, she might take him on as a regular but if he had lost everything, then he would remain a good friend. The world was too harsh for showing sympathy with carnal pleasures; she didn't work that way.

Papa Baby also sat at the high table looking like a cross between a lizard and a vulture as he practically drowned in the new outfit she had bought him. He had had countless bottles of beer and had tactfully hidden plates of pounded yam and amala under the table. He didn't know when such a blessing of free food would come his way again. His wife sat in a corner sulking.

He called out to one of the young women serving, 'Go bring soup for me, make

I lick!'

The girl with the tray frowned at him. Was he crazy or did he think he was sitting in his house? How could you ask for soup to lick at a wedding when there was surplus to eat? Eyeing his skinny malnourished frame, she wondered where all the beer and palm wine he had been downing since the ceremony began and all the plates of food had gone. Did he have a creature in his belly, feasting on all he ate as soon as he swallowed it? She wouldn't put tape worms past him.

'I say go bring me soup to lick, abi you deaf?' he demanded again, waving his bony hands.

'Yes sir,' she hurried away with the intention of not returning with the order.

Papa Baby looked around and marvelled at Paulina's wealth. Life had been good to her and he regretted sending her and their children away, it was all his young wife's fault. She had used juju on him and made him senseless after which she had wrecked him. Now he lived in abject poverty and was stuck with her.

The ceremony began with a long opening prayer by the pastor. As he screamed into the microphone, he prayed for a successful ceremony. He cast out all the bloodsucking demons lurking on the roads to cause accidents to the invited guests and reigned curses on all the evil guests who were present at the ceremony with the intention of causing havoc. He prayed for fire and brimstone to consume them as they perished, after which he prayed for a happy married life for the young people who would soon be joined in holy matrimony and advised them to walk in the way of the Lord. He instructed the guests to stretch out their right hands and pray for the couple, then asked them to place their right hands on their chests and wish themselves all that they had wished for the couple.

He screamed the final, 'In Jesus name!' into the microphone.

The guests shouted, 'Amen!' and 'Hallelujah!'

When he was done, he went back to his seat at the high table and took a long drink of water before sitting down. The guests clapped and one of the waitresses quickly served him food.

The groom sat with his family while Taibat and the Imose sisters sang traditional songs, clapping and beating calabashes at the same time. Iye Baby as the mother of the bride wasn't expected to do much traditionally, as the aunties took care of the rites. So she sat well-dressed next to her malnourished ex-husband and

watched the activities unfold. Occasionally her eyes would meet that of Mr. Holloway and he would smile at her and next to him, she would notice Oyibo's eyes shooting daggers at her with her shaky eyes even though she wore large dark sunglasses. If only looks could kill!

It was an interesting contrast seeing the rich fat woman seated next to the skinny man. Who would ever believe they had been married or that there was a time he was rich and Iye Baby was a naïve young girl begging him to take her back after he had thrown her out? No condition was permanent. It only took the twinkle of an eye for the good Lord to change one's destiny and she was one of the lucky few, sinner or not. She cast a side-eyed glance in his direction and almost rolled on the floor in laughter. He reminded her of a hungry ostrich.

The women entertained the guests and then presented three false brides to the groom's family. The girls stood there with veils covering their faces and Octavius was asked to identify his bride to be. He stood up, placed some money in a tray and took a good look at the veiled girls. He couldn't see their faces and had to be careful not to pick the wrong one. After walking back and forth a couple of times, he shook his head.

'None of them be my wife!'

Friends and supporters cheered him on as he went back to his seat. The Sweet Banana band took to the microphone again and sang a sweet number as Baby was brought out. Valentine could see her surrounded by her friends, Chinelo, Destiny, Fine Girl and Evangeline. Surprised at seeing Evangeline, Valentine almost forgot his lines and missed a step nearly falling on his monkey. He couldn't remember inviting her here and why hadn't it ever occurred to him that since she was a nursing student, there was a possibility that she could be friends with either Chinelo or Destiny?

Baby was dressed in red and gold aso oke, and even though a veil rested on her gele, her belly stuck out announcing its presence and the reason for the hurried union. The women danced around her before instructing Octavius to identify his bride. He walked over to her, paused for a while, circled her and then embraced her.

'Na my wife be this!' he announced.

The women cheered again as he led his bride to kneel before her father for

blessings while Sergeant Solo, as the older brother, was sent to inspect the other items that usually accompanied the dowry. They had been neatly arranged in a corner. Tubers of yam, gallons of palm oil, a gallon of palm wine, bush meat, a carton of dried fish, a box of wrappers, an umbrella, a bag of salt, sugar, rice, a carton of cheap alcohol, soft drinks and many other things. Papa Baby from where he was seated eyed the goodies brought on behalf of his daughter and smiled as he hoped they would be left behind. He placed his hands on the heads of the young couple blessed their union and prayed it would be fruitful, wishing them all the best and hoping for better things ahead.

The ceremony went according to the traditional rites. The groom and his family paid the bride price and people watched as a bundle of clean notes were handed to Papa Baby in a tray. He made a mental note to keep it for himself; his wife must not know about it. He would also beg Paulina for some money after the ceremony. If only she would forget the past and be forgiving enough to help him. After all, the good Lord loves cheerful givers and he was the father of her children.

As they went back to their seats, the Imose sisters sang and danced for them and presented their gifts to the couple, before the dance troupe Taibat had invited entertained them. The Christian mothers sat feeling holier than thou with an air of superiority eyeing the immoral club women. Since Nimbe was such a small city and everyone's business was public knowledge, they eyed their husbands' mistresses and single mothers with contempt, their list of sins were endless. They had only showed up at the ceremony for the free food, gifts and gossip, and all they had given to the young couple was a large Bible and a cross for a happy married life.

The bride and groom were invited to the dance floor as the Sweet Banana band performed another special number. Well-wishers joined them, spraying the young couple with new naira notes. Mr. Holloway also joined in the dance, standing next to Iye Baby as he sprayed a few dollars over the couple before hurrying back to his seat. Destiny danced next to her sister, occasionally wiping the sweat off her face. As the money rained down, Fine Girl, Chinelo, Evangeline and Sergeant Solo were busy picking up the notes in case people start stealing them. This was not uncommon at weddings, and the best way to catch thieves at ceremonies, was to watch the videos after the event had finished, as it was easy to see all the people who should have been spraying or dancing, picking up money and pocketing it!

As Sergeant Solo picked notes off the ground, he bumped into Happiness who was doing the same.

‘Wetin you dey do for here?’ Sergeant Solo demanded wiping the sweat off his face with his hand. A cigarette was dangling from the side of his mouth.

Happiness shrugged, ‘I’m picking money at my brother’s wedding.’

‘Na my sister marriage and you no suppose to dey pick money with us.’

‘Says who?’ The young man ignored him and continued picking up the money that raining down on them.

Sergeant Solo pushed him, ‘Gerrout from here before I lock you up!’

‘Please, don’t do that again and believe me, I am as excited about this union as you are,’ the younger man warned in sarcasm.

Taken aback Sergeant Solo shouted, ‘Wetin you go do, you albino. You no know say I be police officer? I go lock you and your family up!’ With that he slapped Happiness at the same time spitting out the words, ‘Bloody civilian!’

That was all young Happiness needed, he went for Sergeant Solo’s legs, and all people remembered was seeing the policeman in the air and then crashing into the band narrowly missing Sweet who quickly hoped onto the roof of a canopy and started chattering away angrily. Happiness jumped on his opponent and rained heavy punches on his face and belly. Next the two family’s crashed into each other, Oyibo faced Iye Baby grabbing her gele, as she was angry about Mr. Holloway. She picked up a plate of okra soup and hit her over the head with it, and in return, Iye Baby hit Oyibo with a yam tuber from the bride price on her head, then went for her legs.

That was all needed to start the madness. People started fighting and throwing things turning the newly painted and gravelled ground into a wrestling field. The first to leave were pastor and Mr. Holloway, closely followed by Oga Commissioner and Oga Engineer. Chief was last to follow, he held his cap in place with his left hand and gathering his flowing agbada with his right hand he ran towards the gate with his mouth wide open and his pot belly jiggling. He missed a step and fell into the pool of water that had gathered at the gate but was too frightened to wait to see what had caused him to fall. The bride and groom

left with their different families and Papa Baby used the chaos as an opportunity to slip lots of notes into his pockets, only to have it stolen when he was flung in different directions in the fight.

Food was thrown everywhere as people landed on pots and trays, and plates were broken as they were hurled at people. The gates flew open and the uninvited guests outside joined in while others busied themselves ransacking handbags and stealing what they could. During the commotion the church women confronted the Imose sisters, who had long been accused of causing their husbands to go astray. They pulled each other's wrappers and scratched each other while Make Me Shine Photos, the camera man and the Nimbe Times photographic team busied themselves capturing the whole drama on film!

Chapter 10

Sweet Banana

In the weeks that followed, the Nimbe Times recorded its highest sales as different versions of the story and pictures of the chaos at Baby's wedding was covered by the media. The city was filled with gist, exaggeration and gossip about the mayhem.

In the market place, small groups of people gathered to talk and laugh about it, clapping their hands and shaking their heads. The streets too were filled with the gist and even those who hadn't attended, had heard from someone, who had heard from someone else who had attended the wedding.

The church was also occupied with the gist about how the women of God had fought the women of the world. Everyone had something to say. Oyibo, Iye Baby and Baby were nowhere to be seen and Oga Commissioner, Oga Engineer and Chief kept their distance all waiting for the excitement to die down. Mr. Holloway found Iye Baby's house and tried to see her, but she would not see him.

Sergeant Solo had to return to his base the next day and when he arrived all battered and bruised, he lied that he had given Happiness a good beating. The officers hid behind their copies of the Nimbe Times which had excellent pictures of him in the air and in other amusing positions and laughed, glad that someone finally had the guts to teach him a lesson. When he had gone back the next day to arrest Happiness, he found that the boy had called his soldier friends from the army barracks, so he withdrew silently like a dog with its tail stuck between its legs.

Iye Baby sat shaking her right foot in pain and anger as Fine Girl nursed the swelling on her forehead. Oyibo had hit her with a plate of okra soup during the fight and she in return had made sure that she pulled out her braids after hitting

her with a yam. She was so angry. She had never been so embarrassed in her entire life, what sort of ill luck was this? How on earth had things gone so wrong? A ceremony she had spent months planning had turned out to be the talk of town all for the wrong reasons! Promise had spent her time singing mocking songs and laughing at her misfortune.

BBC had taken it upon herself to visit her every day until she got better. It was from her that the whole of Nimbe city knew about the fight and how the witch Aunty Blackie had come to her aid.

Since the gist had already spread like wildfire, they all chose to stay indoors. This time around, BBC could not be blamed for any other versions of the story, rumours and exaggerations. All her money had been wasted. Where the hell had all her men been? The cowards had left leaving her to suffer such an ill fate and humiliation. Baby didn't help matters; she had been crying non-stop and that wasn't healthy for her pregnancy.

Promise could be heard every morning singing praises about the walls of Jericho that fell down flat as the children of God praised the Lord.

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A few days later, Taibat and a few other Imose sisters had accompanied Baby with her boxes to Oyibo's house to plead and beg Octavius to at least take the pregnant girl in as his wife, since her bride price had already been paid. It was a disgrace for a young pregnant girl to sit at home alone when the father of her unborn child was still alive. Octavius sat outside his mother's flat smoking and drinking with his friends, while his mother sat on a couch all bandaged and red. Her son turned to look at her; she shook her head before rolling off the couch and limping away.

Taking this as a queue from her, he walked them out of his compound claiming that his mother had been disrespected by Iye Baby and Sergeant Solo.

'My son, we all make mistakes,' Taibat tried to explain, as she did her best to hide her irritation at his stubbornness. Why was he being so inconsiderate?

He eyed the older woman, 'Who be your pikin? Abeg make I hear word,' he spat

angrily at her.

When Oyibo emerged from the kitchen with a pestle, Taibat and her group knew it was time to leave. They took off at the speed of light with Oyibo, her sons and their friends chasing them down the street with a pestle, brooms and sticks. Taibat couldn't remember the last time she had run so fast.

Now Baby was stuck with a pregnancy and a future she wasn't sure of – it was clear that her relationship had officially ended. She wondered if Octavius had ever loved her and if the words he had said to her in the heat of passion were ever true. Destiny sat beside her trying to console her as usual. She had no advice to give, so all she could do was try to appease her broken-hearted older sister who wasn't wise in the ways of the world. The next day Destiny packed her bags and went back to her nursing school. She had exams to prepare for.

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On the other side of town in the slums, Valentine lay on his mattress with Beauty, having a good laugh over the events of the past two weeks. She had been part of the onlookers standing by the gate that day when the fracas had broken out and had left before being hit. He had explained to his sugar mummy that he needed to give her space to heal. They were still laughing when they heard a knock on the door.

'Valentine!'

They fell silent.

'Valentine!'

It was Evangeline's voice. What did she want? She had never come visiting on her own, he usually went to her school to bring her to his place, so why was she here today? He hadn't had time to speak to her at the wedding. Had Chinelo or Destiny been stupid enough to tell her that Iye Baby was his sugar mummy? Maybe she finally had a change of heart and decided to give in. He rolled off the mattress and put on his shirt.

'Who be that?'

‘It’s me Evangeline,’ came the soft voice from the other side of the door.

He sat up, Evangeline? ‘Evangelina I dey come make I find my door key,’ he lied. He turned to face Beauty. The tramp was still sprawled on the mattress. ‘My madam don show, abeg step.’

She frowned, ‘Make I step?’

‘Yes na, wetin you for do before? Abeg go take care of your pikin.’

She sat up and picked her skirt off the floor, ‘Na wa o, na now you know say I get pikin? So where I go come pass commot na?’

‘You dey craze? You go pass window. Abi you wan pour san san for my garri?’ He pointed at his window. ‘Oya quick, quick.’ He snapped his fingers as he pushed her towards the window.

She reluctantly got dressed. In all fairness, she had no right to be angry because they were not in a relationship. They were just two adults who helped each other out from time to time. Since her boyfriend Okwy London was always away on business, she had thought Valentine would invite her to stay longer today but with this Evangeline girl knocking on the door that was definitely not going to happen. Maybe she would return after the girl had left. Any time he came over to hers or she went over to his, she always made sure her son Chi Boy was outside playing outside in the dirt with the other slum babies.

Valentine helped her out of his shack through the window. She missed her footing and fell on the dustbin below. ‘Thunder fire your head!’ she swore at him.

‘Commot there make person see road, ashawo.’

He quickly adjusted the sheets on the mattress and sprayed a cheap perfume around the room then sprinkled Saturday Night powder in his hairy armpits. He powdered his face, combed his hair and switched on the television before he hurried to the door.

Evangeline stood there in a long skirt and a blue blouse. She looked so beautifully inviting. He let her in and watched her sit on his mattress. It was strange this visit.

‘Why are you staring at me like that?’ she smiled, she continued. ‘When I saw you at that wedding singing two weeks ago, it dawned on me that could be us without the drama. I have changed my mind.’

‘Wetin you change mind about?’ He went to sit next to her. That was all he had cared to hear in her short speech.

‘You have been so good to me Valentine and as the son of an ambassador, I think it is time you stop hiding out at your friend’s place.’ She waved her hand at his room. ‘We can make this relationship official and then go to your house, so I can meet your family and you can teach me how to drive.’

‘Na true.’ He feigned understanding, amused at her stupidity and gullibility.

‘I will do it with you on the condition that you promise to marry me.’

He was taken aback, ‘You mean am?’

She nodded.

He had been dying to bed her for months but not on the terms and conditions she had given him. Promising to marry her was no big deal but to take her to his father’s house? That would be hard. Whose house would he take her to? He thought of his real parents’ home not too far from his shack and almost laughed aloud. It was barely a house, if they could call their zinc and wooden residence one, but it had been home to them for many years until he was old enough to leave and fend for himself. He scratched his head, no one came to mind but he would work something out. Why waste such an opportunity?

‘Okay, I go carry you go there next week. No worry yourself, just pull your cloth I dey come.’ He smiled at her.

‘Okay,’ she nodded. She had been so moved by the emotions of Baby’s wedding that she was willing to do anything.

As he watched her undress, he marvelled at how naïve she was. She was almost 18 and amazingly ignorant of the antics of men and their lies. He searched through his drawer for some condoms and almost kicked himself. His pack was finished and he had used the last one on Beauty. Had he known he would get so lucky today, he would have reserved the last one especially for his sweet

Evangelina. Damn the consequences, she was studying to be a nurse and could take care of herself so he was fine.

‘Do you have a condom?’ her voice was shaky.

He nodded dishonestly. This was too good to be true; he started to sweat. ‘Abeg excuse me, make I pour water for my body first.’

He had to wash off the feel and smell of Beauty for this special conquest. He hurried outside and picked up a bucket half filled with rainwater and hurried to the back where the bathrooms were located. There was a short queue, so he waited impatiently and after a fat woman who spent what seemed like ages stepped out, a young man went in and then it was his turn. He soaped his body and sponged it hard, scrubbing himself like he had never done before. He couldn’t remember the last time he had been so excited.

He was done in no time and tying a small old worn multi-coloured towel around his waist he hurried to his waiting damsel almost slipping as he stepped on some leftover soap.

He passed by Beauty who threw him an angry look; he couldn’t be bothered. She was seated on a stool with her bag of fresh corn beside her and her basin of charcoal in front of her all set for business. Let her roast corn for the evening, he could handle her easily when he was done with his sweet Evangeline. There was no situation a few lies couldn’t take care of.

Evangeline was lying under the covers when he came in. He flung off his towel and went to join her under the sheets. Her eyes opened wide when she saw him naked. He turned up the volume of the television and switched on the fan, then turned to her. She was shivering.

He smiled knowingly, ‘Just relax, remember say my guy name na Sweet banana, don’t worry yourself. I am a gentle lover and I go treat you well.’

She nodded quietly as he pulled away the wrapper and ran his coarse hands all over her soft body.

He marvelled at the thought of her purity. Girls like this were so rare and he was glad she had chosen him to initiate her into the mysteries of womanhood. He got down to business, taking his time to savour it all. This was one experience he

didn’t want both of them to forget in a hurry.

In no time, he was huffing and puffing and she lay in agony wondering what on earth had pushed her to give in to him. This wasn’t what she had expected, she had expected it to be romantic like the novels she had read; he didn’t even kiss her like the books said or whispered sweet words of love.

She lay there in regret, her friends had lied to her, and there was nothing so fantastic about it. It was so painful and he didn’t seem to care if she was comfortable or not. He was sweating all over her and the fan didn’t seem to be doing much to cool the heat. She tried to distract herself, silently praying it would soon be over so she could go back to school and mourn her loss. Why had she gotten herself into this?

She was still wondering, when the door burst open. Since she was facing the door, she saw the lady come in with a large stick; her eyes opened in shock, Valentine on cloud nine didn’t hear her storm in.

The contact of the big stick with his back twice brought him back to reality in a terrible shock. He convulsed on top of Evangeline, before rolling off her to see what was going on. He fell on the floor with a thump and saw Beauty. His door was wide open, giving the whole neighbourhood a fantastic view of his nakedness. Evangeline’s only source of dignity was the pillow she held close to her chest to cover her. Since the attack had been unexpected, Valentine couldn’t defend himself. Beauty beat the hell out of him, bringing the stick down on his back, his buttocks and other interesting parts of his promiscuous body.

Evangeline got a few strokes of the stick on her back and buttocks and pleaded in tears before Beauty let her go, screaming, ‘Ashawo, Harlot! Woo!’

The poor girl ran outside with her clothes narrowly missing the gutter, only to find that the neighbourhood had gathered and were shouting insults at her and calling her names. She ran as she got dressed wondering why she had to lose her virginity in this way.

As for Valentine, he wasn’t so lucky. He ran out naked and fell into the gutter. Beauty chased him down the road with the stick. He ran like he had never run before, past the slum market, the church and the bars. When Beauty was tired, she returned to her stand where her corn lay burning on the charcoal, and let out a long hiss.

This had officially ended whatever it was they had and she was glad she had taught him a good lesson. He was lucky Sweet didn't live there with him, as she would have beaten the stupid monkey too. She let out another long hiss as she took the burnt corn off the charcoal. Her eyes roamed the slums quickly for her son and she saw Chi Boy playing with the other children. That was fine by her.

Valentine returned later that evening bare foot and dressed in a skirt and blouse he had pulled the clothes off a washing line in his race. He hurried past Beauty to his place; he should have known better than to mess with a slum tramp. That evening he packed his clothes, locked up his shack and moved into Iye Baby's flat.

Promise was sitting in front of her apartment washing the empty plastic bottles in her wheelbarrow when Valentine walked in. She cast her gaze on the nuisance of a man holding his tiny bag and burst into a song about fornication and punishment.

Chapter 11

Girlfriend

Iye Baby hadn't seen Valentine since the fight and she was lying in bed in pain when he had walked in. Before she asked what had happened, he quickly explained to her that he had been beaten up at the ceremony too and good Samaritans had rushed him home. She felt sorry for him and invited him to join her in bed so Fine Girl could nurse them both. The pain that shot through his body as he made contact with the mattress was so excruciating, he screamed.

'You sure say we no go go Dr. Maduka chemist?' she enquired with her swollen forehead.

He shook his head, 'Na small thing.' He moved away from her and closed his eyes.

By evening he was all swollen and feverish, Dr. Maduka had to be called in to administer drugs to him.

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Since the fight at the wedding almost a month ago, Iye Baby hadn't visited her bar, as she didn't want customers seeing her with a swollen forehead. She did all her business from home and Baby and Fine Girl gave her steady feedback on all the goings on there.

Taibat sat with Iye Baby's girls at the Love Your Neighbour Beer parlour and bar. She had called together all the girls who had attended the naked party and drilled them about what had gone on and what had happened to the money. They all told Taibat the same story. She ordered a bottle of stout and sat planning her

next course of action. She could easily believe these girls but why was she convinced that her best friend had double-crossed her and paid them to lie to her too. She lit a cigarette and puffed the smoke in circles in front of her. She had to find out the truth.

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Mr. Holloway kept coming round and she still refused to see him. How could she attend to a man when she didn't look her best? That was unheard of. Valentine had only had the privilege of seeing her down because he had supposedly been involved in the whole madness too. Despite all the discouragement, Mr. Holloway kept coming back and each time Fine Girl turned him away, he always left something for her, either fruits or flowers, which Fine Girl took to her aunt seated in her bedroom.

On one of the days he had left her flowers, she had laughed and laughed. 'See this yeye oyibo man. Na flower I go chop?'

Valentine had laughed from where he was stretched out on her bed and she had eyed him. He was beginning to irritate her and get on her nerves. It was better when he came around occasionally but since he came to stay with her the thrill was gradually wearing off. He was a leech, he lied a lot and had long overstayed his welcome.

When Valentine had told her how robbers had broken into his shack and threatened to kill him, she had felt sorry for him and let him stay, fully aware of the possibility that it could be a big fat lie. He had forgotten that he told her he had been beaten up at the wedding. Now the story had changed. What else was new? When she asked him about Evangeline, he denied it claiming he had never heard such a name before and couldn't even pronounce it!

After a month, when she felt she looked better, Mr. Holloway came back to visit and she welcomed him dressed in black tights and a flowing kaftan. She quickly dismissed Valentine who let himself out through the back door, and Fine Girl had gone to her bar. They had the house all to themselves. They sat in her living room and he took her hands in his and smiled. It had been a long time. When they had dated years back, he had a full head of hair, but now it was grey and he had gone totally bald in the front. His eyes were still grey though and his hands

still felt soft to touch.

They chatted about everything that had happened since he went to prison and she showed him the silver lighter she had kept. She couldn't remember the last time she had laughed so much when they remembered the day one of her scorned ex-lovers had chased him down the hill with a broken bottle. Since her clash with Taibat, she had been bursting with stories and no one to tell them to. Now Mr. Holloway was here so she told him everything. She even told him about her regular clients and the ups and downs of her trade.

He said he had never stopped caring about her and that he would like to date her, not just to have her as a mistress but as a steady girlfriend. He told her that he had stopped whatever dubious business he was into back then which had sent him to prison and now owned a large warehouse that supplied and sold seafood.

She had chuckled, 'Girlfriend? I don too old to be that kind thing. You know say I like money well, well.'

'I mean it Pauline.' He had a serious expression on his face and his grey eyes seemed to be peering into her soul.

She liked the way he said her name; she eyed him suspiciously. When it came to men, one could never be too careful. But life was all about taking risks wasn't it? He looked sincere enough.

'Make I think about it.'

She made lunch and they sat at her table and ate. She put on some music and they danced and eventually ended up in her bed.

When Valentine returned that night from wherever he had strayed to and saw Mr. Holloway's car outside and Iye Baby's door closed, he guessed the man didn't leave after his visit. He made do with the mat on the cold living room floor, where mosquitoes partied all night long around his ears and feasted on him. When he tried his luck with Fine Girl during the night where she lay fast asleep in the next room, she used a large broom on his hands! Why had she gone to bed with such a big broom?

Next morning, Fine Girl set hot coffee on the table with scrambled eggs, fresh bread and baked beans. She eyed Valentine where he was sprawled on the floor

snoring with his mouth open, glad he had wisely returned to his bed last night. If he hadn’t she would have done worse. He smelt the breakfast from his sleep and as he opened his eyes, she made it clear to him that he was not welcome to eat.

Iye Baby led Mr. Holloway to the dining table carefully stepping over Valentine on the way. She didn’t bother introducing him to her guest. Was he so inconsequential to her? Didn’t the older man at least wonder who he was? Maybe he assumed he was just a relative.

Valentine’s stomach began to rumble as he rolled the mat. He knew he had no right to question his sugar mummy about her other men, but she had never totally ignored him like this. He went to wash and change. He felt like going to the recording studio to sing his heart out and hang out with his friends. As he walked away, Sweet jumped on his shoulders as Promise walked past them with her wheelbarrow.

Chapter 12

Number One

Iye Baby sat with Oga Commissioner in her air-conditioned room upstairs. She sat massaging his legs; his trousers were neatly hanging on the rack in the corner. His eyes were closed as he relaxed. There had been no explanation with regards to where they had all been since Baby's wedding and she was glad to see him when he showed up at her bar.

'Paulina, 'he said softly.

'My Oga?' she looked up at him, adoration in her eyes.

'I have been transferred.'

She stopped, 'Transfer? To where? Why government go carry you commot for here just like that? Abi you wan run away from me because of that small fight for Baby marriage? That na old story na and e don tey small.'

He shook his head and placed his hands on her shoulders 'Duty calls, it's my job and it is closer to my wife and kids.'

She couldn't argue. A client's wife and family came first. Instead she shook her head and said, 'Ha, I don dey miss you already. I go dey lonely, well, well.' She tried to look sad.

He smiled, this woman was magic and despite her deceit, she knew how to make a man feel like a king. His wife could do with a few lessons from this soon to be ex-mistress of his. He would miss her services. How could she be lonely, when she had a million and one men at her beck and call? Not to mention the regulars? He remained silent.

She put his feet down and crawled to his side, and taking his head, she rested it

on her soft bosom, the assets he cherished most on her body. He rested his head properly and they just talked about everything. She told him about Mr. Holloway and he advised her to follow her heart and do what she thought was best. If the man was offering her love and security, it was much safer than having different men in your bed all the time. He made it clear to her that the relationship would end as soon as he left. He thanked her for her love and pampering and wished her well. They got down to business and she did her best to please him. He was a good man and had been so good to her; he deserved the best.

As he got ready to leave, she sat watching him. He had been her regular client for years and his departure had created an opening for a new client. When he was done, he walked back to her, gave her a warm hug and planted a big kiss on her cheek.

'I will miss you Paulina. Take good care of yourself.' He handed her a big brown envelope and with that he was gone.

She sighed; such was the life of a prostitute. Clients came and went which was okay, but when your good regulars left, it was bad for business and reminded you that you were all alone and had nobody who really cared. She rolled over to the window and watched him drive off; there were tears in her eyes. He had been kind enough to tell her it was over and she appreciated that. Would she ever be any man's number one?

She watched her staff at work while they served and chatted with customers. She could also see Chief's car in the distance and was surprised to see Promise standing by his window with her wheelbarrow. He seemed to be buying some bottles of kunu and zobo from her. She adjusted the baby on her back as she handed him his purchase. Iye Baby prayed he wasn't on his way to her bar. She wasn't in the mood for him now.

Her eyes went over to Oyibo's bar to see what was going on there and was surprised to see Valentine sitting with Oyibo. What nonsense was that? Was she hanging out with the tramp to spite her because of Mr. Holloway? When she asked him about his relationship with Oyibo, he had truthfully explained to her that he had ended their relationship as soon as he had seen her, so was the foolish woman hanging out with the leachy Valentine to spite her?

The extent of the woman's stupidity was endless. Didn't she know that no one

had total control over anyone else's feelings? Mr. Holloway was free to sleep with anyone he wanted and since he had chosen her, what was this woman's problem? Why was she acting as if she was new to this business? If she had been nicer, they could have easily shared men, like they used to back in the days when they were friends. Well let her have Valentine, that was her business. Good riddance.

She let out a long hiss and headed for the bathroom for a quick shower. He would come running back to her sooner or later and she would throw him out. She was done with his leachy self, sweet banana or not.

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'Imose sisters!'

'Presido, Presido!' the women clapped in reply.

'Beautiful sisters!'

'Presido, Presido!'

'Sisters keepers!'

'In sunshine and rain!'

'Distinguished and accomplished women!'

'Together as one!'

They sang their club anthem and clapped.

Today was Oyibo's turn to host the club meeting and as the women sat under a canopy in front of her house, her girls did their best to make sure the women were well served. Her sons were nowhere in sight. Their hostess limped to her seat and the women smiled knowingly, wondering why it was taking her so long to recover from the beating. Didn't she know that people who lived in glass houses shouldn't never throw stones?

Iye Baby eyed her; it served her right for trying to steal her sugar boy.

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Baby stood anxiously waiting for the door to open. Octavius had to be in his room. She had heard his voice and radio blasting out loudly before she knocked. There was a small pot bubbling away on a stove just outside his door. She glanced at her watch, she knew she was a disappointment to her mother but she had to try her best to make things work. Today she had come to beg Octavius to forgive and forget despite her mother's warning. This was the first time in her life she had ever taken a bold step to do anything reasonable.

The embarrassment of sitting at home unmarried and pregnant was becoming too much for her. Promise never ran out of songs of mockery for fatherless babies and girls pregnant out of wedlock. She hoped she could be able to convince him to at least let her move in with him. He had pledged his undying love for her before the wedding so why should things be different now?

She knocked again and the door flew open. Octavius stood facing her frowning.

'Wetin?'

'Can we talk?'

'Nothing dey to talk about.'

He tried to shut the door in her face but she put her foot in the doorway.

'At least hear me out, please,' she pleaded.

He let her into the once familiar venue of their numerous rendezvous. A fat girl was sprawled on the bed with a wrapper around her chest. She hissed when she saw Baby with her large tummy and rolled off the bed, walking past her without saying hello.

Baby sat on a plastic chair in the corner, 'Octavius I have come to beg you to please take this shame away from me and my family.'

He raised an eyebrow, ‘Shame? How you go talk about shame? No be ashawo all of una be for una family? Especially that your fat mama na big Harlot.’

She winced at his harsh words but chose to ignore the insult, ‘Please, I didn’t come here to fight I came here to make peace. For the sake of our unborn child.’

‘Which pikin? Na me give you belle?’

That statement stung, ‘Why are you talking like this?’

‘Abeg make I hear word. I say that belle no be my own. Go find the papa of your bastard pikin.’

Tears flowed freely down her cheeks, why was he acting like this?

The fat girl came in with a large plate of jollof rice with two boiled eggs and two spoons. She placed a stool in front of Octavius and placed the steaming plate of food on it. She made herself comfortable next to him on the bed.

Still ignoring baby she turned to him, ‘Sweetie abeg make we chop.’

‘Thank you.’ He smiled at her.

Baby sat watching them chewing with their mouths open. It was clear Octavius didn’t want her any more but he could have at least done it with a little dignity. She stood up slowly still sobbing and walked out of his room.

The words of her mother rang through her head, ‘Them no dey tell pikin wey get sense make e commot from inside smoke!’

Octavius didn’t look up nor call her back.

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As Iye Baby drove into her compound a few weeks later, people were gathered around Promise’s apartment. Had Action finally killed the stupid girl she wondered. She parked her car and went to find out what was going on. Action was sitting on the dirty steps leading to his apartment and holding onto his three

children who were crying. He was raving and ranting, Promise had left him!

He had come home from work and met the children crying and hungry; she had abandoned her children too. Iye Baby hissed and walked away. It was high time the girl left before he killed her. Even though she didn't support her abandoning her children, everyone deserved some peace and happiness in this life. Tomorrow he would send for his mother to help him with the children until he sorted things out.

She turned away and waddled to her flat. Even though she had better things to worry about she couldn't help wondering where Promise had gone.

Chapter 13

Revelation

The young girl sat sobbing bitterly, her friends tried to console her.

‘My dear young lady,’ Dr. Maduka continued, ‘You are pregnant. Congratulations.’

Evangeline glared at him in shock, it couldn’t be. ‘That’s not possible.’

‘How do you mean?’ Dr. Maduka asked amused. He had seen too many of such cases to be bothered. The pleasures of the flesh had consequences and young girls were always at the receiving end.

‘He used protection,’ she tried to explain.

‘Then how come your test results reveal you are pregnant?’ The older man enquired.

‘He said he used a condom, I asked him before we did it,’ she wailed.

The older man sighed the folly of young girls was endless. ‘Did you see him actually wear it?’

It was then it dawned on her that she had only asked him if he had used one. He had simply nodded and she had believed him. Now she was pregnant and Valentine was nowhere to be found.

Her friends Chinelo and Destiny tried to console her. After the humiliation and beating of that fateful day, months ago she had gone back to school to recover. Fear and shame had kept her away from the slums. When asked what had happened to her that fateful day, she had lied to the other nursing students that she had been robbed and beaten up by petty thieves. Three months had gone by

and Valentine hadn't come to her aunt's shop. How was she going to tell him she was pregnant? Her uncle would kill her. The only other option was an abortion.

She fell off the bench and started to lament with her two hands placed over her head. 'Valentine, you have ruined me o. You have ruined me.'

The two girls raised their brows, 'Valentine? Which Valentine?' they chorused in curiosity.

'Valentine, Sweet Banana. The son of the ambassador, the one with the Jamaican mother,' she wailed.

'The one-eyed Valentine? Jamaican mother?' Destiny enquired.

The girl on the floor nodded. The two girls burst into peals of laughter.

'Oh so that's your secret boyfriend? The ambassador's son you have been boasting about,' Chinelo added shaking her head. 'The one you kept us from meeting.'

'The one-eyed Valentine?' Destiny asked. At her friend's nod she continued, 'He's my mother's sugar boy. We didn't know that was the so-called son of an ambassador you were talking about and the slum shack he had been taking you to, is actually his house. The car he drives most of the time is my mother's car and believe me his mother is certainly not Jamaican!'

She couldn't believe her ears, she had been lied to, and she had been fooled. Why was life so unfair? Even though they only did it once, she knew better. Her friends told her about Valentine and explained that he had been living at Iye Baby's place for the past three months. They both decided to take her to Iye Baby's flat to give him the good news.

Valentine was sitting in front of her house chewing on a sugar cane while his monkey jumped around him waiting for tidbits. He looked up when he saw them approach and his expression changed as soon as he saw Evangeline. Suddenly his legs felt heavy, he could still run away if he wanted to, couldn't he? He decided against it. The girls stood in front of him and Evangeline, the one-time object of his affection calmly said to him.

'Valentine I am pregnant. You did not use protection like you made me believe

you did.'

His eyes opened wide, he couldn't believe his ears. He couldn't be a father now he wasn't ready. He still had to be a star, wax an album and travel to Europe. It wasn't time for this kind of responsibility yet. This would ruin his plans, dreams and ambition. He sucked on his sugar cane before replying.

'That belle, no be my belle.'

'Then whose is it? You are the only one I have been with and if you remember well, I was a virgin when we met remember?'

'Abeg commot there make person see road, na you first be virgin? Na you know where you carry that belle from. No be me get am. I know you before?'

She grabbed him by the collar and shook him hard. She wasn't going to let him ruin her life so easily, he was going down with her, but he didn't know that yet. First of all she would make sure his sugar mummy threw him out and then proceed with running him out of town.

'Look, commot your hand for my cloth or I go dial your number now with serious slap!' he threatened. Sweet hopped and did a couple of somersaults chattering excitedly.

The once calm, prim and proper girl ranted and raved like a mad woman, 'Dial my number? Valentine you are threatening to slap me? Just try it and let me see. I will pluck out your remaining eye!'

Fine Girl who was washing up in the kitchen saw what was going on from the window and went to get her aunt. The large woman stepped out of her flat tying a wrapper around her chest. She had been preparing to have her bath and then head to her bar when her niece came to inform her that her attention was needed outside.

'Wetin dey happen for here?' she demanded, eyeing the screaming light-skinned girl who had her hands around Valentine's neck and was shaking him. He didn't seem to care as he went on chewing on his sugar cane.

'I go knock this sugar cane on top your head o,' he threatened her again.

‘Try it! I will make sure I rearrange your ugly face!’ she screamed.

‘I say wetin dey happen for here?’ Iye Baby demanded.

Destiny went to stand next to her, ‘Mummy, this is Evangeline and she is pregnant for Valentine.’

They watched the information sink in and rage fill her eyes. Silently she went back into the house and then his slippers came flying out, followed by his shirts, travelling bag, shoes and all.

‘See wetin you don cause?’ he pushed Evangeline violently and she fell to the ground. He ran to the door in time to dodge his shoes flying past. ‘Mama no be wetin you think na devil,’ he pleaded.

‘I ask you many times about Evangelina because people don dey warn me since, I ask you and you deny am. You go follow Oyibo, I forgive you. You think say I be mumu? I resemble small pikin for your eye? I don tire for your lie, lie. Every day for the thief and one day for the owner. Today na owner day.’

‘Mama, I say na devil make me do am. No be my fault.’ He threw his things back into the house, only to have them thrown back at him.

‘Wetin concern devil with your foolishness and wickedness? You be wicked somebody and you no get conscience! I sure say na woman beat you that time wey so so sore full all your body and you still come tell me lie.’

After flinging out the last of his things, which were an old pair of boxers and a pair of stylish red superman underpants, she slammed the door in his face and bolted it from the inside.

He stared at the door, too stunned to react. This meant going back to the slums and there was no telling what Beauty had in store for him. He had been away from that place for little over three months and going back there was not an option.

He had to think fast, he glanced at Evangeline busy dusting herself off the floor. Tears flowed freely down her cheeks. If she lived alone, he simply would have promised to marry her and then convinced her to take him in until he sorted himself out and then would take off. But she lived with her uncle so that was

unfeasible. Oyibo would have been a good catch but she didn't like younger men. Taibat was out of the question, as she couldn't stand him. He could take the risk and try Oyibo again, women were unpredictable and he could just get lucky. The few times he had tried her, he had found her to be stingy and she used him like a houseboy.

'Do this, Do that!' was all he heard the few times he had hung out with her and she wouldn't let him sleep with her.

He picked up his things and carrying his monkey, took to his heels. This was why he didn't date younger girls, they had no common sense and he certainly wasn't going to marry her.

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'Oga Engineer, I no be mumu o. E don tey wey u give me money and any time you come here, I go service you until all my body start to dey pepper me because you no dey tire.'

Iye Baby sat naked on the bed in her air-conditioned room upstairs. What on earth was wrong with this foolish man? It seemed he was tactfully pulling away from her and he had stopped giving her money. Now he stood there telling her that his project had ended. What was happening to her clientele? Since the fight, all the men seemed to be leaving her. Well, she wasn't going to let this man leave her without a good fight.

'Try to understand, I will give you money when I return in a few weeks,' he explained obviously lying.

She stood up and quickly pulled on a loose gown forgetting to put on her bra. She had to make sure she dealt with him properly. Why should he be so stingy? He was her most insatiable client and any time he came round, she had to take painkillers and energy drinks afterwards as she could not attend to any other client until the next day. She only tolerated him.

He sat naked on the bed, ignoring the sheets to cover his modesty, 'Why are you getting dressed? We are not done yet.' He reached for her again.

She threw him an angry look as she tried to pull away, ‘You wan kill me?’

He laughed and pulled her body on top of him, ‘Just a few more rounds for the road.’ He tugged at her gown.

The man was unbelievable. ‘So you no go give me the money be that? But you wan do me die!’

‘Be patient, you will get the money.’ He turned her over so he was on top of her. She held her thighs firmly together, struggling with him as he tried to force himself on her.

She panicked, was he trying to rape her? This was the first time in the history of her successful career that a client had tried to force himself on her. Her reaction shocked both of them. In a flash, she pushed him off her and he landed on the floor with his bony behind hitting the table.

‘You don dey craze? Abi you chop witchcraft? I go break bottle for your head and chook your belle now!’ she threatened. ‘Which kind rubbish be all this? You wan rape me on top money wey you no wan give me? Your hand na super glue, you stingy man.’ Her eyes shot daggers at the naked man sprawled on the floor.

He sat embarrassed and in pain at the same time, as he reached for his clothes where they were heaped in a corner, she pulled them away.

‘Give me back my clothes.’

‘Your cloth? You never ready, stingy man, make I see as you go run go house today. I go show you pepper and thunder must fire your head!’

With that, she hurried to the bathroom and dropping his clothes on the floor, she turned on the shower and soaked them. That served him right and marked the end of their relationship.

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When Chief came visiting a few weeks later, she sat quietly watching him. He wolfed down the food she had set before him, chewing with his mouth open and

belching rather loudly.

She was lost, what was happening? Was she losing her magic touch? Were her sins finally catching up with her? Were her clients already tired of her? Or were the prayers of the scorned wives finally being answered? She didn't know; she missed Oga Commissioner. At moments like this, he was the only one who cared enough to talk to her and listen to her problems. She would call Mr. Holloway later so they could chat. That wasn't Chief's cup of tea; he just enjoyed her company and body, and that was it. When he was done, he belched loudly again and washed his hands, then lay back in the bed picking his teeth noisily with a toothpick. Even though the man lay on the bed beside her, she felt lonely and empty.

What was happening to her? Why was she only just realising this after all these years of whoring that the excitement of this line of business was wearing off as one got older and younger women came onto the scene? Apart from Taibat, she had no one close enough to talk to; all the men around her were mainly chop and run. She was getting tired of all the fighting, malice and gossip. There was a time she thrived on all of that but these days everything seemed to look different to her. She no longer felt the power and control the way she used to in the past, when prominent men bowed at her feet for a chance to have a taste of her gold mine and a feel of her precious waist beads. She was definitely losing her touch.

Only last week when she had dismissed Oga Engineer after soaking his clothes, he had sat stranded. He had been too embarrassed to call his friends or co-workers to help him out. When she marched him out of her room, he had covered what was left of his dignity with a napkin and ran straight to his truck and sped off.

Today she lay here with Chief and there was simply no connection any more. These past few months, he didn't frequent her place much and had suddenly stopped talking about marrying her.

He sat up and yawned loudly, stretching his hands. His belly wobbled as he breathed, and she shook her head at the thought of what her life had become. He opened his briefcase and handed her a fat brown envelope. She accepted it with indifference. He had never given her so much money before but the truth was that Chief was rich so he could afford to give her as much as he wanted without flinching. She would give to it Fine Girl to pay it into the bank for her later.

He stood up and started getting dressed; she didn't bother to get up. She covered herself with the clean sheets and watched him. It was always the same routine. He never wore any underwear, as he claimed he was always ready for action. She rolled her eyes at the thought of the action he had to offer. With Chief, the only consolation was the money, as she could get her satisfaction elsewhere. He pulled on his trousers over his naked flesh and quickly got dressed. When he was done, he put on his cap and then casually said to her, 'I go soon marry new wife.'

She sat up, 'New wife? I think say na me you wan marry?'

He laughed loudly and shook his head, 'Na wa for you o, my Pauli, Pauli. How I go marry old mama like you? I need fresh young blood, your own done dry finish.'

Her eyes opened wide, she couldn't believe Chief had just practically referred to her as an old hag. He was obviously marrying a younger woman. Why did life have to be so unfair to her? She had had it. She burst into tears. She was human too; did all these men think she had a heart of stone?

He went to sit next to her, 'Pauli don cry. Nothing last forever, na e make I give you all this plenty money to take settle you.'

She shook her head, 'But I go dey lonely. Na so so all this small small boys I go dey meet and you know say them no get money at all.'

'I know, don worry tins go better for all of us.' With that, he picked up his briefcase, bade her farewell and walked out of her life.

She lay in silence staring at the ceiling; she had lost all her best paying clients. How on earth was she going to start over? Getting to know people, building the confidence and then making them her regulars? She sighed. Sitting up, she carefully counted the money before waddling to the window to call out to Fine Girl who was downstairs chatting with one of her girls. Fine Girl obediently came to join her upstairs, where Iye baby handed her the brown envelope and gave her strict instructions to take the money to the bank. She instructed her to hand the money to her personal banker and return with a copy of the teller as proof that she had paid the money in. The girl put the money in her handbag and left promising to meet her at home. She went to take a shower before going downstairs to supervise her business.

Chapter 14

One Chance

When Iye Baby got home that evening, Valentine was sitting in front of her house picking at his pimples. She almost laughed. She hadn't seen him in months and the last gist she had heard about him was that Oyibo practically turned him into her houseboy, and when he tried to get too smart Octavius had thrown a kettle of boiling water at him burning his legs and narrowly missing his most precious asset. He must have tried his luck in other places and being unlucky, he had decided to return to her. Sweet as usual was doing somersaults and chattering away. The lights were off, which meant Fine Girl wasn't back from the bank yet. She could only see a few bandages on his legs, which meant the burns were healing well. It served him right.

She parked her Volvo in her usual parking spot and walked to her door with her keys in her hands. She walked past him and as she turned the key in her lock, he came up behind her.

'Mama, abeg no vex. Forgive me. Na beg I dey beg you so. I for kneel down for you but see my condition.' He pointed to his bandages.

She eyed him in disgust, 'Shebi na small, small girls and albino dey hungry you. Go find them na. You don see wetin you go find for outside.'

'I don learn my lesson,' he admitted. 'I don repent, I no go ever cheat on you again. I go stay with you and love you well, well as you dey like.'

She thought of it, this young man was the best lover she had ever had, he knew just how to tune her right and it had been a while since she screamed. All the tension of the past few months and her state of mind could do with a good touch from Sweet Banana himself. She sighed, why did she find the wrong things so irresistible? Standing before her was a man who had spent the past few years,

living off her, lying and cheating on her but he alone knew how to knock the senses out her in bed.

Even though she had been with Chief earlier that day, she could hardly call the huffing and puffing of a sweaty obese old man anything. All he did was sweat all over her and pin her down to the bed with his huge fat belly. She preferred slimmer men, as they were easier for her to handle. The thought of Valentine under her sheets made her smile and her body tingle in interesting places.

‘Oya come inside,’ she let him in. She noticed he didn’t have his travelling bag with him. ‘Where your bag?’

‘E dey my friend house, I go bring am tomorrow.’

She stretched out on her couch and he hurried to the kitchen and served her a big bottle of stout and switched on the television. He sat on the floor and massaged her feet. She closed her eyes relaxing, if only the foolish boy could be faithful to her and remain exclusively her sugar boy she could do a lot for him. When he was done with her feet, he massaged her neck and shoulders. She smiled, this was more like it, he was trying his best to please her and it was working.

Her eyes flew open and he stopped at the sound of someone crying. It was coming towards her door and it sounded like Fine Girl. The door opened and Fine Girl walked in weeping loudly. She fell at her aunt’s feet and wailed, ‘One chance! One chance!’

‘Wetin happen?’ her aunt enquired really worried.

‘One chance!’ she wailed again. ‘Dem carry all the money! One chance!’

That was when it made sense; she had been robbed. She had fallen into the hands of the popular ‘once chance’, a fake taxi firm with fake passengers and they had hypnotised her and taken the money.

‘I don finish o,’ Iye Baby threw herself on the floor. ‘My money o, my money!’

As the two women rolled on the floor in tears, neighbours gathered to console them. They advised Iye Baby to thank God for the gift of life and that Fine Girl hadn’t been killed in the process.

After they left, Iye Baby told Fine Girl it was okay, she trusted the girl not to have the heart to double-cross her for she had been really good to her. Everything happened for a reason she explained.

The electricity went off and Valentine quickly went to help them switch on the generator; he would switch it off when the electricity came back on. As the generator roared to life, he looked around him and smiled. He would give Iye Baby the time of her life tonight despite her mood and that would be his farewell gift to her. He took a bottle of brandy from her bar, took a few sips then went to join her.

When he entered her bedroom, she was already lying in bed. She had cried herself out and lay silently, shivering from time to time. He crawled into the bed beside her, and whispered in her ears, ‘Mama you dey sleep?’

Silence.

‘Mama, you dey sleep?’ he enquired again.

She could smell alcohol in his breath. He must have taken a few sips of brandy from her bar.

‘How I go sleep with all the evil in the world?’ she complained.

‘That’s life, things go better.’ He ran his hands up and down her plump thighs marvelling at the bulk and thickness. He loved fat women. There was something their weight did to him that made him feel good. Slim women he bedded just for availability, as he found them too bony and dry, but a fat woman had great presence in a bed and that made him feel like a man.

‘I no think so, na so so bad tins dey happen to me and my business all this months! I no offend anybody. God be my witness.’

He wasn’t interested in listening to her problems; she could reserve her tales of woe for who cared to listen. He poured her a glass of brandy and she reluctantly sipped it while he held to her lips, after which his skilful hands found their way under her blouse and then her wrapper. She paused before getting carried away, ‘Where your rubber?’

He almost yelled frustrated, if only she knew he was too broke to afford even the

cheapest condoms. She usually had packs stashed in her drawer. She lay patiently as he leaned over her and pulled open her bedside drawer, it was empty. There were only empty packs. He sighed she never gave him access without protection. She didn't trust him at all and she was always yelling about STDs and other diseases.

'I don see am,' he lied.

'Make I see am,' she insisted, lifting her head off the pillow. She didn't trust him one bit.

He tactfully held up the closed end and she believed it was a new packet which was all she needed. He pretended to put it on and shook his head, all women, both young and old were the same – gullible and foolish, age didn't make them any wiser. He got down to business, he would give it to her so good that her back and waist would hurt for the next few weeks and she would never forget him!

In no time at all, she was screaming as she held on to him. Fine Girl in the next room had to put a pillow over her head to drown out her aunt's screams. When she was tensed or depressed, Valentine knew how to make her feel good. Great sex and alcohol were the only things that calmed her down. That night she soared and her senses burst into a million stars.

By morning, all the money in her handbag, her jewellery, her generator and Volvo were gone. Valentine was nowhere to be found. Fine Girl sat beside her on her bed trying to wake her up, her head hurt badly not to mention her back and thighs. He seemed to be on an unusual high the night before and had pounded her like a horse in heat despite his bandages. How could she have slept so deeply and for so long? She picked up her brandy glass and sniffed it, it smelt different the bastard had spiked her drink. She could have slapped herself at her stupidity and weakness for Sweet Banana.

Chapter 15

Redemption

‘Imose sisters!’

‘Presido, Presido!’ the women clapped in reply.

‘Beautiful sisters!’

‘Presido, Presido!’

‘Sisters keepers!’

‘In sunshine and rain!’

‘Distinguished and accomplished women!’

‘Together as one!’

Today they did not sing their anthem nor clap as they had come to pay their president a visit to console her over the loss of her property. They were also careful not to mention that it was her sugar boy who had stolen them.

Many of them were guilty of the same sin, so who were they to judge one of them? Their president lay on the large couch in her living room, her body still hurt and she couldn’t move about much. She had nothing to offer them and they understood, if not for anything that the importance of this sisterhood was a blessing to many of them as they were always there to offer support to each other.

The Christian Women’s Association did not visit her, instead, they eyed her in church and gossiped about how shameless she was, spreading her fat old over-bleached legs for a boy younger than her son. They further mocked her behind her back saying that the robbery was a reward for her sins.

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Fine Girl sat in the backyard picking stones out of the beans she had been instructed to prepare for dinner when she heard the unmistakable sound of the engine of a motorbike approaching. It came to a halt by her house and Okwy London walked towards her. Helmet in hand and a bright orange bag in the other. She smiled shyly.

‘Hello Susan.’

‘Good afternoon.’

He pulled a plastic chair from the corner and sat facing her.

‘How your journey?’ she still couldn’t bring herself to look him in the face.

‘It was fine, the roads were friendly.’

‘We thank God.’ Even though she didn’t understand what he meant by friendly roads. How on earth could the roads be your friend when it just lay flat and couldn’t speak to you?

‘I bought you this,’ he handed her the bag.

She put down the tray and took the gift, ‘Thank you.’ She opened it and pulled out a blue dress and a pair of black jeans and pink sandals.

‘All this plenty things for me? Thank you o,’ she said again. He looked a little uncomfortable, ‘don’t worry, na only me dey house.’

He smiled and seemed to relax a bit, ‘Susan I want to talk to you.’

She sighed. Finally he was ready to say what he had on his mind. ‘Okay.’ She put down the bag and faced him.

‘You know I really like you.’

Her hand went to her threaded hair and slippers at her brown feet. What could she possibly possess to make such a man of the world interested in her?

‘Don’t worry about your look, I don’t care about all of that. You are a responsible young woman and I want to marry you after you finish secondary school.’

She almost fell off her stool. He caught her before she hit the ground.

‘But I must tell you the truth, I have a son and he lives with his mother who is actually my girlfriend.’

Oh he had a son and a girlfriend, so why had he been leading her on these past few months? Men!

‘So wetin you come dey find for where I dey?’

‘I like you and if you say you will marry me, I will end the relationship.’

She shook her head; she might not be beautiful nor wear the best clothes. Her hair might be threaded with slippers on her feet, but she was certainly nobody’s fool. She appreciated that he had told her the truth but she had to put an end to this folly. If he left his girlfriend and mother of his child for her today, what was the guarantee that he would not leave her for someone else tomorrow if she married him? She shook her head and handed him the bag,

‘No. I no go fit do another woman that kind thing. Our people say, the stick wey man take pursue first wife commot for him house, he go keep am behind door take pursue the second wife.’

He tried to make her understand but she shook her head and asked him to leave. She was not that desperate for love. He also had to leave before her aunt got home and met him there.

***

It started out as an unusually slow day. The truth was that Iye Baby was fed up. Why was all this bad luck coming her way? Who on earth had she offended? Her men leaving her, Fine Girl getting robbed and Valentine absconding with her valuables, car and generator was a bad hit. When she started itching and feeling funny she ran to Dr. Maduka afraid that she might be pregnant.

The foolish boy had not only stolen from her, he had also slept with her without protection. Why were people so wicked? Dr. Maduka had taken her to his inner room where he attended to important patients and after lots of poking around revealed to her that she had gonorrhoea! She almost fainted, it was unheard of, she had never contracted any STD in her life. Why would that happen to her in old age? How embarrassing.

Even though things were still a little tense between her and Taibat, she was still her only friend and the only one she could easily pour out her sorrows to. For now she would keep this part of her woes to herself. She sat shaking her right leg in the 'Health is Wealth' chemist as she was advised like a child on what she already knew – the importance of practising safe sex. She almost doubted him since she knew he wasn't a qualified medical practitioner. Since he had treated the inhabitants of Nimbe for years without any complaints or death, she had to trust him.

She bought the prescribed drugs from his chemist, hid them in her bag and walked home. Since Valentine had taken her car she had to do more walking and that she itched badly didn't help matters, as she had to find corners to hide in so she could scratch her itchy parts from time to time.

She walked past the women in the barracks and they exchanged pleasantries like they always did as they went about their daily chores with babies tied firmly to their backs and children playing around and being mischievous. Aunty Blackie greeted her as she walked past. Iye Baby could see she had gone to the market to purchase beans for her akara. These bush women did not possess half of what she had, they had no money, jewellery, expensive clothes, nor rich men bowing at their feet but they possessed what she would do anything to have now. That was peace of mind and dignity.

Since her cash was limited, her suppliers were kind enough to supply her goods for her bar on credit until she could pay, so that wasn't too bad. She went about her daily business making sure that all the orders were placed so the bar would run as usual. Baby was getting heavier and it was better for her to be occupied than to sit at home moping about all day, so Iye Baby got her to work at the bar seeing to all the supplies and taking inventories of everything. If anyone was to ever steal from her again, it had better be her child. That she could bear and easily forgive.

Valentine had the guts to call her a few weeks later, to apologise for what the devil had made him do! He had sold everything and paid for his visa to Europe. Even though he claimed he was calling her from Europe, she could hear a goat bleating loudly in the background and someone shouting, ‘Buy your hot moi moi here!’

That meant he was hiding somewhere in Nimbe! She had cursed him in anger, wishing him all the ill luck in the world, praying he fell into the wrong hands and was rewarded for his evil ways by some unfortunate woman giving him the same thing he gave her, but in his own case may it render him impotent!

She went to see to her suppliers a few mornings later to place her orders for the week. Just the other day, her bar had been broken into and items were stolen. She wouldn’t have been surprised if she was told Valentine had been one of the robbers since he was never ever up to any good, but she had to be grateful that she hadn’t been around when the thieves came.

BBC had been putting away the last of her things and had heard the noise. She had stepped out of her bar and screamed into the dark, ‘Who be that?’

Silence.

‘Who be that?’ she had enquired again.

‘Madam,’ a gruff male voice had ordered, ‘Enter your shop and keep quiet, this one no concern you!’

Sensing they were thieves that was all the loud-mouthed woman needed. ‘Ole! Ole!’ she started to scream, ‘Ole!’

Seeing that the noisy woman could get them into trouble, two of the thieves had crossed over to her bar and given her a good beating and instructed her to shut up.

All of Nimbe heard the story when they had opened up for work the next morning and it was also featured in a small corner of the Nimbe Times. If the thieves had come in the day, people would have come to her rescue, but at night everything was quiet and everyone minded their own business. It was unfortunate that the gossip had still been there.

Iye Baby had apologised to her despite her stolen things and finally told her, ‘Make you thank God say them no kill you. If not nobody for hear the true story of wetin happen!’

It was a hot afternoon and Iye Baby rode in a taxi on her way back lamenting to Taibat about the ills of the world and her misfortune. As the taxi approached her bar, she saw people gathered and thick smoke was pouring out. Alas! It was her bar in flames. She flew out of the taxi without paying the driver, and people had to hold her back in case she jumped into the flames. Two of her girls had got into a fight over money and a man, and unfortunately, a lit stove had been kicked in the process and the fire had spread fast through the building.

When the fire service was called, they apologised that they had no water in their tanks, which was not surprising. So the onlookers had tried to put out the fire with buckets of water and sand. In tears and frustration, she watched all her life savings and years of hard work and investment burn to the ground. All that was left was the ‘DO NOT UNIRATE HERE’ sign. What kind of life was this? This was the handiwork of her enemies.

She begged Taibat to accompany her to Chief’s place. Even though they were no longer an item, he was the only one who could help her get back on her feet. She needed cash quickly. They took a taxi and sped towards Chief’s office. On getting there, she didn’t get the warm reception she usually received. The man at the gate, a man whom she had tipped countless times, kindly told her that Chief had left instructions that if she ever showed up at his office, she would not be let into the premises! She pleaded with the man but he shook his head explaining to her that this job was his only source of livelihood and he couldn’t risk losing it.

They were still standing at the gate when Chief drove out. Even though the windows of the car were tinted, she could see him in the back with a young woman. When the car got closer, she could have sworn the young girl was Promise sitting next to him! So the girl had abandoned her three children and abusive husband for Chief? How on earth had her path crossed with Chief’s? He rarely came to her house, so where had this girl met him? Wonders would never cease.

She went back to the taxi and beat her chest as she wept. Was this what life was all about? Was this how people treated their fellow men? She couldn’t touch the club purse, as it wasn’t her turn yet to collect her contribution. She instructed the

driver to take them to the church, as she needed to speak to the pastor. Taibat tried to console her but that wasn't enough, she needed divine intervention at this moment.

The pastor sat behind a large desk writing when she walked in. She collapsed on his floor and burst into tears. He hurried over to her side.

'Pastor, I don sin well well. Now the Lord dey punish meeee… Every day na so so bad luck. Wetin I go do…' she wailed.

'We are all sinners.'

He helped her up and she sat on the couch in his office. He took the seat facing her. She poured out her story to him and asked him for forgiveness.

'Only God can forgive us all but I will pray with you because you have realised your sin and chosen to come to the Lord with all your heart.'

After he prayed for her, she felt a little better and went home. As the taxi pulled into her compound she saw Mr. Holloway siting on the bonnet of his car. What did he want again? She had repented and had promised to sin no more, she had to fight her weakness for the things of the flesh and here was one waiting for her. The devil was a liar! She would rise above the spirit of lust!

Ironically he wasn't even here for that. He went to help her out of the taxi and the first words he said were, 'I came as soon as I heard the bad news.'

Which of them? She wondered. Valentine robbing her, her misery or her bar burning down? She bade Taibat goodnight as the taxi pulled away and turned to face him silently.

'I hurried to your shop but was told that you had left so I came here to wait for you. I am so sorry my darling, is there anything I can do to help?'

He had been waiting all this while? 'Too many bad things don happen to me this year,' she lamented.

'I can imagine.' He nodded in understanding.

They walked to her house and sat in the living room talking. He held her hand

while she told him about the robbery carefully missing out the gonorrhoea part and how she had lost her best paying clients. It was no big secret that she sold her body for money so why hide it from him? That was what she was doing when he had met her and he didn’t seem to have a problem with it. He wasn’t here to judge her. He just wanted to be her friend and was still looking for a relationship.

Chapter 16

Today

Taibat was sitting in her shop inspecting what her tailors were doing when BBC walked in. She was surprised at this august guest and wondered what she wanted. Why was she trying so hard to be her friend? She wasn't a bad woman but Taibat wasn't interested in such an alliance where all your private business was public knowledge because some people talked too much.

She led her to her office out the back and offered her a comfortable seat.

'Iya Labake, you are welcome to my shop.'

'Thank you my dear friend, you know I have been promising that I would pay you a surprise visit someday. So this is the day. How can we be friends and not visit each other? That is not good enough and since you come to my shop almost e week.'

Her eyes twinkled and Taibat wondered what gossip had brought her all the way to her shop this hot afternoon. True she ate at her restaurant nearly every week but that was because the food was excellent and most of the time it was free.

'Would you like something to drink?' she leaned over to open the small fridge.

The gossip shook her head and got straight to the point, 'You remember that naked party I told you about at the beginning of the year?'

Taibat nodded.

The woman clapped her hands, 'Just the other day two men were at my shop talking about it!'

Taibat wasn't impressed, as she had lost money. What else was new?

‘Oh were they?’

‘Hmmm, yes and I remembered I had discussed it with you before.’

Discussed? She had told Taibat, but if she felt they had discussed it then that was fine by her. She wondered what important information the woman could give her that she hadn’t heard already. She was still angry at the loss of money and the betrayal by her best friend.

‘Well, the men were laughing and talking about the girls who had attended the party. It was true they were all given $500 at the beginning of the party like we all heard. But they said as soon as the party was over, their boss had instructed them to take the money from the girls and throw them out into the street!’

Taibat felt as if someone had just poured cold water over her head. ‘Really?’

‘Yes, it serves them right.’ BBC went on laughing. ‘All these women and girls who have no self-respect! How can you sell your body that way?’ she went on lamenting on the falling moral standards of society and how people had little or no respect for the Creator.

Taibat had tuned off and couldn’t hear the woman blabbing. So that was what had really happened? After much investigation and anger about the naked party money, she got tired of hearing the same story from all the girls, but if everyone was saying the same thing, then there had to be an atom of truth somewhere. In all fairness Iye Baby had been a good friend to her and had never double-crossed her or been untrue to their friendship in any way these past years. In the end she had decided to let go since she valued the friendship too much to lose it over money. She had planned to ensure that she would never bring business to her friend in the future as that way everyone was happy and no strain was put on the friendship.

Now she felt so guilty that she had ever doubted Iye Baby at all. Why had it taken a gossip to prove her innocence? She would apologise to her and tell her what BBC had said. Her attention was brought back to the blabbing woman, when she felt her tap her shoulder.

‘Aunty Taibat?’

She smiled at her, ‘Yes?’

‘Ah, you were mumbling to yourself, I wasn’t sure you were listening to me.’

‘Of course I was listening to you,’ she lied. ‘You were talking about falling moral standards among women and young girls.’

The other woman smiled and continued.

Taibat almost burst into laughter. Had BBC just referred to her as aunty? Aunty indeed, Even though she didn’t know her age, the woman wasn’t less than five years older than her and here she was calling her aunty. She shook her head, BBC was still talking. What would Nimbe do without storytellers like this august visitor of hers? Their nuisance value came in handy occasionally.

***

When Okwy London came visiting on his bike again, Fine Girl made it clear to him that tempting as his offer was, there was simply no future for both of them together. She advised him to face his girlfriend and son even though he claimed they had broken up. She advised him to make peace with her for the sake of their child. He insisted that she kept all the gifts he had given her and after much argument, she agreed.

He would be her best-kept secret as she continued to serve her aunt. So when Nimbe girls bragged about hooking up with Okwy London the most eligible bachelor in the slums and his bright coloured shirts, she would smile secretly at the thought that she could have been his wife if she wanted to, as he had cared enough to want to marry her and not just have some fun as he did with other girls. For now she was content and when true love finally came calling, even if it came on a large motorbike, it would come without excess baggage!

He rode away on his bike just before Chinelo and Destiny joined her in the backyard. They were talking about Evangeline.

‘She claimed she had a painful miscarriage,’ Chinelo told her friend as she made herself comfortable on the bench next to Fine Girl.

Destiny sneered turning up her nose, ‘Miscarriage. I think she had an abortion at Dr. Maduka’s chemist.’

‘I doubt it, what if her unhappiness made her lose the baby?’ Destiny frowned. ‘You shouldn’t be too quick to jump to conclusions.’

‘Destiny,’ Chinelo wagged a finger at her. ‘With mothers like ours, one would expect you to be worldly wise at least. When she came back that weekend and was sick all week and secretly hiding her pads, didn’t you guess?’

‘I thought it was just a fever that coincided with her monthly flow.’

‘Haaaaaa. Five days monthly flow? Na issue of blood?’

The three girls laughed.

Destiny sighed, ‘Whatever. Only Evangeline knows the truth. From the look of things, those legs of hers won’t be spread for any one for the next few centuries. She’s now so pious. She spends all her time now reading the Bible and studying!’

‘E go beta if she face her Bible and school. Na only big mumu go believe all the lie lie wey Valentine dey talk. That suffer head, he goat! Dem talk say all thing wey dey shine no be gold, na long throat carry that Evangelina land on top Valentine Sweet Banana and wetin too dey sweet person na e dey kill am. Person like me for don take broom beat am sweep him bad luck!’ Fine Girl spoke for the first time.

The two girls looked at her and all three burst into laughter over the bitter lesson Evangeline had learnt.

***

Valentine couldn’t believe his luck the day Okwy London handed him his international passport. He flipped through the pages and almost burst with joy when he saw his Schengen visa. He had been hiding in Nimbe for the last few months and had used up all his savings to fulfil his dream of going to Europe. He dropped off Sweet with a friend and promised to send money regularly for its upkeep.

He travelled to Lagos and boarded his flight to Amsterdam. He had been told

that white women loved black men and he intended to tap into that rumour. He would find himself a rich white woman, marry her, live off her and get his foreign passport before he settled into his music career.

He thought of Iye Baby, Evangeline and the other unfortunate women he had dealt with and laughed. The folly of women was a mystery. He was on his way to richer women and greener pastures where his skills would be appreciated. He would meet up with an old acquaintance whom would help show him around, and once he released his album he would be rich and famous.

***

Oyibo sat shaking her right foot. Why was life so unfair? When she had met Mr. Holloway months ago, she had assumed this was it. Only for that obese and over-bleached Iye Baby to snatch him from her. She didn't care what explanation anyone gave, all she knew was that Iye Baby was a man snatcher!

She sighed as she sipped her drink, chasing the white man was such a waste of time. He didn't seem interested in her anymore and he had the guts to tell her he and Iye Baby had history! She thought of her life and how things had come to what they were now. This lifestyle was taking her nowhere and her education could do her a lot of good. It might not fetch her the kind of money her bar did, but she would at least have some sort of dignity.

Since Iye Baby's bar burnt to the ground and news had spread that all her lovers had dumped her, Mr. Holloway never left her side. How lucky she was to have someone who genuinely cared about her. She hoped she would get that lucky soon; maybe she should slow down. It had been a dramatic year and she didn't need any more negativity around her. Could she bring herself to close down her bar? For now she had no rivals, so maybe she should bask in that for some time and make up her mind later about another line of business.

She could wait for Iye Baby's tenure to end as president of the club. She was next in line and that was okay for her for now. There was a knock on her door and one of her girls stepped into her back room where she sat relaxing.

'Madam, one Oga dey find you.'

‘Tell him I’ll be with him in a few minutes.’

She stretched out and went to stand by the full-length mirror. It was time to attend to a client.

***

The good Lord was the only one who had the right to judge man, and the beauty of the Divine was the ability to ask for repentance and seek His face upon the realisation that one had fallen short of his glory. That night, a gonorrhoea-free, Iye Baby lay awake staring at the ceiling, Mr. Holloway lay sleeping peacefully beside her. Even though she had vowed not to indulge in fornication, she couldn’t help but appreciate his kindness to her at the lowest time of her life, so she had offered him the warmth of her body.

She hadn’t worked this past month and all her staff had left with some going to work for Oyibo. She was mentally and emotionally drained, the year had been turbulent for her. BBC had been kind enough to gossip to her that Chief’s second wife, Morenike, and other disgruntled wives had been the brains behind the burning of her bar. She was too tired to fight.

Gist had reached her that Promise had stolen money from Chief’s safe and Okwy London had helped her to get to Europe where she now worked as a prostitute and regularly sent money home for the upkeep of her children. Iye Baby had laughed shaking her head when she heard this. How the righteous had resorted to sin. Maybe the girl had been envious of her because she had had the guts to sell her body boldly damning all the consequences. How her path had crossed with that of Chief was still a mystery or could it be that day she had seen Chief buying drinks from her? Wonders would never cease.

Fine Girl had told her that Valentine had fallen into the hands of the law in Amsterdam. He had been dating a mother and daughter who lived on the same street and when the daughter had found out and challenged him, he had slapped her. She had called the police in tears and he had spent a few days behind bars. When he was released, he found a 70 year old white woman who wanted a husband. He proposed to her and she said yes. She had money and promised to pay for the ceremony. All he wanted to do was to pick the venue for the wedding.

She had happily let him. As an illegal immigrant, the silent rule to a marriage of convenience and citizenship was to either pick a church far from a police station or one without a fence or gate to make it easier to run away if the police raided the wedding.

So Valentine in all his wisdom found a ‘safe’ church, and as he stood taking his false vows, the police arrived with the scorned mother and daughter. He was arrested and taken to court after which he was deported unceremoniously. He was lucky he wasn’t jailed for fraud.

Iye Baby didn’t bother asking Fine Girl how she had heard all this; that wasn’t important as long as he didn’t show up at her place ever again. She had driven past him with his monkey a few times and heard he entertained at different bars for a pittance. It seemed getting a sugar mummy was hard for him as newer and younger men were now available thus making the services of Valentine Sweet Banana redundant. Some said he was homeless or he had gone mad, while other thought he had returned hopeless and Beauty had taken him in since she and her boyfriend had gone their separate ways.

As for Sweet, some said Valentine had sent it to steal from someone’s house and hot akamu had poured on its head.

Iye Baby wasn’t concerned any more. Even if Mr. Holloway didn’t love her, he cared about her and had shown it in many ways. He was kind and all he wanted from her was just her time and attention. He was tired of seeking warmth and comfort in random places and needed a steady woman.

He wasn’t half as good as Valentine and her other men in bed, but that was a sacrifice she was willing to make for peace. He was willing to take care of her and maybe love her later and she was okay with that. Her bar had been burnt to the ground and nothing was left. She was tired of living in sin and wanted to do things right; it was time to leave the army barracks and her past behind. She didn’t realise that she was shaking her right leg; it woke Mr. Holloway up. He opened his eyes,

‘Are you alright darling?’

She turned away and burst into tears. Why was she crying so much these days?

He sat up. ‘What’s the problem, are you alright?’ he reached for her.

She nodded, ‘which kind bad luck be all this? I don tire for sin, I wan commot for this barrack!’

He looked amused, ‘Then marry me and come and live with me.’

She was taken aback, she hadn’t seen that coming ‘Marry you? You mean am?’

He nodded, ‘Yes Pauline, will you marry me and make me happy?’ His fingers had found their way to her waist beads and he was playing with them.

She turned to face him, wiping her face. She took the hankie he handed her and blew her nose loudly, ‘Ah, make I think am first, just give me some time.’

He shrugged, ‘Okay. Let’s go over to my place for lunch then and if you like it, you can move in before then.’

She had never been to his place. As a silent rule she didn’t visit her men, they came to her, so it was a welcome change to be visiting his home. The next morning, they got into his black Mercedes and he drove past the spot where her bar used to be. It was all in ruins and the fire had also burnt a bit of the Mother is Good restaurant. She would sell it and seek an alternative.

Mr. Holloway lived in the GRA on Nimbe hills and his house was a commodious duplex. He had paid staff taking care of the place. He helped her out of the car and gave her a tour of the house. This was all too good to be true as it was a far cry from her two-bedroom flat. What else did she want? Maybe this was God’s way of compensating her for all her suffering and hard work.

He took her to his picture wall and showed her his family; he had five children. They were all married with children then he showed her a picture of his wife; she had died long before he came to Nimbe. Comfortable with the fact that his wife had died and that she was not trespassing, she made up her mind.

‘You know wetin, Mr. Holloway?’

‘Wetin Pauline?’ he mimicked her voice.

She laughed, ‘Broken English no sweet for your mouth at all but I go marry you. You be very good man and you dey treat me like somebody.’

He jumped and embraced her, planting two big kisses on her two cheeks. ‘Thank you, thank you and trust me Pauline, you won’t regret this decision. I will make you so happy, no more drama and all. We will see the world together.’

‘I hope say you know say I don old and fit no born pikin for you. But I promise you one thing if you treat me well, I go treat you like king and I no go ever follow another man.’ She wagged a warning finger at him.

‘That’s not a problem and your past is your past, 45 isn’t old and we both have our kids, and if we get lucky and have one together then fine. That would be our love child and if we don’t that’s still fine by me. All I am interested in is making you happy.’

She almost screamed, how had she gotten so lucky? When some women who had lived pristine and pious lives ended up with bad men?

‘Hallelujah’, she sang in her heart, ‘The Lord don bless my soul.’

‘By the way my darling, I think it’s time you stopped calling me Mr. Holloway. I have a first name you know.’

‘Na true o, wetin be your first name sef?’ her eyes lit up. She had only known few of her clients’ first names in the past as it was of no importance to her back then.

‘It’s John.’ He was grinning at her.

‘Eh Johnny.’ She killed the name.

‘Not Eh Johnny,’ he laughed, ‘John.’

‘Johnny.’

He gave up, ‘Never mind, Johnny, Eh Johnny. It’s all good. I will kiss you now as my wife to be.’ He leaned forward.

She frowned in disgust and pushed him away gently laughing, ‘Abeg carry your mouth go one side. That dirty thing wey una oyibo dey chop person mouth and lick spit. I no fit do am.’

He laughed shaking his head as he rolled off the couch. She was a feisty woman and he loved that.

So Paulina Omoregbe and Johnny Holloway were married in a small civil ceremony in his church in the GRA just before Christmas. She wore a beautiful flowing white dress with a red band, a red hat and red shoes and Johnny wore a black suit. The only people invited from her past apart from her children, were her niece Fine Girl, Chinelo and Taibat who made the wedding dress. Johnny's photographer was there to cover the wedding, as this wasn't an event for the Nimbe Times or Make Me Shine Photos.

They honeymooned in a posh hotel in the GRA for five days and Johnny bought her a red jeep as a wedding present. She drove the jeep back to her old flat in the barracks and made sure she parked it where everyone could see it. Fine Girl brought out a bench for her to sit on and she spent the day giving out most of her property to the neighbours who had gathered around her. Her wedding band reflected brightly in the sun, catching the eyes of the neighbours who admired and gossiped about it while some beat their chests that Iye Baby had used juju on the white man.

A young lady walked up to her and asked if she was willing to sell what was left of her beer parlour since it lay in ruins. She had just returned to Nimbe from Europe and was willing to pay a good sum for the plot as she liked the location. Iye Baby shrugged; she had nothing to lose. The young lady was welcome to the place. She must be one of the women Okwy London had helped in the past who had come back to Nimbe to invest her wealth.

She handed all her cooking utensils to Aunty Blackie who had come to wish her well. When they had emptied the flat and swept it clean, Fine Girl placed her suitcase in her aunt's jeep and they bade Nimbe army barracks goodbye.

She had paid her dues and it was time for her to move on. Her days as a member of the Imose Sisters Association of Distinguished and Accomplished Ladies were over. She officially handed the presidency over to Oyibo as that had been her ambition. The women gave her a big send off as part of their Christmas party as her tenure as president had been a good one and she had set a standard for all the presidents after her. As Iye Baby drove to the party venue, she drove past the spot where her beer parlour once stood. A large building with lots of lights and a high fence stood there with the sign that read 'Sugar Cane Baby Connections.'

The ‘DO NOT UNIRATE’ sign had been removed and replaced with ‘NO TRESSPASSING’. She shook her head and sighed, if only these young women knew what they were getting themselves into. As she pulled into the venue, the women came out to welcome her.

They ushered her inside and for the last time with tears pouring down her face, Iye Baby shouted, ‘Imose sisters!’

‘Presido, Presido!’ the women clapped in reply.

‘Beautiful sisters!’

‘Presido, Presido!’

‘Sisters keepers!’

‘In sunshine and rain!’

‘Distinguished and accomplished women!’

‘Together as one!’

They sang the club anthem, showered her with gifts and prayers then all the women gave her a standing ovation as the microphone was handed to her.

She smiled wiping the tears from her eyes, as she held on to the microphone with her manicured dark blue nails. Her gele spread out on her head like the feathers of a proud peacock.

‘My dear lovely sisters. The love wey we don show each other all this years is not a small something. I thank una for this party wey una do for me and God go continue to dey bless una. Una know say plenty people no like us, so we must stand together as one to continue to dey support each other as sister’s keeper. Ashawo na still the oldest work for this life and for Bible Jesus forgive that our ashawo sister. I no talk say na good thing but na condition make crayfish bend. To judge each other na big sin and even as we be sinners, make we try to do good make God shower plenty blessings shower on us. I don hand over to Madam Oyibo today and even if I no dey here again, I dey here in spirit. I wan start new life with my Oga and I know say una understand as e be to marry for old age. I go dey come meeting from time to time and go continue to dey help

una as my power reach. I don dey miss una already,' and with that she burst into tears.

These women had been her bedrock and they had faithfully supported each other through the years. She would miss them terribly, but it was a choice she had chosen to make. She had to put certain things behind her. The live band that had been hired started to play and the women danced around her. Her eyes fell on the young musician, he was tall and handsome. He must be new to Nimbe as his face wasn't familiar. She watched him sing and dance and almost laughed. There was a time she would have loved to bed him and make him her sugar boy. Today was different Pauline Holloway had stepped up her game. No more little boys.

The women danced, ate and drank and at the end of the party stood waving to her until her car vanished.

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Iye Baby sat with her husband on the soft rug on Christmas evening chatting. As it was Christmas day, they had spent most of it entertaining guests. The last guest had left a little over an hour ago and the girls had retreated to their rooms to rest. She cast her eyes on the large Christmas tree and said a silent prayer of thanksgiving. She still woke up some mornings thinking she was in her two-bedroom flat. This new life of hers would take time to get used to but she loved it. This was the first time in her life she had a good man take care of her, and it was also the first time she had gone for months without working.

'What business would you like to start in the New Year, darling?' he had read her mind.

She placed her head on his shoulder and sighed, 'I still dey think.'

'Would you like to run a club?'

She sat up and circled her right hand around her head a couple of times, 'God forbid bad thing.'

He raised an eyebrow amused. His wife's new found faith and understanding was interesting to watch grow.

She explained, ‘Those na thing of the world. Now na only things of the Lord I want to dey do.’

‘Okay, and what are the of the Lord you want to do?’ he mimicked her voice.

‘Maybe bread.’

‘Bread? I don’t understand. What has bread got to do with the things of the Lord?’ he looked confused.

She smiled, ‘I wan do bakery business. The time wey Jesus dey preach and people dey hungry, na bread he give them chop.’

He shook his head laughing; there was no end to his wife’s interesting ideas. ‘Okay, that’s not a problem. If that’s what you really want, tomorrow we will find a suitable spot to build your bakery or rent you a nice space.’

She was so happy, ‘Thank you my husband, ‘she held him close, ‘you dey too good to me and God go continue to dey bless you well.’

‘Anything for you my darling.’ He planted two big kisses on her rosy cheeks. He would have loved to kiss her but she always pushed him away so he let her be.

They rented a nice big space not too far from their home and there Johnny and Pauline Holloway set up Obey God Bakery, the only suppliers of fresh bread to the elite living in the GRA of Nimbe city. John made a mental note to change the name of the bakery to Pauline’s in the future, but for now, her happiness was all he cared about.

She worshipped with her new husband at his church where no one knew her nor had heard of her. In the beginning this had surprised her for she assumed she ruled the whole of Nimbe city. It then dawned on her that she ruled in the world of the lower class as an upper class rustic and not this new class Johnny had introduced her to. Fine Girl, Baby and Destiny came to live with her in her new home and John welcomed them with open arms.

Baby brought forth a beautiful red baby boy on New Year’s Day and Iye Baby and John were by her side to welcome their grandchild into the world. Iye Baby was never told about Baby’s previous visit to Octavius. If Octavius wasn’t ready to be a man, that was his loss. She would take care of Baby and ensure that she

and her child had the best of what she could afford. When Baby was strong enough, Iye Baby would introduce her to her bakery business and the girl could make her lazy self useful for once.

In this part of Nimbe, everyone called her Pauline and as the months went by, her visits to the other end of Nimbe city where she once ruled with bottom power as Iye Baby, lessened. On the days she felt nostalgic, she opened up a bottle of beer and shared it with her husband. At other times, when Taibat visited, the two women would sit on her balcony, drink and smoke cigarettes and laugh about the good old days as Taibat gave her updates on the happenings among the lower crust of Nimbe and her once cherished Imose sisters. She occasionally sent them fresh bread through Taibat and promised to visit them soon.

Even though the church women were glad that she had left their straying husbands in peace, they missed her generous donations of wrappers and rice every Christmas as she had done for the past ten years. Since her departure, no one had been that generous to them. The pastor missed her terribly as she had never held back on her tithes and large donations, which everyone had benefited from especially the church women who had judged and envied her. She smiled at the thought; it served them right. Let the saints and women of God among them reach out to them in holiness!

Some evenings she was seen strolling to her bakery to check on her staff and at other times, she was seen strolling hand in hand with her husband.

The last time the rumour-mongers had returned with gist about her, they claimed to have seen a pregnant Pauline Holloway taking a walk in the GRA district of Nimbe city.

THE END

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Finally the amusing story in my head has been put on paper, I thank God for His abundant grace. This story is first for my parents without whom I wouldn’t have had the blessing of travelling around the country - living in many different places, learning different languages and experiencing different cultures.

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About the Author

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She started writing at an early age, inspired by her many travels while growing up. Her writing is greatly influenced by spirituality, passion for African culture and gender struggles in contemporary life. Her other passions include photography and traveling.