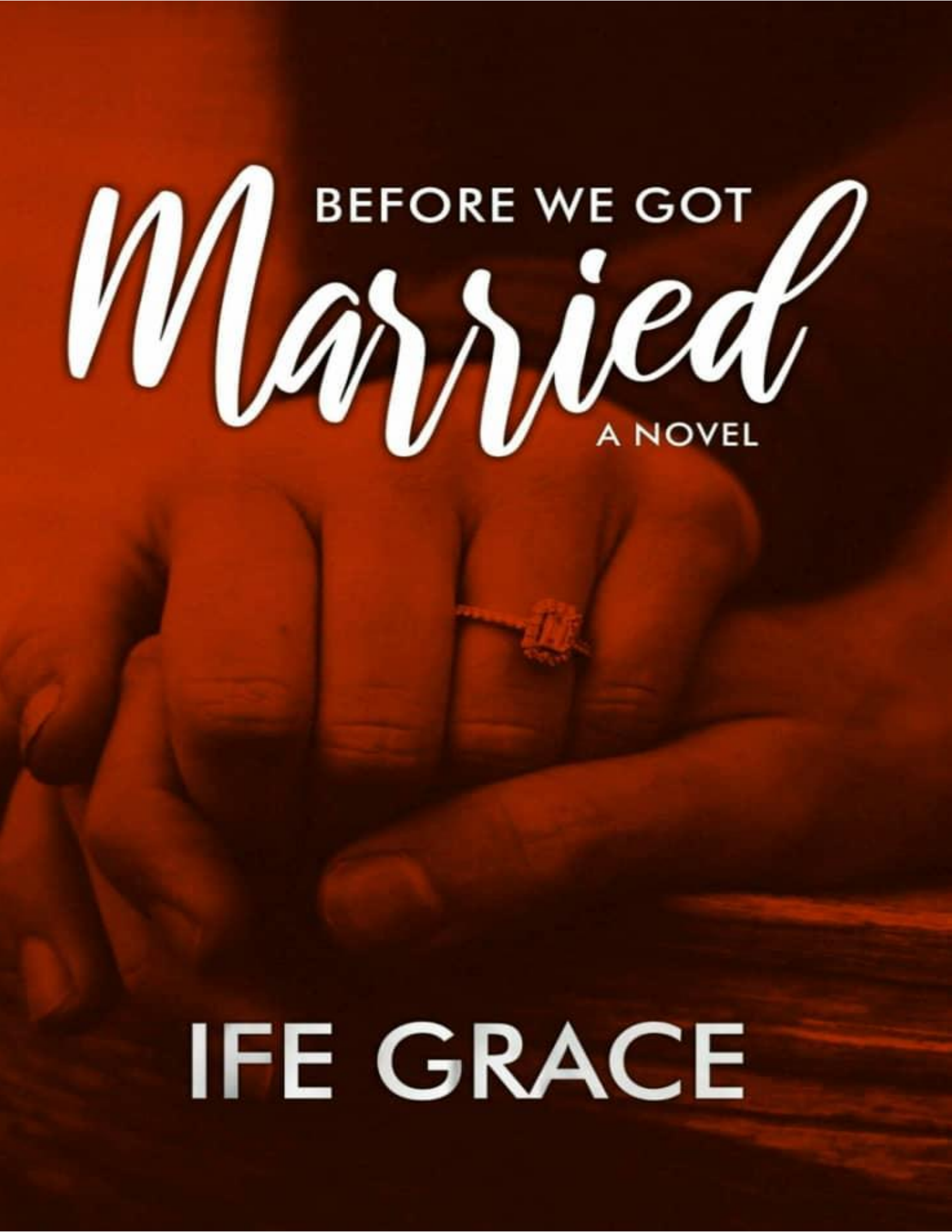

BEFORE WE GOT
Married
A NOVEL
IFE GRACE

Before we got married.

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Before we got married is a work of fiction. Where real people, events, establishments, organizations appear, they are entirely coincidental. All other elements of the novel are drawn from the author's imaginations.

TO MY BLOG FAMILY,
With you I have a tribe

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CHAPTER 1

Tomi's heart quickened as the taxi took the corner that led into Adewale street where her parents lived. It'd been three years since she left home. How time flies.

She stared out the car window. A smile lit up her face revealing a gap tooth and dimples on her freckled cheeks.

Nothing had changed. Mama Barakat still had her shop beside the only barbing salon on the street. As small as the place was, there was hardly anything you couldn't find there. Opposite Mama Barakat's store lived the loud-mouthed Fikayomi, the laziest tailor Tomi had ever met.

Then there was the bakery in an unpainted bungalow. Tomi remembered Wednesday mornings as a teenager. Bread and fried eggs was for breakfast. Dressed in her school uniform, she'd rush to the bakery to purchase loaves of bread. One of the workers always looked out for her among the crowd of retailers who came to buy bread. He'd signal for her to meet him at the back door where hot fresh bread would be exchanged for money.

When the taxi moved slowly towards a block factory, Tomi saw dark men covered in sweat, arranging blocks into a jalopy. Two other men stood aside from the others, laughing and talking aloud. She knew all of them. Suberu. Gbenga. Olaiya. Gbadamosi.

Behind the factory was an open field. Tomi remembered that right on that field, Akin had kissed her. It'd been her first kiss. The sweet tingling feeling she experienced after that night was gone. She was left only with vivid images of the incident.

She remembered that night clearly as if it had happened only a few days ago. Her mum had sent her on an errand to get cubes of maggi from Mama Barakat's shop.

She'd been excited. It was an opportunity to see Akin. Their love life had only been fanned by letters passed through the hand of his brother who attended

her school. They wanted more. She craved for something physical. Something that her friends at school did with their boyfriends.

When she got close to the shop, her excitement had died. How would she get Akin out of the house? It was almost 8p.m and she didn't have a phone to reach him. Determined, she stood in front of his gate, thinking of every possible strategy.

"I'll ring the bell and if his father appears at the gate, I'll tell him I need to get a textbook from Akin."

Tomi laughed at how lame her plan was. Akin's father would look her straight in the eye and say, 'Tomi, what is the name of the textbook? You are in Jss 3 and Akin is in SS2. Go home my friend and read your book!' Before he shut the gate at her, he'd add, 'Send my regards to your father.'

Discouraged, Tomi bought the cubes of maggi and set for home. She had just gone halfway when someone whispered her name. The voice was familiar.

Akin!

She turned. He pulled her away from the light streaming through the block factory and led her towards the field. Her heart raced.

"Oh Akin, I was praying I'd see you. I've missed you so much. I wanted-"

He kissed her passionately, knocking out the wind from her lungs. When he broke away, he caressed the back of her neck with his thumb.

"I thought of you all day. I couldn't even concentrate on my homework."

Tomi's body trembled from the effect of the kiss. "I love you so much Akin. We are meant to be together. I wish our parents can see the depth of love we have for each other. They need to loosen up."

Akin laughed. "They'll never understand. I'm sure when I get a job as a bank manager and introduce you as my future wife-"

"I can't wait to marry you! I wish we could do it now.' Tomi folded her hands. "But how did you figure that I'll be out at this time?"

"Mum sent me to buy onions from Mama Barakat. I saw you leave her shop. I followed you. Here we are."

He pulled her into his embrace. "Can't we even spend more time together? This our parents ehn."

They kissed again, their mothers confident that their innocent children had simply gone on the errand sent them.

Tomi turned her gaze from the window. Where was Akin now? Was he married? Since his parents moved to Ghana, they had not kept in touch. So much for spending the rest of their lives together.

"That's the house." Tomi pointed to a two-storey building.

The taxi pulled up in front of a black gate. Tomi's fifteen-year old brother, Seyi, was sitting on the veranda upstairs when he raised his head and saw her.

"Sis Tomi is here!" He shouted and ran down the stairs. She paid the fare and the security man rushed to help her with her box. Seyi dashed out of the entrance and ran into his sister's arm.

"You are now taller than me. This is serious o.' Tomi said to her brother as they walked into the house.

Seyi laughed. "In which case, you have to start referring to me as Mr Seyi. Just so you know, things have changed around here. I'm no longer that small boy you scream at."

Tomi slapped the back of his head playfully. He laughed and took the box from the security man. He followed Tomi into the room she shared with her sister and dropped the box.

"It's so good to be home." Tomi muttered.

Her mother entered, her loud voice filling the room. Tomi hugged her.

"Mum, I've missed you."

Tomi's mother grinned. "Welcome home."

Her father came in a moment later. She went to him. For the first time in months, Tomi was happy. She was far away from Lagos and the troubles it brought her. She was home, to the only place she felt safe.

Tomi's phone rang. She stopped unpacking and reached for it.

Daniel.

She hissed and dropped the phone back on the bed. The phone rang again. She ignored it and continued to fold her clothes into the wardrobe.

"Who left empty wraps of chocolate on the floor? Seyi!" A voice from outside barked.

Tomi recognized her sister's voice and hid behind the curtain.

Her sister continued. "Seyi don't let me deal with you. Does this place look like a refuse bin? Ehn! Where is this boy? Haba, what kind of nonsense is this?"

A tall, plump lady in a black suit with matching heels entered the room, looking exhausted. She flung her shoes aside and pulled off her braided wig. She threw it on the bed but it landed on the floor. Grumbling, she bent down to pick it up and placed it gently on the bed.

Tomi stepped out of her hiding place and tip-toed towards her. Her sister sensed movement behind her and turned sharply. Her eyes widened when she saw Tomi.

"Tomi! You are back!"

Tomi wrapped her hands around her sister's waist. "Barrister Ayomide! Look at you."

Ayomide pretended to be annoyed. "Why didn't you tell me you were coming today?"

"I love to give surprises, remember?"

Ayomide jumped in excitement. "I'm so happy. Girl, you've been away for three years. Please tell me you'll be staying for a long time."

"Let's just say I'm not leaving anytime soon."

Ayo sat on the bed. The tiredness she felt some minute ago had disappeared. "I'm really happy you are back. At least I'll come back from work to a gist partner."

Tomi's phone rang again. Ayo looked from the phone to her sister. When Tomi didn't make any attempt to pick it, she glanced at the caller ID.

"Babe, your guy is calling you."

Tomi stood up to arrange her shoes in a shoe rack.

"Tomi, pick your call. Even if you guys are having issues, at least hear what he has to say."

Tomi rolled her eyes at her younger sister. "Yes, madam counsellor."

The phone stopped ringing when Tomi got to it. "I'll call him later." She faced her sister. "So, what have I missed?"

Ayo stretched her legs on the bed. 'Nothing that you don't already know. At least I've been giving you updates over the phone."

"Which *yeye* update. Anytime I call you, there is always one excuse or the other. Check your archives *jare*. *Gist suppose dey*."

Ayo clicked her fingers. "I just remembered one gist."

Tomi clapped her hand. "I talk am. No be my sister. No dry moment with you."

Ayo laughed. "Sis Bisola married the head of Protocol unit. Can you imagine? We were so shocked. I mean, of all the fine brothers in Garden Assembly, that sister decided to settle for Pastor Damola. I'm sure there is a twenty year gap between them. The worst part, his kids returned from the U.S for the wedding and they didn't look happy at all. Sharon said her father should still be mourning."

Tomi was irritated. "Who prescribed the length of time a man should mourn his late wife? Pastor Damola's wife died like five years ago."

Ayo shrugged. "I'm sure if Sis Bisola had been a little closer to his age, they wouldn't have felt that way."

"Babe don marry. There is nothing they can do about it. I think Bisola is perfect for Pastor Damola. That man needs to learn how to relax."

Ayo nodded. "That's true." She moved closer to Tomi. "Sad news. Femi's mother is dead."

Tomi covered her mouth. "Oh no!"

"I must confess, her death is a great relief to the church of God."

Tomi frowned. "Ayo, that's not a good thing to say. I know that woman stirred a lot of trouble in the church but we shouldn't be happy about her death."

Ayo stood up to undress. She reached for a towel hanging on window and tied it around her chest. "That woman was a witch. The Pastor had to excommunicate her from the church early this year. She helped Bro shola's daughter with an abortion. That girl almost died."

Tomi's eyes widened. "Are you serious?"

"She is very manipulative and seductive. Don't you remember how she almost scattered our family?"

"Still I think we should have prayed more for her. If not for anything but for her kids. Look at Femi. He is nothing like her. Does he still attend our church?"

Ayo shook her head. "He stopped coming shortly after you left. The shame must have been too much for him to bear. His mother was just a thorn in everybody's flesh."

Tomi was disturbed. Where was Femi now? They'd been close friends until the incident that almost tore her family apart.

"I just hope he is fine." Tomi said quietly and climbed the bed. Her eyes were heavy. She decided to leave Daniel a message.

Hi dear, I'm sorry I didn't return your calls. You know how it is when you are home after a long time. We'll talk tomorrow please. I need to catch some rest now. Love you. Goodnight.

Tomi's phone rang immediately.

"Oh my God! Can't this guy just understand that I'm not in the mood to talk to him?" Tomi muttered to herself. She hesitated before answering the call.

"Hello Daniel."

"Tomi baby! You won't believe, I got that deal. Remember that contract with the Lagos state government I told you about?"

Tomi mouth opened. What kind of man was this? He couldn't even ask how her journey had gone. He wasn't even concerned about her welfare. Had she eaten? How were her parents and siblings? When would she be returning so they could see?

Did he even miss her?

It had always been about him. What he wanted. How he wanted things done. From the beginning of the relationship, she'd wondered why she had agreed to go into it in the first place.

"Tomi, are you there? As I was saying, I won the contract. I've got some real cash mehn. That's not all. There is a Lebanese guy I met this morning. Another deal is coming. We have fixed a meeting for Wednesday. I can tell it's going to be huge."

Daniel kept talking. Tomi put the phone on speaker and left it on the bed. Ayo came out of the bathroom and chuckled at the scowl on her sister's face.

"Tomi, are you there?" Daniel asked.

"I'm listening."

"I met a commissioner's wife this morning. I told her about you and how good a fashioner designer you are. She promised to call. But then you have to start thinking of moving to a bigger place. We need something classy. You remember-"

Daniel didn't stop talking. Seyi came into the room with a plate of spaghetti and fish sauce. Tomi took the plate from him and thanked him before settling into the chair by the window. Daniel's voice filled the room. He was talking and laughing at the same time.

"I'll call you back dear. Another call just came in." The line went dead. Tomi sighed in relief.

Ayo looked at her sister. "No relationship is perfect Tomi. You've dated him for a year now. You just need to adapt to this part of his personality."

Tomi didn't respond immediately. She was still pissed that Daniel hadn't even ask how her journey had gone.

"I wish it is as easy as you have said. Let's be frank. Daniel is selfish. He knew I left Lagos and he didn't call me for once throughout the journey and now he is telling me about a deal he landed. Is everything about money? Daniel doesn't listen. Before I complete a statement, he would interrupt and say like hundred other statements."

"Tomi, you know-"

Tomi didn't allow her sister finish. "You know how difficult it is for me to express myself. While I'm trying to find words to express how I feel, he shifts in his seat impatiently and starts looking at his phone. There were times I just wanted to unburden my heart, and before you know it, Daniel is dishing out plenty advice. All I wanted him to do was listen to me."

"Maybe you should send him a mail. That way he'll be forced to listen.
Tomi stared at her meal. "I like his tenacity, I like that he is ambitious. I love the fact that I'll never have any fear of my husband neglecting his responsibility as the head in the home. His leadership ability is superb but…" Tomi paused and looked at her sister. "I just don't want to feel like a visitor in my own house."

Tomi picked her fork and plunged it into the spaghetti before lifting it to her mouth. "He is a child of God and I know he strongly upholds God's Word, but I get angry at the end of every discussion we have. Sometimes I'm depressed. It's one reason I came home."

Ayo rubbed her sister's back. "You'll be fine. Just don't make any hasty decision. Give this some time. You can even threaten to break up with him. If he loves you, he'll be ready to listen."

Tomi's phone rang again. When she saw it was Daniel, she grabbed her plate. "I'm not picking this call. I'll be in mummy's room."

Ayo laughed as her sister hurried out of the room.

Later that night, Femi crossed Tomi's mind again. She pulled the blanket over her head, wondering why she couldn't get him out of her head. Was this happening because of the news about his mother's death?

God, wherever he is, I ask that you comfort his heart.

It was a week later that Tomi would bump into Femi.

She had scheduled a weekend hangout with Becky and Peju. They were close friends long before she left for Lagos. Up until Becky's parents left Garden Assembly for another Pentecostal church, the three ladies always hooked up at the end of the service. There was always something to talk about.

That Saturday morning, as they munched on burger and ice-cream, they talked about the men in their lives, their goals, Peju's new apartment and Becky's wedding plans.

Becky stood up. "Let's go to my place so I can show you my wedding gown."

Tomi objected. "Another time Becky. I told you a friend from Lagos is sending my sewing machines. I have to go to IRT transport office to pick them up."

Peju clapped her hands. "At least I will rest from all these radarada fashion designers. When should I bring my Ankara? I have like ten different materials in my box.'

Tomi chuckled. "Bring all the materials, I'm available. Just make sure you bring your money along."

Peju threw the last piece of burger into her mouth. “Haba, what are friends for? I will give you whatever I have.”

Tomi eyed her friend. “Does my fashion business look like a charity organization to you? See, when I was in Lagos, the least amount I charged for a simple Ankara gown was 7k.”

The two girls burst into laughter. Peju shook her head and leaned towards Tomi.

“You better go back to Lagos. So if I want to make one correct dress, I’ll now pay like ten thousand naira. How much did I buy the material?”

“I wonder.”

They left the eatery to the place Becky parked her car. Becky blinked her eyes as she fixed her gaze on Tomi.

“Please, let’s go to my place. I promise I won’t take your time. I’ll even drive you down to pick the machines. After all you’ll need a car to carry them.’ She held Tomi’s waist. “I’ve missed you. I want to spend every moment with you.”

Peju grinned. “See scoping *abeg.*”

Becky slapped her back playfully. “You should be convincing her to come with us. Sometimes, I don’t even know your usefulness in my life.”

Peju opened the door of the car and winked at Becky. “Whether you like it or not, you are stuck with me for life.”

The three ladies got into the car and drove to Becky’s house. Giggling like excited children, they walked towards the duplex and it was then Tomi noticed a man cleaning a black jeep. He wore a grey t-shirt over a pair of shorts. When he raised his head, she saw his face clearly.

“Femi!”

The napkin Femi was holding fell to the floor. He stared at Tomi who was now walking towards him.

“Tomi is back in Ekiti?” Femi mouthed.

She gave him a quick hug and stepped back to look into his face. “It’s so good to see you again.”

Femi couldn’t take his eyes away from her. His heart pounded. Was he dreaming? “It’s been three years. How are you?”

She held his hand. “I’m good. You’ve been on my mind since I heard about your mother’s death. Please accept my condolence.”

Femi let out a deep breath. The feel of her skin against his resurrected buried feelings. If his mother had not caused a rift between the two families. If it hadn’t been difficult to get a job after bagging a second class upper, if…

Oh God, I still love her so much.

“Thank you Tomi. I’m happy to see you again.”

Tomi held on to his hand. “I want my friend back. We have to stay in touch this time.”

Femi swallowed hard. “Yes ma’am.”

“I have to go now.” Tomi retreated and ran up the stairs to Becky’s room.

“Becky, why is Femi washing your father’s car?” Tomi asked as soon as she stepped into the room.

“He is my father’s personal driver. He started shortly after his mother was admitted to the hospital. My father likes him a lot.”

Peju looked upset. She faced Tomi. “You surprised me. After what that guy’s mother did to your family, you could still be friendly with him like that.”

“Where in the new covenant is a mother’s sin passed on to her son. Femi is different. He is a believer and you know it.”

“If I were in your shoes, I won’t even go close to him.”

Tomi was furious at Peju’s reaction. She didn’t expect such statement from her friend. “This guy just lost his mother. Am I supposed to just walk past him like that?”

“I didn’t say you should not greet him. But the way you were acting so informal with him. How will your mother feel if-”

Becky stood between the two ladies. “Ladies! Will you just stop? See how both of you are bickering like teenagers. Can we just see my wedding dress and talk about some other important things.”

An hour later, as Tomi left the house with her friends, she looked around for Femi. She didn’t see him. If she had taken a few steps towards the back of the building, she’d have seen him sitting on the floor with his knees pulled up to his chin and his head bowed.

CHAPTER 2

"Hey, what are you thinking about?"

Femi raised his head to find his sister standing at the door, dressed in a skimpy gown. He glanced at the clock on the wall. It was noon already? Had he been sitting there for so long?

He rubbed his hand over his face and stretched out his legs on the stool in front of him.

God, please I want to stop thinking about Tomi. I can't continue like this.

His sister left her handbag on the center table and settled into the sofa opposite him. She crossed her legs and leaned her elbow on the armrest.

"You've not answered my question. Since you came back from work two days ago, you've been like this. What bothering you?"

Femi shrugged. "Nothing." His eyes stopped at her mini gown that barely covered her thighs. "Bukola, where are you coming from?"

She stood up and grabbed her bag from the table. "I've told you to stop mothering me."

"You didn't sleep at home last night."

Bukola didn't respond. She walked to her room but Femi quickly blocked her path.

"I'm begging you to stop sleeping with men for money. God has been faithful to us. He'll take care of us."

Bukola tucked back a strand of her braid behind her ear. 'I'm an adult okay? I had enough of this from mum. Please don't take over from her."

"You can get something else to do."

She folded her hands. "Like what? I don't have a degree. Who will employ me? See, I need the money. How do we get by with the stipend you receive from your job?"

"If you'll just live within your means and stop buying expensive clothes and makeups, we'll be fine."

Bukola tipped her chin slightly. "What I do with my life is not your business. I'm no good to anyone after all. I have a spillover of courses that I can't just pass. There is nothing that I put my hands to do that prospers. Abeg Femi, just leave me alone."

Femi sighed and stepped aside. When Bukola got to the door of her room, she turned to her brother who was now back on the sofa.

"Why didn't you go to work today?"

"My boss and his wife flew out of the country yesterday. They'll be away for a month or so. Besides, mum will be buried in a couple of weeks. There's enough time to plan the burial arrangement and see that she is laid to rest properly."

Bukola hissed. "I don't feel like going to that village. I hate mummy's family. When she was alive, they didn't even care about us especially when dad left. Now she is dead, they all show up wanting a befitting burial. Crazy lot."

Femi glanced at her. "We should be grateful they are helping us with the expenses for the burial. Imagine if we had to raise that kind of amount."

"Whatever." Bukola said and entered her room.

Few minutes later, Bukola came out of the room in a blue tank top and jean knickers.

"I'm hungry. I want to prepare rice and stew." Bukola announced without looking at her brother. When she didn't wait for his response before entering the kitchen, Femi wondered if he had pushed too hard. He had been frustrated that she was following his mother's step and didn't want that to happen.

His mother's last words were still fresh in his mind. She had fixed her gaze on Bukola, her hands immobile by her side.

"Bukky, please don't walk in my footsteps. I am already mad at myself for creating a replica of me in you." His mother had said, in a voice barely above a whisper.

"You'll come to hate yourself for allowing men use your body to satisfy their lusts. I was a bitter woman, determined to take marriages down. I was jealous when I saw marriages soaring while mine was in shambles. I hated to see anyone

around me happy. It drove in me a passion to destroy them. The people who loved me dearly will only remember me for evil. Be like your brother. Turn your hurts to Jesus. I wish I did this long ago." She stopped and coughed. Her breathing slowed. She closed her eyes and faced the wall. Then she was gone.

Femi wiped the tears already gathering in his eyes. This was not a time to cry. There'd be enough time to shed tears at the village. He tapped his phone to check his mailbox.

His heart dampened. None of the jobs he had applied for had called him for an interview. Was there something he was not doing well? He opened his notebook and wrote out the list of videos to watch on YouTube.

How to write a powerful CV that gets noticed by employers.

7 ways to hit a well-paying job

10 things to do when you are unemployed.

Reasons no one is hiring me.

Why can't I get a-

The knock on the door stopped him. He covered the notebook and went to answer it. When he opened the door, Rotimi, his best friend was standing there, grinning.

"Hello buddy." Rotimi said, as he entered the house.

Femi slapped him on his back. "Good to see you again. It's been like three weeks."

Rotimi sat down and hung his arm on the sofa. "Don't mind me jare. I've had many gigs in the last couple of weeks. I developed a website, did some programming work for a company. Helped a friend with a software. Just plenty stuff like that." He leaned forward.

Rotimi smiled. "Immediately I saw your text message, I knew I had to be here today. So Tomi is back."

Femi clasped his hands on his knees. "I was shocked when she walked into my boss' house two days ago."

Rotimi reclined on the sofa. "I wish I could meet this Tomi. Since I've known you, no other lady has fascinated you. This Tomi lady must really mean something."

Femi exhaled. “I don’t even know if I’ve been stupid to think she’d be interested in me. Maybe I’ve been holding up to false hope. She might even be in a relationship.”

“Now is the time to find out. It’s getting too long Femi. She’s been hanging around your mind for how many years? Now that she is back, I think you should make a move. At least know where you stand.”

Femi clasped his hands. ‘I’m scared. I’m scared of hearing a No. It’ll break my heart if she slips away from me. I’m not sure I can survive seeing her in another man’s arms.”

Rotimi pointed a finger at him. “Now, you are indulging the flesh. Love does not demand its own way. If she marries another man, who says God can’t lead you to someone else?”

“But I heard God. Rotimi, I’m sure of my convictions.”

Bukola peeked out of the kitchen and smiled when she saw Rotimi. She waved at him. He waved back. She returned to the kitchen and Rotimi turned his attention back to his friend.

“I’m not doubting your convictions. I’m saying it takes two to get into a marriage covenant. If for whatever reason she goes on to be with another person, then it’s her choice. When I told Esther about the way I felt and she said no, I respected her decision and went back to God. Chidera is in my life now and I’m grateful to God for bringing a woman like her my way. Femi, our trust in God is the only constant equation.”

Femi laughed dryly. “Love can make someone crazy.”

“So when are you going to pop the question?”

Femi chuckled. “She just got back. I should give her sometime and then we’ll see how it goes from there.”

“I strongly believe her return is God’s mercy to bring an answer to the longing of your heart. It’s time for you to move forward.” Rotimi said.

Femi nodded his head. “I believe so too. Thank you Rotimi.”

Bukola came out of the kitchen with a tray of rice and stew. She placed the tray on the center table. The men stared at the meal without touching it.

Rotimi smiled. “Bukola, I’m not hungry. Thank you.”

Femi shook his head. “Maybe later.”

Angry, Bukola took the tray and walked back briskly into the kitchen. Rotimi went after her with Femi following behind. Bukola dropped the tray on the sink and spun around to face them.

"You guys have no right to judge me. I know what you think. I prepared this food with tainted money. Just take your holier than thou attitude and get out of my sight! I am a prostitute, yes! You are better than me. I accept it. If the money had come from Femi's pocket, I'm sure you'd have accepted the food." Tears filled her eyes.

Rotimi held her hands. "This has nothing to do with you. Femi and I are spending the evening praying. We can't eat anything until we are done."

Femi stood at the kitchen door watching as Rotimi spoke softly to his sister. Chidera was blessed to have a husband like him. He smiled remembering the day Rotimi's son, Joshua was born. Watching his friend hold his son had left a deep longing in his heart.

Lord, I'm going to have a beautiful family with Tomi. Hasten to fulfil your word, Oh Lord.



Tomi walked down her street, holding a bottle of coke in one hand and with the other hand held a phone to her ear.

"Tomi, you mean you moved all your things to Ado-Ekiti without telling me?"

Tomi hesitated. Daniel had every reason to be upset. But if she'd told him before leaving, he'd have talked her out of it.

"I still have some of my belongings in Lagos."

"Can I ever understand you? How could you take a decision without involving me? Besides what are you doing there? Can't you even think before making a rash decision? I've always told you, smart women use their brain not their emotions. When we get married, are you now going to move your things back to Lagos?'

Tomi fought back her tears. Why does Daniel always talk to her like a child whenever he wasn't comfortable with a decision she made.

"Daniel, I just need some time to think. Lagos is choking the hell out of me."

"I agree with you. We all need breathing spaces in our lives. That's why companies have retreats. Taking a few days off your business is perfectly fine but closing your work studio and moving out of a place like Lagos seem foolish to me."

Daniel's words cut through Tomi's heart. Her heart has been at rest since returning home. Had she really acted foolishly?

God, you asked me to come home. Did I make a mistake? What exactly is your plan for me here?

"Daniel, I'm really sorry."

"Have you told your parents about our plans for the wedding introduction?"

Tomi sighed. 'Not yet. Can we wait for another couple of months? I just need some time to pray and think about the future."

Daniel sounded frustrated. "Time, Tomi. Time. You are really asking me to give you time. I'll call you back. I have to take this important call."

The line went dead.

When Tomi entered the house, the sitting room was packed full of women. Her mother was one of the cell leaders under the women's department. Tomi had completely forgotten that they held their meetings every Wednesday evening. She walked quietly to her room, overhearing her mother preach on love and forgiveness.



Daniel came into Ado that weekend.

"You didn't tell me you were coming." Tomi said.

"Just like you didn't inform me you were moving to Ado. I'm somewhere around old garage. Meet me at the eatery opposite Tobas filling station."

When he ended the call, Tomi stood for a while in the center of her room, holding a mop stick.

Had Daniel missed her so much that he had to travel down from Lagos to see her? She smiled and placed the mop stick into a bucket before dragging it

aside. She rushed into the bathroom, showered and began to rummage her wardrobe for a dress to wear.

Her sister entered the room with a broom in her hand. Beads of sweat covered her forehead.

"Where are you going to?" Ayo asked, a broom in her hand.

Tomi jumped excitedly. "You won't believe it. Daniel is around. I can't even explain how excited I am. He must have missed me so much."

Ayo left the broom at the entrance "See someone that was ranting few days ago."

"Don't mind me *jare*. Sometimes when I wear my emotions on my sleeve, I just spill rubbish out of my mouth."

"I'm happy he came around. That man loves you."

Tomi pulled out some dresses from the hanger. "I'm still not happy with him for not calling to find out how my journey to Ekiti was. But for Daniel to leave his busy schedule just to come see me, that's something. He really wants to make this work.' She held up two dresses. "Which should I wear?"

Ayo looked from one dress to the other. "The navy blue. Let me wash my hands. I'll arrange your hair and get you ready for your date. When Daniel sees you, he'll agree with anything you say."

Ayo got to work. She rubbed oil on her sister's weavon and combed it slowly. When she finished, she took the foundation and slowly smeared it on Tomi's face.

The door was slightly opened. Tomi's mother pushed it backwards and stepped in.

"What's going on here?"

"Your daughter has a date." Ayo stepped back to admire her work. "Mum, Is she not beautiful?"

Tomi's mother raised her nose. "Even without all the mud you are plastering on her face, she is a beautiful princess. What date are you talking about?"

Ayo reached into the wardrobe for a bottle of perfume. She sprayed it behind Tomi's ears, the back of her neck and on her wrists.

"Daniel is around. Wait sef, why am I the one talking." Ayo pushed her sister gently. "Speak for yourself *joor*."

Tomi held her lips firmly to allow the pink gloss spread evenly across her lips. She released her lips and turned to her mother.

"Daniel is in Ado. The guy don miss me die." Tomi laughed and rose to her feet. Ayo dropped a pair of black heels in front of her sister's feet.

Tomi shook her head. "It's too high abeg. Give me something lower. I prefer flat sandal."

"You and who is wearing flat." Ayo reached for a pair of silver shoes. Tomi slid her feet into the shoes.

"But why isn't he coming to see us?' Tomi's mother asked.

Tomi smiled. "You'll meet him soon. I might even convince him to come over after our date."

"He had better show up here." Her mother said. "He cannot just land in Ado and disappear like that. Let him come and try our pounded yam and correct efo soup. Convince him."

Ayo tapped her mother's chest. "Mummy relax. You will meet your future son-in-law."

Tomi stood in front of the mirror. She loved what she saw. She was going to blow Daniel's mind away.

"I have to go. Bye." Tomi said, and hurried out of the room.

When she got into the eatery, Daniel's head was bent over a book. Tomi was slightly upset that he wasn't even looking out for her arrival. She walked over to the table and drew back the empty seat in front of him.

She sat down. "I'm sorry it took a while to get here. I was attending to some chores when your call came in."

Daniel didn't smile. He closed the book he was reading and sat straight.

"You want something?" he asked.

Had she upset him so much that he couldn't even smile at her? She felt suddenly guilty. If he gave her a long lecture here, she'd comfortably enjoy it. She'd do anything to make him happy.

"Daniel, I'm sorry I-"

Daniel raised his hand. “Let’s eat something. I’m having a pie and a drink. You?”

“Same.”

Daniel stood up. Tomi’s eyes followed him as he walked to the counter. She was again swoon at the sight of him. She noticed how the jeans firmly hugged his thighs. His back was strong, his shoulders broad and strong muscles popped under his t-shirt. He walked with grace and confidence. This was a man who was sure of what he wanted to do with his life.

How could she have thought of letting go of a man like this?

“Tomi, you are very stupid.” she muttered under her breath. ‘Stop acting like a child! You are going to be 26 in November. Grow up girl!”

How could she have made such a terrible decision? For goodness sake, she had clients who paid her good money for the clothes she made them. Just last month, Daniel had introduced her to a business consultant who wanted to take her brand to another level.

“I’m going back to Lagos.” Tomi concluded. She would convince Daniel to see her parents concerning the wedding introduction and promise him she’d be back in Lagos in a couple of days.

Daniel returned with two trays. Her heart leaped when his eyes met hers.

Smile, Daniel, please.

“Ado has not changed much.” Daniel said, opening the bottle of coke.

Tomi chuckled, relief flooding her face. “You never told me you’ve been to Ado.”

A faint smile appeared on his lips. “It was a long time ago.”

“Thank you for coming Daniel. I’m sorry I moved away from Lagos without informing you.”

Daniel gave her his full attention. His gaze filled her with warmth.

She continued. “Obviously, leaving Lagos was a wrong move. I didn’t even think of how you’d feel. I’m sorry. I’ll just spend a few more days here and return to Lagos.”

Daniel didn’t say anything. He chewed his pie quietly. His silence unsettled her. She was familiar with him taking over every conversation. She wanted to know what he was thinking.

She reached for his free hand on the table. “I’ve missed you so much. I didn’t realize that until now.”

Tomi’s eyes were teary. “Daniel, please say something.”

He put the uneaten pie back on the tray and pointed to her meal. “You’ve not touched your pie.”

Tomi shook her head and pressed her palm into his fingers. “How are you Daniel?”

Daniel chuckled. “How am I? That’s one interesting question. Were you expecting me not to be fine?”

Hurt, Tomi recoiled, feeling the familiar biting edge of his tongue. “I was just looking for something to make you talk. Of course I know you are fine. I’m happy about the deals you landed and I-”

“Tomi, I travelled down here to break up with you.”

Silence.

Tomi’s heart pounded. What did Daniel just say?

Daniel continued. “It’s clear we are not on the same page. You nag a lot even when you were in Lagos and while I was still wondering how to cope with that bad habit of yours, you took a very important decision without my knowledge.”

Tears welled up Tomi’s face. “But I apologized.”

Daniel continued. “Before you left Lagos, you said you were going to tell your parents about our wedding introduction and suddenly, you turn around to say, you are not ready and I should wait another couple of months. I can’t marry a woman who is unstable emotionally. There is a lot coming in my future and I need a strong woman who can bear the weight of my vision. If at this point, you are neither here nor there, what will happen when we are faced with tough situations after marriage?”

Tomi cleared her throat, fighting back tears. “Are you saying I am weak? That I am emotionally unstable?”

“I am saying, you need to work on yourself. There is a lot you must learn.”

Tomi flared up. ‘Look at you sitting there thinking you are perfect. You don’t listen when I talk. You like to control every decision. My opinion does not

matter to you. As long as you've made up your mind about something, you'll convince me out of what I think is right."

He smiled. "You see what I'm saying. You are doing it again. How can I marry a nag? Listen, let's move on okay." He looked at his watch. "I have to return to Lagos."

"Just get out of here!" Tomi shouted. Her voice attracted the attention of some of the customers in the eatery.

Daniel stood up, calmly. "Look at the way you are suddenly throwing up a tantrum. Trust me, you are not ready for marriage."

"You know what? I'm happy about this break up. You are the most cruel and unemotional man I have ever met. Any woman who marries you will be your slave and I'm glad that person won't be me. Just go!"

He uttered a foul word under his breath and walked out of the eatery. Tomi placed her head on the table and wept.

The moment Femi entered the family house in his mother's village, he suddenly sensed thick darkness hovering over the place. Everything seemed normal. Women sat at a far end of the compound, shredding vegetables. Some men were roasting a cow at the back of the building. Beside the gate, heaps of yam were offloaded from a truck.

Aunty Morenike, the immediate younger sister to Femi's late mother met the trio at the door. She began to fuss over them, talking about how much their mother was missed. She shook Rotimi's hand, asking what he thought about their small village. Rotimi smiled and said, it was a beautiful town.

"Kadiri, take their bags to one of the empty rooms." Aunty Morenike ordered a boy who had come in with two bags of pure water. He obeyed immediately.

She turned to Bukola. "You will stay with my daughters in their room."

Aunty Morenike addressed her sister's children. "Welcome again. I've been telling your mum to bring you to the village but she always refused. I hope

you'll be staying for a while after the burial. There are wonderful things to see in Gbekuba."

Femi prostrated. "Thank you for your support ma."

Aunty Morenike touched his head. "Go and shower. Amala and gbegiri is on the fire. I'll send someone to call you when the food is ready."

They followed Kadiri to their room while Bukola went with one of her cousins to another room.

The room was sparkling clean when Femi and his friend entered. When Kadiri left, Rotimi stood in the center of the room, his hands akimbo.

"I sense strong demonic presence in this house."

Femi sat on the bed. "I thought I was the only one feeling this way. When I came here last week to see how things were going, it wasn't this bad."

"We have nothing to be afraid of. Remember whose kingdom we belong to. We are in Christ who has spoilt principalities and powers and triumphed over them.'

"I'm worried for Bukola."

Rotimi placed his hands on Femi's shoulders. "She'll be fine."

That night at about 1a.m, the door to the room where Femi and his friend slept opened. A light skinned beautiful woman in a long purple gown entered and shut the door behind her quietly. She stood at the foot of the bed, watching Femi and Rotimi fast asleep on the bed. She went over to Femi's side and tapped him.

"Femi." The woman whispered, careful enough not to wake Rotimi. Femi stirred but didn't open his eyes. She tapped him again.

"Femi."

CHAPTER 3

Femi opened his eyes, squinting at the light that shone from the ceiling above. For one moment, he forgot where he was. His eyes stopped at a man snoring beside him. He jerked backwards.

Who is this?

He rubbed his sleepy eyes and peered closer at the man.

Rotimi.

"What's Rotimi doing-"

"Oh." he sighed, suddenly remembering he was in his mother's village for her burial. He relaxed and snugged the pillow closer to his chest and closed his eyes.

The woman in the purple gown touched his leg. "Femi."

Femi's eyes flew opened. Did someone touch his leg? Did he just hear a woman's voice?

He raised his head. A woman was sitting at the foot of the bed.

He sat up quickly. "Jesus!"

"Femi." The woman smiled sadly.

"Mummy!"

"Are you surprised to see me?"

Femi blinked twice. Was he dreaming? "I don't understand."

She leaned against the wall and covered her face with her hands. Then she began to sob quietly.

Confused, Femi moved closer to her. "Mum, why are you crying?"

Femi's mother wiped her tears and fixed her gaze on her son. "Listen Femi, my spirit is restless. My life wasn't supposed to end like this. I am still angry at the world. I was cheated!"

What was going on? Why would his mother show up few days before she was buried?

He took a long look at her. His mother before she died had aged greatly even though she was just fifty-four. The disease had eaten into her body, leaving her body shrunk and her disheveled hair hanging loosely over a wrinkled face.

But this woman here was different. She was his mother back in the early days at Garden Assembly. It was this body symmetry that had left married men at Garden Assembly hungry for lust while their worried wives set up cages to protect their men from her. His mother had broken down some of those cages, drawing those men into her arms.

"Femi, those people in Garden Assembly, they are very wicked." His mother lamented. "Did you get any condolence message from any of them? Where is the Pastor? What about the women fellowship where I was active for ten years."

"But mum, remember all the troubles you caused them. They have every reason not to show up."

She shook her head. "I can't even believe you support them. I know I did a few bad things but look at my good side too. They hate us Femi. Even if they are still upset with me, what about you? You practically brought life to their youth group. Remember when we first got there, their youth fellowship was dead? You mobilized those young men and organized programs and outreaches. Remember the nights when you stayed on your knees praying for those teenagers. How many of them have called to sympathize with you?"

Bitterness crept slowly into Femi's body and slithered quietly around his heart. His mother was right. Except for a brother who lived on the same street with him, nobody had paid him a visit, not even the executives of the youth fellowship.

When he'd sent a text to the youth president, he'd expected him to mobilize the members to help with the burial arrangement. The Pastor had not called not even for once. He remembered the contributions and the journeys he had embarked on when some of the youth fellowship members lost their loved ones.

His mother's eyes were full of rage. "Avenge the hurt they have caused you. Don't let them rest for treating us like trash!"

Femi stared at his mother, wondering why his body shook so much with anger. Why had they not stood by him when he needed them? Was it because he

left their church two years ago? What about the years he'd spent with them? What about his commitments and sacrifices?

She touched his legs. "You don't need them to succeed. Femi, you will be very wealthy and famous. Your future will be great. When you become powerful, bring that church down. Don't ever let that Pastor go unpunished."

Femi sighed in frustration. "Oh God, what's happening to me. Why am I so full of rage?"

His mother smiled. "The anger is good. You need it to fight well."

Femi turned his face away from the woman sitting in front of him. Something wasn't right. His mother was dead. He knew that once a man dies, his spirit leaves to face eternity. He also understood that demons took the form of humans to create familiarity and gain access into people's minds.

"Femi, what's wrong?" The woman asked, her eyes tenderly holding his.

"My mother is dead. Who are you?"

The woman jumped to her feet, annoyed. At the same time, Rotimi yawned and released a thunderous fart that sounded like a machine gun.

"Sorry bro. That beans last night was something else." Rotimi muttered to no one in particular. He turned and was surprised to find his friend awake, staring into space.

"Who are you?" Femi asked, unaware that his friend was watching him.

The woman started crying. "Femi, why are you doing this to me? Have you also abandoned me? After all I did for you when your father left."

Rotimi tapped his friend on his shoulder. "Guy, who are you talking to?"

"One foolish spirit is standing over there in the exact replica of my mother. I was almost fooled." Femi said, without looking at Rotimi.

"And you are still holding a conversation with the useless thing? Send that nonsense out of here." Rotimi pulled the coversheet over his head and faced the other side.

Femi pointed at the woman. "In the name of Jesus, Get out!"

She staggered backwards and hit her legs against a chair. Suddenly, she changed into a bare chested, pot-bellied man wearing only a red cloth over his loins. Femi closed his eyes and opened them again. Was he hallucinating? What just happened? He blinked twice. The man disappeared out of sight.

Rotimi pushed the sheet down. “Has the thing gone?”

“Yes.” Femi said and returned to bed. He couldn’t sleep.

Why had the youth fellowship of Garden Assembly abandoned him? He had sent a copy of the details of the burial arrangement. Why didn’t they call him?

Rotimi leaned on his elbow, watching his friend struggle with his thoughts. “I don’t know what was planted in your heart, but you have to flush it out or else you will be giving the enemy room to take hold of your mind.”

Femi exhaled and took out his phone from under the pillow. As he tapped on his bible app, a scripture flashed in his heart.

The weapons of our warfare are not carnal but mighty through God to the pulling down of strongholds; Casting down imaginations and every high thing that exalted itself against the knowledge of God, and bringing into captivity every thought to the obedience of Christ.

The words of the woman came back. Tears stung Femi’s eyes.

“Garden Assembly, why? Why did you treat me this way after I gave my all to your church?” Femi let out a deep breath. ‘Oh God, take this bitterness away from my heart.’

Memories flooded his mind again. Years he’d spent organizing crusades, days he’d gone hungry to pay for conference materials, times he’d fallen ill from overworking himself.

Femi threw the phone aside in frustration. “What’s wrong with me?”

Rotimi climbed down from the bed. “I can’t even sleep again. Let me pray jare.”

Femi tossed the coversheet aside. “I think I’ll join you. I don’t even understand how I’m feeling right now.”

The two men began to pace the room, praying. Femi stopped at the center of the room and laid on the floor.

“You spirit of bitterness, you do not belong to my life. I am seated in heavenly places in Christ.”

After all the countless sacrifices you made, they couldn’t even reach out to comfort you.

Femi shook off the dark thought. “As Christ is, so am I in this world. I love because Christ first loved me. The love of Christ fills my heart. Oh yes! I walk in

love. I have been called to a higher life. I shall not respond in the same the way I've been treated. While men mocked the son of God on the cross, he looked at them and said, Father forgive them. I-"

How can you just forgive them? They threw your mother out of the church. Can you remember how most of the ladies didn't want to have anything to do with you? You knew that if you had proposed to any of them, they'd have said no. They hated you.

Femi sat up. "Oh Jesus, help me."

Remember Bro Dare, there was vacancy in his company. You had the qualification required for that job. He didn't give it to you! Obviously the Pastor talked him out of it. Now you are a common driver. The sin of your mother is finally catching up with you.

"Jesus, help me. I need your strength." Femi cried out.

For you are washed. You are sanctified, you are justified in the name of the Lord Jesus Christ and by the Spirit of God

Immediately that scripture reverberated in Femi's heart, he felt strength course through his body.

Pray for Garden Assembly.

Femi went on his knees. He prayed for his former church with all the passion he had. He declared prosperity over the congregation, prayed for strength for the Pastor and numerical growth for the church. The more he prayed, the weaker the voice that plagued him. He continued praying until he could not hear the thoughts anymore. Gradually, peace settled in his heart.

Saturday morning, Femi's mother was buried behind the family house and the burial party took place at Adunni Event Center.

At the event center, Femi stood at the back of the hall wondering where so many people had come from.

He didn't know half the people shouting for more amala and ewedu soup. At the caterer's stand, Aunty Morenike hurled insults at the people crowded in front of big food warmers. Bukola stood beside her pushing back the crowd and giving orders to the servers.

Femi gestured to his sister as he stepped out of the hall. Bukola grabbed a bottle of coke and joined him outside.

"Ah! These people are something else. Why do they act like barbarians?" Bukola lamented.

"Do you think Mummy knew most of these people here?" Femi asked, wondering at the new arrivals who were trooping into the hall.

Bukola adjusted her gele. "Trust me, they heard there was a party somewhere and ran here. Who cares what the occasion is about, as long as there is food to eat."

"Where's Rotimi?' Bukola asked, looking behind him.

Femi pointed to the middle of the hall. "He should be somewhere there, feasting on pounded yam and efo."

Bukola tapped her brother. "Look who's here."

Femi followed her eyes and saw his boss' daughter, Becky, advancing towards them. Two familiar faces walked beside her. His eyes scanned for Tomi. She hadn't shown up. He was disappointed.

Becky shook hands with Femi and his sister. "I'm so sorry for your loss."

Femi smiled. "Thank you for coming."

He greeted his boss' secretary and chef. "I'm glad you made it."

"Please come with me." Bukola led them into the hall. She sighted Rotimi and headed in his direction.

Becky settled into an empty seat beside Rotimi while the other visitors found empty spaces at a table behind her chair. Femi introduced Becky to Rotimi. They shook hands and got into small talks.

"Nobody from Garden Assembly showed up?" Becky asked, looking around.

Bukola hissed. "We are devils. Angels don't dine with devils."

Becky smiled sadly. "My parents send their regards. They'd love to be here if not for the urgent trip they had to take."

Bukola leaned towards Becky. "Your father is an amazing man. We'll forever remember how your family stood by us until mum passed away. I'm just glad your family left that stupid church. Rotten eggs."

"Bukola!" Femi shouted.

"Why are you calling my name like that?" Bukola snapped at her brother. "Look at the sacrifices you-"

Femi raised his hand. “I don’t want to hear it.”

Bukola directed her attention at Becky “Please what would you like to eat? Amala, pounded yam, rice.”

“Rice is fine.”

The secretary wanted pounded yam. The chef settled for amala and gbegiri. Bukola left to take their orders.

Femi sat there, wishing Tomi had come. He had only seen her once since she got back to Ado. Every emotion buried had resurrected the day she stood before him at his boss’ house. His heart ached for her. He imagined she was sitting across from him. Why didn’t she come?

“How’s Tomi? I thought she’d come with you.”

Femi noticed the broad grin on Rotimi’s face as he wiped his hand on a napkin. Why was Rotimi smiling? He’d poke him in his ribs later.

Becky didn’t respond immediately. Instead she pushed a brown envelope in front of Femi. “That’s a cheque from dad.”

Femi’s eyes widened in surprise. “I wasn’t expecting this. I’ll send him a mail once I get home.”

Becky crossed her legs. “You were asking about Tomi. She is not in the best frame of mind right now.”

Femi frowned. What could this mean? Was something wrong with her? Becky sensed his worry.

“Oh no, it’s not something so serious. She’ll get over it.”

He brought out his phone. “I’m not sure I still have her number. I’d love to give her a call sometime.”

“That’s fine.”

Becky tapped her phone and scrolled down to Tomi’s number.

“Good job, boy.” Rotimi mouthed and winked at his friend.



“Babe, you have to move on.” Ayo stood at the foot of the bed, looking at her sister curled up under a duvet.

"You turned off your phones and refused to eat. Everybody is worried about you. If Daniel has chosen to walk away, then he doesn't deserve you."

Tomi hissed and got down from the bed. She reached for her phone on the bed and turned it on.

Ayo stared at her. "Please don't tell me you are going to call Daniel."

Tomi didn't respond. She dialed a number and waited for a response from the other end. When a voice came on, she cleared her throat.

"Good evening ma'am. This is Tomi, the fashion designer recommended by your daughter. I was wondering if I could come pick up the materials today."

"Ah, I've been trying your line for days." The voice on the other line said. 'Yes, you can. I'll send you the address to my house.'

"Thank you." Tomi responded and ended the call.

Ayo laughed. "This is what I'm saying. Keep building your career. We don't stay down at all. No matter what, we rise still."

Tomi walked to the bathroom. 'Ayo, I'm hungry."

"I prepared quaker oat."

Tomi made a face. "That's boring. I need something to lighten me up."

"French toast?"

"Your head is correct."

"I'm going to make it right away." Ayo got up and left the room.

From the bathroom, Tomi could hear her sister's voice. She was shouting excitedly.

"Mummy! Your daughter is back on her feet."

Later that afternoon, as Tomi stepped out of the gate that afternoon, Becky pulled up in front of her house.

She got down from the car. "Hallelujah o! My friend finally comes out of her bedroom."

Tomi didn't smile. "I don't even know why I spent a minute mourning over that idiot. He was no good to me anyway."

Becky raised her hand. 'This kind of attitude is not good o. Idiot keh? You have to forgive him and release him from your heart. Listen, all things work together for good. We trust God for the best okay?"

Tomi sighed. “Thank you jare. I can’t remember when last I prayed. My life has just been upside down.” She hugged Becky. “I’ve missed you. What have you been up to?”

“I was at Femi’s village over the weekend. His mother has been buried.”

“Oh, I should give him a call. How’s he taking it in?”

Becky shrugged. “I guess he is fine. He asked for your number. I gave it to him. Hope that’s fine with you.”

Tomi laughed. “After you’ve given him the number, you are now asking me if it’s fine.’ She opened the door and slid into passenger’s seat. “Drop me off at the junction *jare*, I have a business to run.”



“When are you finally going to hit Tomi with this question?” Rotimi asked Femi.

They were in Rotimi’s living room. Rotimi was playing with his son while his pregnant wife Chidera served Femi water melon.

Femi hesitated. “It’s so hard. What if she says No? I’m thinking I should wait for a little while.”

“It’s been six months since she returned to Ado.”

Seven months actually.” Femi corrected.

“You’ve been talking with her on the phone. You suppose don do small inspection.”

Femi rubbed his hand on his knees. “I know she is not in a relationship but I think she just sees me as a friend.”

Chidera chuckled. “Femi, ladies like Tomi will not be in the market forever. If God is prompting you to make a move, please obey. If another brother gets her because of your lack of faith, it is you who will lose. Talk to her. The worst you will hear is No. At least you made a move. That’s how my elder brother cried when two years after he’d kept his conviction away from the sister because he was indecisive, he saw her wedding invite.”

Femi’s eyes widened. “Eh! Are you serious?”

Rotimi threw a toy car on the floor. His son crawled and rushed to take it “*Siddon there.* Keep quiet, you hear?”

The following day, Femi gave Tomi a call. It was time to take the bull by the horn.

Fear gripped his heart again. The stains his mother had left in Garden Assembly. His mother's sexual involvement with Tomi's father. The way he left the church without any explanation. The hatred Garden Assembly had for his family. Would Tomi be able to look past that and accept him into her life? Would he even be worthy in her eyes?

"Hello Femi, what's up?" Tomi said.

Femi's heart raced. "I was wondering if you have a minute. I'd like to talk to you about something."

"That's fine. I'm at the shop. The painters are about finishing up with their work. We can stay here and talk or we can go somewhere else. Are you coming now?"

Femi sighed. "Yes."

"I'll be waiting."

Femi stared at his phone. What exactly would he say to Tomi? I love you? Will you marry me? He picked up a pen from the table and flipped to the back of his notepad. It was time for rehearsals.

CHAPTER 4

Tomi's thoughts ran in one direction. What was it Femi wanted to talk to her about? Was he finally going to ask her the question she'd been waiting to hear him say for the past five months?

She would never forget the day Becky paid her a visit two months after her breakup with Daniel. At the end of a long chat, Becky had looked at her and said,

"Can we pray together?"

It had been a simple two-minute prayer but it was the beginning of something different in her life. She'd felt a deep sense of God's love. It was the day she truly moved on.

The week following Becky's visit, Femi called to ask if they could grab a bite together. At first she'd hesitated. The last thing she wanted to do was engage in a discussion with an unmarried man. Then she remembered she had not spoken to him since the day she saw him at Becky's house.

I am going to give him an audience, just this once, she'd concluded. She had her plan set. Twenty minutes into conversation, she'd politely tell Femi she needed to return to work.

It hadn't worked that way. They had talked for hours and met the following day and the next weekend. There was a connection she couldn't explain. Something kept pushing her forward, nudging her heart towards him.

"God, I should be mourning my last relationship." She muttered one evening as she sat across from Femi. "How can I just fall in love just like that? Why am I enjoying this conversation?"

How long will you mourn for Saul?

She chuckled as the scripture landed on her heart. Does God always have this sense of humour?

So God, what are you saying? She thought.

Your David is here.

"Tomi, are you listening to me at all?" Femi asked, concerned.

She'd quickly brought her mind to the present. What had Femi been saying?

"I'm here by the grace of God."

"What was the last thing I said?"

Tomi laughed. "Don't use that line on me please."

Femi pretended to be annoyed. "Tomi, what was the last thing I said."

Tomi tapped her fingers on the table and tried to remember what Femi had said before she got lost in her own thoughts.

"Hmmm…You said you've registered for an online course in innovation and design." She shook her head. "No. That's not it. I remember clearly now. You were giving me the gist about a strategic idea you pitched to some igbo business men."

"To…mi." Femi said, dragging her name. "Tomi, I said that almost ten minutes ago."

Tomi covered her mouth with her hand to prevent laughter from escaping her mouth. Femi shook his head, a broad grin on his face.

"The moment you started chuckling, I knew I had lost you."

Tomi cleared her throat. "I'm sorry." Then she remembered something and started to laugh again.

Femi looked at her, puzzled. "What's funny now?"

Tomi cleared her throat and shifted in her seat. "Can you remember one time we came home from ASUU strike and we sat together at the back while Pastor Abel was preaching? I was giving you a gist about an incident that happened in school."

Femi grinned. "Yes, I clearly remember that story. Your roommate had spread her clothes on the line outside and when it started to rain, some girls rushed out of the hostel to the line including those who didn't spread clothes there."

Tomi clapped. "Femi your brain is sharp o. I can't believe you remember the story after ten years."

Femi leaned forward, "Let me finish first. If I'm able to tell this story correctly, you will take me out next weekend."

Tomi stretched out her hand. Femi took it. "Deal."

Femi rubbed his hand over his side beard, ready for the challenge. Tomi folded her hands and kept her gaze on him.

"Ok, so when your roommate got to where she dried her clothes, everything had disappeared including the napkin she used to dry her shoes. At first, she thought someone had helped packed them but after three days and the clothes were nowhere to be found, she brought an old woman to the hostel. The woman sat in the courtyard and laid out a red cloth in front of her. Then she brought out cowries and began to make incantations."

Tomi placed her hand on her head. "Oh God! You remembered all the details. I can't believe this."

Femi went on. "Your roommate took a bell and rang it continuously. Girls came out of their rooms to watch. She said if within two days, her clothes do not return to the line, the thief will run mad before the end of that week. Your roommate got all her clothes back that evening."

Tomi stood up and clapped. "Femi o!"

Femi was not done. "That's not all. Your roommate later told you that the old woman was just a beggar at the market where her mother sells palm oil. It was at that point that Pastor Abel stopped preaching and focused his attention on you."

Tomi shook her head, remembering. "I was so embarrassed. Then he asked me the same question you just asked me."

"What was the last thing I said?" Tomi and Femi chorused.

Femi tapped his forehead. "What answer did you even give him?"

Tomi laughed so loud that the man in a navy blue suit occupying the table beside her started smiling. "I said, when Satan comes through one door, don't bother to look for another door of escape. Jump down from the window."

Femi grinned. "Did he really say that?"

Tears were running down Tomi's face from too much laughter. "I don't even know. That was the first thing that came to my head."

And they had talked for hours until it was almost dark. As Tomi got to the room, she replayed their conversations and her heart was filled with so much warmth and joy. For five months she had watched and prayed, looking out for

warning signs but the more time they spent together, the stronger her love for him grew.

Was he going to ask her to marry him?

Femi arrived just as the painters finished their work. Tomi's heart fluttered at the sight of him. He hugged her and put a bottle of wine on the table. He looked around the shop.

"This is beautiful. I thought you wanted to design white circles around the edges of the wall."

Tomi stood beside him. "I changed my mind. I saw a design on Becky's laptop and fell in love with it. You think that's better?"

He shook his head. "Not at all. This is cool. I actually prefer this. The shop already welcomes your customers even before they meet you. It's lovely."

"Thank you."

Femi's gaze rested softly on Tomi's eyes. She held her breath praying silently he wouldn't hear the way her heart pounded fast. She needed a distraction and reached for a pair of scissors.

"You didn't go to work today?" Tomi asked.

Femi thrust his hands into his pocket. "My boss gave me the day off."

Tomi wanted to get to the root of the discussion. "You said you wanted to talk to me about something."

Colour drained from Femi's face. He looked into her eyes and lost the boldness to declare his intentions to her. The words he had rehearsed flew out of his head. Would she withdraw from him the way she had done when the news of their parent's affair broke out? The last thing he wanted was to lose this friendship that had become dear to his heart.

Femi shrugged. "Nothing really. I guess I was looking for a way to spend time with you."

Tomi looked away, disappointed. She had been lost in her own fairy tales. Femi felt nothing for her and just enjoyed the friendship they shared. She was probably not the kind of woman he wanted. Didn't Peju meet a man like that? After a year of friendship believing he was going to ask her out, he turned around to say he never had feeling for her.

Lord, I don't care! Tomi almost screamed out loud. I'm not going to allow this man toy with my emotions.

Femi uncorked the bottle and poured wine into two paper cups. He gave her a cup and held up his. "Tomi, what you've done in this shop is remarkable. I am positive you'll stand out here in Ado-Ekiti. You are a phenomenal woman and I am proud of you. I'm sorry we don't have glass cups. But we can make do with this. Let's make a toast."

Tomi dropped the cup on the table and rose to her feet. Femi sat there wondering what he had said that had made her upset.

Femi got up and went to her. "What's wrong?"

Tomi took a step backward. "I think we should just stay away from each other."

Femi's heart broke. Was Tomi pushing him away again? "Tomi, please. What have I done wrong?"

"We are getting too close and I like to define my relationships. I don't want to keep making assumptions and-" Tomi stopped and stared at the floor. "I just think we-"

Femi's eyes burned with desire. He held her chin. "Tomi, please look at me."

Tomi shook her head. She kept her face down.

"Tomi, I love you."

She raised her head and looked at him. "What did you just say?"

Femi sighed. "I know this isn't the formal way of proposing. I planned my speech before coming here but I can't remember any of the words I rehearsed. I didn't see any vision about you. I have no dream to narrate. I just know deep down in my heart you are the right person for me. I've known this before you left for Lagos. Tomi, I want to spend the rest of my life with you. Will you please pray about it?"

Tomi chuckled. "Why should I pray again when God has already given me the answer? Yes, Femi, I will marry you."

Femi stared at Tomi, unable to believe what he had just heard. Did she just say she would marry him? He grabbed the edge of Tomi's working table, unable

to suppress the joy in his heart. Tomi placed her hand on his shoulder. He turned to hug her.

"Thank you Tomi."

He wanted to say more but the words were stuck in his throat.

What they didn't realize was that the decision they made that day to get into a marriage union together would push them right in the center of the fiercest battle they'd ever encountered in their lives.

CHAPTER 5

"You want to marry Femi?" Tomi's mother stopped stirring the vegetable soup on the gas cooker and stared at her daughter. "Is this some sort of a joke?"

Tomi sighed. "Mum, I'm serious."

Her mother turned off the cooker. "Prepare the semovita and call Ayo to peel some oranges for your father."

Tomi sighed in frustration as she watched her mother walk out of the kitchen. The kitchen door opened again. Her mother reappeared at the entrance.

"Don't think about it Tomi. Kill whatever desire you have for that boy and look for a real man. You can't marry him."

Tomi left the pot of water on the sink and followed her mother out. "I'm an adult and I can make my decisions."

Her mother spun around. 'Have I ever imposed my decision on you? When you chose mass communication when I wanted you to study law, did I force you against your will? When you abandoned your Master's program and pursued fashion designing, did I object? Even when you moved to Lagos to start your business, didn't we all show up when your brand was launched? You are my darling daughter and I am proud of the decisions you make but on this one, you have decided like a child and I won't take it."

Tomi's mother climbed the stairs. Her father stood at the top, holding a newspaper. He waited until his wife walked past him before descending the staircase.

"What's going on between you and your mother?"

Tomi folded her hands. "She doesn't want me to marry Femi."

Her father looked confused. "Who is Femi?"

Tomi exhaled. "Sister Bimbo's son."

He gave Tomi a surprised look and walked quietly to the living room. Tomi was fuming as she entered her room. Her sister was the only person she could talk to. Ayo was pulling off her black suit when Tomi entered the room.

"How can my mother tell me I can't marry a man I love without giving me any concrete reason?"

Ayo looked at her sister. "Tomi, you know why mum is objecting to your relationship with Femi."

"Ayo, for goodness sake, the affair dad had with his mother happened ten years ago. Besides, what is Femi's fault in this?"

"He came from her loins. I think you are just excited about entering a new relationship. You need to relax and heal from Daniel's hurt so you don't jump into the same *wahala*. I strongly believe you are making a mistake. '

Tomi sat on the edge of the bed and clasped her hand against her forehead. Her family has rejected Femi. Not even one of them had her back except of course Seyi, her brother. He was in the boarding school. Even if he stood by her, how did that count? Tears stung her throat. She left the room for the veranda.

A tear dropped down her face as she ran her hands over the rusted railings.

Oh God, is this what we are going to face?

Her phone rang, jolting her out of her thoughts. She reached into her jean pocket and pulled out the phone.

"Hello Femi."

"Hi dearie. How are you?"

Hearing his voice brought fresh batch of tears. She couldn't speak. When she tried, her lips trembled.

"Sweetheart, are you crying."

Tomi wiped her tears and tried to control her emotions. "Femi, I-" She stopped, unable to get the right words out.

"I'm about leaving my boss' house, can we see?"

"Where?"

"Captain Cook."

"Ok, I'll be there soon."

Ayo came to the veranda as she ended the call. "Mummy said I should tell you dinner is ready."

"I'm not hungry." Tomi said and walked back into the house.

"Don't do this to yourself Tomi. You-"

Tomi turned around to face her. "I'm not hungry Ayo. Do you want to give me a lecture on that too?"

Annoyed, Ayo raised her hand. "Sorry o."

Tomi washed her face and dressed up to see Femi. When she got downstairs, her parents were in the dining room, eating.

"Where are you going to?" Her mother asked.

Tomi didn't even give her mother a glance before storming out of the house.

When she arrived at Captain Cook, Femi was sitting by the window, waiting for her. He rose as she approached him. When he pulled her into his embrace, she broke into tears. Femi held her, making no attempt to pull away.

Tomi raised her tear-smeared face from his shoulders. She stared into Femi's eyes. "I love you. Why can't my parents just understand that?"

A fierce love consumed his heart. He had expected this battle. He was ready to fight it, no matter how long it took.

He wiped the tears from Tomi's face. "I love you too. Much more than you can imagine."

Tomi narrated what had happened that day. "Nobody is supporting us. Not even my sister who always stands by me. I don't understand."

Femi didn't say anything for a while. He looked lost in his thoughts. Finally, he cleared his throat. "Tomi, I don't know how long this battle is going to last. We can only trust God for help. Are you ready for us to fight this together?"

It seemed the opposition by her parents was deepening Tomi's love for Femi. She sat there and knew she'd fight this no matter what.

"Yes. I am. I don't care about my selfish mother who wants to carry bitterness to the grave. What happened between your mum and my dad was a long time ago. Can't she just move past that?"

Femi leaned forward. "Tomi, we will not win this fight by anger. We will not respond with stubbornness and resentment. God already told me that love is how we win this. We follow only the instructions the Holy Spirit gives us. We'll only walk by the spirit as far as this matter is concerned." He paused. "Please,

don't argue with them. Remember that God is in control. We watch and see how God handles this."

Tomi held his hands. What she felt for Femi was deeper than what she'd ever experienced. It was more than the desire that warmed her blood every time he looked at her. When they started the relationship, her thoughts had been consumed with the way her wedding night would be. The kisses, the hugs, the cuddles, the affection, the romance. But this was deeper. She knew that no matter what, she would not let him go.

Tomi's relationship stayed on her mind all through the bible study at the church that evening. She found herself kneeling during the prayer time, praying passionately for God to intervene in her relationship.

Sort this out Lord. Touch the hearts of my parents.

At the end of the bible study, Peju tip-toed behind Tomi and covered her eyes.

"Peju." Tomi said, pulling her friend's hand away and turning to face her. They hugged.

"How were you able to tell?"

"Your small hands are hard to miss. They could barely cover my eyes."

Peju slapped her friend playfully on her back. "I've missed you."

"I'm still angry with you. You didn't tell me you were travelling out of the country."

Peju wrapped her hand around Tomi's waist. "*Ma binu joor*. It was urgent. Tomi, I would have missed that opportunity. You remember that application I made for one Telecommunications Workshop in Ghana. I didn't know I had been selected. The truth is, I didn't expect it. Apart from the fact that a lot of people applied for the program, my application was sent in like few hours before it closed. Barely three nights before the workshop, I got an acceptance mail from them. I had to rush to Lagos to get my documents ready."

"Good to have you back. Hope you enjoyed yourself."

"I did. When I saw the calibre of people that attended the meeting, I kept saying to myself, 'God, when will I get to this level.'"

Tomi laughed. "We will get there someday."

"So what have I missed? I can't wait to hang out with you and Becky."

Tomi almost spilled out the news of her relationship with Femi but she restrained herself. She remembered Peju had been upset the first time they had met Femi washing his boss' car at Becky's house. It was better to keep her out of the loop.

"Nothing much." Tomi hugged her again.

As they moved away from a group of nursing mothers and their crying babies, the personal assistant to the Pastor's wife approached the two ladies.

"I've been searching everywhere for you." The P.A addressed Tomi. "The Pastor's wife wants to see you."

Peju cast a questioning glance at her friend. Tomi shrugged and followed the P.A. They walked down the corridor of the auditorium to a smaller building behind that served as the secretariat.

The office of the Pastor's wife was sparsely furnished. Apart from a table with bibles and books on it, there was a brown bookcase and a water dispenser standing next to a brown leather sofa. Pastor Shade was fetching water from the dispenser when the P.A led Tomi in.

"She is here ma'am." The personal assistant announced.

Pastor Shade dismissed her with a wave of hand. Tomi remained standing. She already sensed why she had been called. Had her mother told the Pastor's wife about her decision to marry Femi?

"Sit down."

Tomi sat with her back straight. She wanted to be done with whatever this was. She waited patiently as the woman drank the water slowly and left the cup beside the dispenser.

Pastor Shade settled at the end of the sofa. "I have just being informed you got into a relationship with Femi."

Tomi remained silent.

"Tomi, what has gotten into your head? Why would you make such a foolish decision? Is it that Garden Assembly no longer has brothers that suit your taste?"

Tomi stared at the Pastor's wife, wanting badly to get up and walk out of the office

"I watched you grow up in this church." The Pastor's wife continued, her buttocks pushed backwards and her hand resting loosely on her thighs.

"I still remember when you were a tiny little girl. You and my daughter, Hannah, would fight to sit on my laps. I'd give you biscuit and then you'd jump down and run to play with Hannah at the back of the church auditorium. That sweet girl has become a beautiful young woman that I'm so proud of."

Tomi swallowed hard as her mind went down memory lane. This woman was dear to her heart. She was twelve when one day on her way out of the church's secretariat, Pastor Shade had pulled her aside. Her skirt was stained with blood. Scared and embarrassed, the woman had allayed her fears and shown her how to use a sanitary pad.

Tomi glanced at the Pastor's wife and wondered if she wasn't making a mistake with Femi.

"Tomi, when I say the decision you have taken is dangerous, I'm not just speaking off the top of my head. There are things you don't know about the family Femi came from. God has opened the eyes of our Pastor to see terrible things concerning his lineage. Do you think Sis Bimbo's death was ordinary? You don't want to spend your marital journey fighting ancestral wars. There are many things I can't say to you. My dear daughter, you must end this relationship. Is that clear?"

A lump stuck in Tomi's throat. What was she supposed to say? Her anger had dissipated and was replaced with fear. What if she was wrong? Can a woman of God really speak from the flesh? Did she hear God well? Her heart was torn in different directions.

"Thank you ma." Tomi said quietly, hoping this was the end of the conversation.

"So are you going to end this?"

Tomi smiled sadly. She didn't want to hurt this woman who had been part of her life since the day she was born.

Lord, please give me the right words, Tomi prayed.

"I'll take what you've said to the Lord. I believe He'll show me what to do."

Tomi thanked her again and quickly left the office. Instead of going home, she returned to the church auditorium. Some of the ushers were stacking up the

chairs while others swept. She kept her face straight ahead as she walked to the front of the altar. She knelt down.

"Lord, you are my strength. I can't do this on my own. Sometimes, I wonder if I actually heard you. The frailty of my heart scares me. This pressure is getting intense. Lord, please do something. If I am wrong, show me."

I will never leave you nor forsake you.

Those words filled her with calmness. As she walked home that evening, she knew with all assurance that she was not alone.



Tomi stood silent for a few seconds before opening the entrance door that led to the living room. Her mother was set to leave for a prayer vigil.

"Did you see the Pastor's wife after the bible study?"

Tomi stopped and looked at her mother. She had to stay calm.

"Yes I did." Tomi answered.

Tomi's mother smiled and stood in front of her daughter. "I hope she was able to convince you. Femi is not the kind of man that fits the future God is preparing for you. Be patient. The right man will come."

Tomi's lips trembled. She was boiling with anger. She opened her mouth to respond but she thought against it. She watched her mother leave the house and then slumped into the sofa.

Lord, when will this end?

"Tomi." A hand appeared on her shoulder.

Tomi jerked out of her thoughts. Her father was sitting beside her.

"Oh dad, I didn't see you walk in."

He smiled sadly. They sat there in silence, side by side, staring at the TV.

"I should have divorced your mother long ago." Tomi's father said, breaking the silence.

Tomi turned sharply, surprised to hear her father say those words. He suddenly looked tired and his face was pale. Tomi noticed strands of grey hair on one side of His face. His lips were cracked. Compassion filled her heart and she locked her hand with his.

"She never forgave me for what I did with Bimbo. For ten years, your mother laid my sin before me. She kept reminding me that I was a disgrace to this family. You and your siblings are the reason I stayed back." He went on. "I grew up with a single mother and I didn't want my children experiencing same. So I stayed. I lived through the mockery, the reminders of my shameful act because I loved you. Right now, your mother and I are strangers. I don't even know her anymore."

Tears stung Tomi's eyes. She leaned on her father's shoulder. "Oh dad."

Tomi raised her head and looked at her father again. How had she been under this roof and never for once noticed the gap between her parents. She should have seen the signs somewhere. How could he hold such pretense for such a long time?

"It was one huge mistake with Bimbo. I still regret the night we spent at the hotel room."

Tomi was curious to know the details. She knew by doing that, she'd be opening up old wounds. She decided to try all the same.

"Dad, what really happened?"

Her father looked at her. His eyes held pain and regret. "Your mother and I had a misunderstanding at that time. Our marriage was already hitting the rocks. We just couldn't understand each other and we kept growing farther apart. Then Bimbo showed up in church with her two kids. There was something about her that attracted men."

"She was stunning." Tomi said, remembering the times she had met Femi's mother. "She had such beautiful eyes. Her body shape is out of this world."

Her father let out a breath. "When reports about her affair with some of the men in church broke out, I saw her as one disgusting woman. I boasted once to the deacons that I would never fall for her."

He continued. "Bimbo called me one morning and was crying on the phone. She wanted to talk privately to me. Your mother was in the room that day. I wondered why I lied to her. I should have just told her who had called. I guess I did it because I knew at that time that many of the women in the church had turned their backs on her."

"So you went to see her?"

Tomi's father nodded. "Yes. I just wanted to hear what she had to say. As I drove to where we were to meet, I felt a restraint in my heart. I knew I shouldn't make that trip but I ignored the warning. Now I wished I had listened. After we talked, I started to feel this overwhelming desire to see her again. We started spending more time together." He stopped. "I hate remembering that night."

Tomi touched his hand. "Dad, you have to forgive yourself."

"Sometimes, I wished I had kept the secret of our affair to myself. When I told your mother what I'd done, she called me names and reported me to the pastor. I was made to stand before the workers to confess my sin. I wasn't angry at her for letting the church know about what I'd done. I was ready to take responsibility for my actions but what I don't understand is why she still cannot let it go."

Tomi saw tears in her father's eyes and her heart reached for his. He looked at her straight in the face.

"Tomi, if you want peace to reign in this house, you must let Femi go. Sometimes, we make sacrifices for family's sake. We don't always marry who we love if it's going to affect the ones we love. Just when I thought things were getting easier with your mother, your relationship with Femi brought out the demons in her. Please my dear daughter, if you really love me, leave him. There are wounds in the past that'll never heal."

Tomi stood up and left the sitting room, shivering. Her world was tumbling down and ripping apart the little hope she had left. She found her way to the veranda and sat on the floor.



Femi dialed Tomi's number the second time. It rang and stopped. He dialed the number again.

"Baby, please pick your call." He whispered, praying silently.

No response. He leaned against the body of his boss' car and stared at the phone screen. Why wasn't Tomi answering her calls? Last night, when he called and she didn't pick up, he thought she'd slept. Since he got out of bed in the morning, he had tried her lines several times.

"Femi, good morning."

Femi raised his head to see Becky walking towards her car dressed in a black blouse over a flowery skirt. Her black high heels gave her a confident look but when Femi went over to meet her, he noticed her eyes were puffy.

"Becky good morning. Hope you slept well."

"Not exactly." Becky responded.

Had she been crying? Femi moved closer. "Becky, are you okay?"

Becky forced a smile. "Don't mind the way I'm looking this morning. I just need some more rest."

Femi rested his hand on the door as Becky climbed into the car. "Becky, when was the last time you spoke with Tomi."

"A couple of minutes ago." Becky took a long glance at his face, wondering if she should have held her tongue. When Tomi called, she had said nothing about any misunderstanding with Femi.

"What's going on?"

Femi smiled and stepped back. "Everything is fine. Have a beautiful day."

He stood there as Becky pulled out of the compound. His thoughts went back to Tomi again.

His phone rang.

He thrust his hand quickly into his pocket and reached for his cellphone. Finally, Tomi had decided to return his calls. He was disappointed when a strange number appeared on his screen.

"Hello."

The voice at the other end sounded excited. "My name is Caleb. Am I speaking with Femi Akintunde?"

Femi tried to place the name with a face. "Yes. Mr Caleb, what can I do for you?"

"Do you attend Garden Assembly?"

Femi hesitated. "Not anymore."

"Can you remember one Caleb, an SS 3 student you led to Christ about nine years ago?"

The name immediately clicked. Femi's eyes widened. "Caleb!"

"Yes sir."

Femi covered his mouth with his hand. “What a surprise.”

He remembered the week he had returned for the semester break and Caleb had approached him after the first day of the youth conference. He was tired with his life. He wanted Jesus to take away the emptiness he felt in his heart. He’d led the boy to Christ that day and groomed him until few months later when Caleb’s father got a political appointment in Abuja and had to move his family away from Ado.

“Where are you now?”

“I’m in Lagos.” Caleb responded in a confident voice. “I run a human resource consulting firm. Yesterday morning, while we sorted out CVs, I walked over to the table of one of my employees to get a quick update and my eyes went to her desktop and boom! Right on her screen was your CV. I asked her to forward it to me because I needed to confirm if it was truly you.”

Femi didn’t know what to say. “This is unbelievable. I’ve lost count of the job applications I’ve written.”

“Can you make it to Lagos before the end of the week? We really need to talk. I’ll book a hotel room and cover every other expenses. As regards getting a job in business strategy and innovation, I’ll handle that. So when should I expect you?”

Femi thought he was dreaming. Could this be real? “Can I get back to you shortly?”

“That’s fine. You can reach me on this number. Bro Femi, you can’t even understand what your impact in my life has done to my Christian walk. I can’t wait to see you again.”

When Caleb ended the call, Femi folded his hands and started laughing.

“God, is this how you work?” He muttered to himself.

He couldn’t believe his days as a driver were almost over. He was going to miss his boss who had become a father to him but it was time to step into the next phase of his life.

Femi’s phone beeped. He tapped his message inbox. Tomi.

Hi dear, can we see this evening. I’m sorry I’ve not been picking your calls. I’ll explain when we see. I love you.

He smiled and tapped on the blank message box. He started to tell her how worried he had been when he couldn't reach her but he stopped and deleted the words.

I love you too Tomi.



"Femi, what are we going to do? We are locked out on every side." Tomi put her hand beneath Femi's arm as they walked towards a concrete slab at Fajuyi park. Femi waited until they were seated before directing his attention at her.

"We pray and trust."

"We've been praying. Nothing is happening."

Femi touched her cheek softly. "We walk by faith and not by sight." He stretched out his legs. "What do you say to morning devotions every day and fasting once a week."

"I'm in. Femi, sometimes, my faith just fails me. There are times I wonder if I'm actually the right helpmeet for you."

Femi stood up and turned around. He stopped in front of her, grinning broadly. He spread out his arms. "Can't you see that I'm growing fatter and my skin is glowing more and more? My heart is at rest Tomi. I'm so happy."

Tomi laughed. "I'm happy too. It's like we should just get married tomorrow." He returned to his seat beside her. "There is gist."

Femi told Tomi about Caleb's call. This was an opportunity for him to get the exposure he needed to pursue his dream. He'd also be able to pay some of her bills. Tomi was not happy with the news and she didn't make any attempt to hide her disapproval.

"You want to pick a job in Lagos and leave me here in Ado?"

Femi was lost for words. He'd expected her to be happy. Didn't she want him to leave the driving job for something better?

Femi's expression was grim. "If I get this job, I promise I'll be coming to Ado every weekend."

Tomi flared up. “It’s not enough! You can’t just leave me to fight this battle alone. I need you here Femi. For goodness sake, you can see for yourself what we are already going through. Only God knows how long it is going to last.”

Femi touched her shoulder. Tomi pulled away and folded her hands.

“You can’t leave me here. Look for a job here. Besides, working in Lagos will sap your energy and leave you depressed. I don’t care how much you are going to be paid there.”

Femi clenched his teeth. Anger rose in his heart. Why was Tomi selfish? This was a great opportunity for him. He had to convince her he was making the right decision.

“Tomi, I’m tired of Ado. I don’t want to stay here.”

Tomi eyes held his. “Femi, please. I need you. Let’s get married first and then we can do whatever we want. I will gladly follow you to Lagos.”

Why can’t Tomi understand? He might never get this kind of opportunity again.

The silence between them dragged on until Tomi stood up and looped the strap of her bag over her shoulder.

“It’s obvious you have made up your mind. Just know that I cannot fight this battle alone. The lions here are ready to tear us apart. If you leave, I don’t know how much longer I can hold on.”

Tomi walked away from the park. When she turned, Femi was sitting where she’d left him. He didn’t look away.

Tomi walked faster, the turmoil in her heart threatening to explode.



Femi sat on his bed, confused. “Jesus, what am I supposed to do?”

His boss had given him the permission to take the trip to Lagos. Tomi didn’t want it.

He was torn between his love for Tomi and moving on with his plans.

He sighed and reached for his phone. He would cancel the appointment with Caleb. Tomi needed his support now that her parents wanted him out of the way.

Caleb's number didn't go through. As he tapped his phone screen to dial the number again, Tomi's call came in.

"Hello Tomi."

Tomi was silent for some seconds. "Oh now I'm Tomi abi? Not sweetheart. Not dearie."

Femi smiled, his heart leaping at the playfulness in Tomi's voice. "Baby mi. My one and only sweetheart. The woman who makes my heart go gigi."

Tomi chuckled. "Keep whining me."

"You know I'm not. Femi that couldn't sleep properly after you left for Lagos. I was always thinking about you. I'd look at your pictures and wished you'd just call for once. After a while I had to delete your contact and everything that reminded me of you just so I could get my sanity back. And then you came back, and I proposed and you said Yes!"

Tomi laughed softly. "I love you Femi and I'm sorry about the way I reacted at the park."

"I'm also sorry for not seeing things from your end. We made a commitment to fight this together. I'll tell Caleb I won't be able to come to Lagos again."

"Sweetheart, no." Tomi protested. "Please go and see him. I feel strongly this is part of God's plan. I want the best for you."

"Are you sure?"

"Yes."

"Thank you. I will-"

Femi stopped talking when he heard his sister shouting his name and rapping on his bedroom door. "Can I call you back? Bukola is at my door."
'I'll be waiting.' Tomi said and hung up.

When Femi opened the door, his sister was standing at the entrance, tears streaming down her face. In her hand was a brown diary. He stepped aside for her to enter his room.

Bukola faced Femi. Her temper was at full steam and her lips quivered as she spoke. "Mummy had nothing to do with Stella's abortion. She was set up. Can you imagine?"

For one moment, Femi was confused. "What are you talking about?"

Bukola wiped her tears and leaned on the wall. “I’ve been clearing out mum’s belongings. Today, as I unpacked the last box, I saw this diary at the bottom of the box.” She stopped. ‘You remember Pastor Shola’s daughter.”

Femi was impatient. He wanted to get to the end of the story. “Yes, Stella. Mum helped her get an abortion.”

“Remember it was because of Stella that she was excommunicated from Garden Assembly.”

Femi nodded. “So what happened?”

Bukola flipped to the last page of the diary and held it out to her brother.

“Mum didn’t do it. Stella confessed to her that it was Tomi’s mother that planned with her mother to get the abortion and-” The words choked her throat. “Just read it for yourself. I’m going to do everything in my power to deal with that church. And you see that god forsaken useless mother of Tomi, she will reap everything she has done to mummy! She is a stupid, useless-”

“Will you just stop ranting and let me read!” Femi shouted.

Bukola folded her hand and stayed silent. Femi held the diary and began to read his mother’s last entry.

19th March, 2015.

I have done some terrible things in my life, yes. But convincing Stella to carry out that abortion, I had no part in it.

I still remember the morning before I was excommunicated from Garden Assembly. I woke up feeling empty. I wanted to start a new life with God and I wondered if he’d forgive me for all my sinful acts. In a way, I felt connected to Mary Magdalene, the woman in the bible possessed by demons. I figured if Jesus could reach out to her, there might still be hope for me. Maybe the demons driving me to my ruin would finally leave me alone.

It was with this hope that I went to church that morning. I’d decided to see my Pastor after the service to seek for help. I got to church only for the

Pastor to call my name and demand that I stand before the congregation. Scared to my wits, I looked above their heads, my heart pounding loudly. I didn't know what was going on. My thoughts flew in all directions.

Then the Pastor called me a wicked woman. He said I had been sent from the pit of hell to destroy the church. He read a scripture and said like Paul commanded the church to cast out the man who slept with his father's wife, he would have to follow the bible and send me out lest I destroy what he had suffered to build.

The part that weakened me was when he said I had taken Stella for an abortion and she was in a critical condition at the hospital. It would take a miracle for her to survive. It was at that point I started crying. That would be the fourth time I'd been accused falsely without any opportunity to defend myself. The head of the security department was standing at the door, ready to lead me out. I was told never to return to the church again.

Femi stopped reading and bowed his head. Tears filled his eyes as the memory of that day came rushing into his head.

When he got home that day, he'd been so angry and had lost his temper. He told his mother what a disgrace she had been and how she had subjected him to a life of shame. His mother had stood before him, tears running down her face. She had told him she didn't take Stella for an abortion. She didn't do some of the things the church had accused her of. He'd not believed her.

Femi went to the window and drew back the curtain. It was dark outside and the air was still. Everywhere was silent except for the turmoil going on in his heart.

Femi, I didn't do it. I didn't take Stella for that abortion.

His mother's words rang loudly in his ears. Why hadn't he believed her?

He returned to the bed and picked up the diary. Bukola left the entrance and sat beside him as they looked down at the open book on Femi's lap.

After I was sent out of the church, I wanted to commit suicide. I was just tired of my life. But each time I thought of it, Femi showed up in my room and I felt a flicker of hope. Why that boy loves me so much, I can't understand. He had a right to stay away completely. Of course, I haven't been an example of a good mother. But he stayed. My daughter was there too. The love I saw in their hearts weakened my resolve to end my life. They were with me even when cancer began to eat into my bones.

Before my sickness became full blown, Stella came to see me at the school where I worked. She was in tears. She said her mother and Sister Folake had helped her with the abortion and she had been restless since she heard I had been falsely accused. She ran away before I could say a word. I'm in tears right now. Sis Folake finally got her pound of flesh. Did she have to hurt me this way for what I did with her husband? I have to stop here. My hands are shaking.

Femi turned to the next page. Blank. He flipped back to the last entry and looked at the date. She had written it shortly before she was rushed to the hospital where she had died.

"I miss mum." Bukola said, wrapping her arm around her brother's shoulder. "I really do."

Femi couldn't hold back the tears. Bukola was crying aloud, her body trembling. He wanted to comfort her but he couldn't even pull himself together. He sat there with her and wept.

Femi pulled away slowly and turn to his sister. "Bukky, can I be alone please?"

Bukola nodded quietly and left the room. Femi reached for his phone and dialed Tomi's number. She answered on the first ring.

"Sweetheart, I was almost falling asleep. I thought you won't call again."

Femi exhaled, rising to his feet. "Tomi, I can't do this."

"What are you talking about?"

He leaned against the wall. "I want us to end this relationship. Let's go our separate ways please."

Tomi hesitated. "Femi why? At least I deserve to know the reason."

There were so many reasons, some he couldn't understand himself. How could he live with himself knowing what his future mother-in-law had done to his mother? He wanted to cut ties with Garden Assembly. It was time to leave his past behind and get on a new start.

"Tomi, marriage can't work for us. That's all I have to say. I'm really sorry."

"Alright." Tomi said quietly and hung up.

Femi felt his heart shattering to pieces. He returned to bed but couldn't sleep. He buried his head in his pillow and still didn't get the comfort he craved. He pushed the pillow aside and went to the living room. As he took the remote and pointed it at the TV, the light went out.

He hissed and went back to bed. He lay there, staring at the ceiling, and into the darkness.



Tomi put the phone down and sat with her back against the wall. Few minutes ago, her relationship with Femi was perfectly fine and the next minute, the relationship was over. She closed her eyes and let out a breath slowly as though she'd been holding it for weeks.

"Are you okay?" Ayo asked, looking up from the novel she was reading. Tomi forced a smile. She took her cellphone from the bed and went to the bathroom.

Sitting on the sparkling floor of the bathroom, she bent her head as tears slipped down her cheeks.

"God, can you show me what's going on? Did I miss it somewhere? Oh God, I need you."

She lay on the floor. She tapped her music player and allowed songs play randomly on her phone.

Tomi suddenly felt her body go hot. She turned to lie on her back, holding her chest as she felt heaviness descend on her heart. Then in a flash, she saw Femi hunkered down under a tree. He looked troubled as he held his head. Tomi opened her eyes and sat up.

Had she just seen a vision of the man she loved? What was going on with Femi? He looked like he was in a lot of pain. Should she call him? What was Femi not telling her? Why this strong burden?

She knelt and prayed for him as if her life depended on it. Her chest tightened with each incoherent word that left her lips. Tomi stayed there until she felt light and the burden lifted. A wave of peace settled in her heart and with it came a deep love for Femi.

Relieved, she left the bathroom. Ayo was still lying on the bed, engrossed in the novel. She raised her head and looked at her sister

"Tomi, you were in the bathroom a long time. Are you sure you are okay?"

Tomi smiled. Her heart was filled with an unspeakable joy. "Yes, I'm fine."

"I don't understand us these days." Ayo said, frowning. "We don't keep secrets from each other. But now it seems you don't tell me things again."

Tomi didn't know what to say. Since her sister's disapproval of Femi, their flow in communication had experienced several bumps.

"Ayo I'm sorry you feel this way. I guess we've both become really busy with work. We should hang out sometime, don't you think?"

Ayo didn't respond. She turned her attention back to her novel.

"Goodnight sis." Tomi said, rubbing her sister's leg affectionately.

"Good night." Ayo mumbled.

CHAPTER 6

Tomi's heart pounded as she approached Becky's house. A month had passed since she'd spoken to Femi. Did he finally get the job in Lagos or was he still working for Becky's father?

She rubbed her palm as she stepped past the security guard who had opened the gate for her. Her eyes swept the garage for any sign of Femi. Disappointed, she headed towards the main building and it was then she saw a dog running towards her.

Tomi screamed and ran out of the compound.

"Tomi, come in, he doesn't bite." A man said, from inside the house. She recognized the voice. It was Becky's father.

The security man stood at the gate, laughing. He motioned for Tomi to come in. He was obviously enjoying the fear in her eyes.

"Oh you think this is funny." Tomi shouted at him.

He laughed again, harder this time. "Aunty, enter. The dog no be African dog. He no get teeth."

Tomi tip-toed into the house. At a corner, Becky's father rubbed his hands over the dog's fur. How can a dog this big not bite?

The dog sighted Tomi and slowly began to move towards her. Tomi drew back. Becky's father called the dog's name. It wagged his tail and followed his master to the back of the building. Tomi ran into the house and up the stairs that led to Becky's room.

"Becky, why didn't you tell me you now have a dog?" Tomi said, panting as she approached Becky's bed. She sat slowly on the bed when she noticed Becky's tear-smeared face.

"What's wrong?"

Becky blew her nose into a white handkerchief. “I should have told you this.” She paused. “The wedding has been cancelled. My relationship is over.”

Tomi’s eyes widened. What was it with all these break up stories? She felt her heart weaken at the news. She had come to receive encouraging words from her friend only to be hit with this sad news.

“Becky, we are preparing for your wedding.” Tomi’s eyes went to the wedding gown still hanging on the wall. Becky followed the direction of her eyes and returned her gaze to her friend. “What happened?”

“I called it off. I told him I couldn’t go on with it.”

“Becky, how could you do such a thing?”

“Fear is a terrible thing Tomi. I’m glad I did. It hurts with the investment I have put in it but I know I did the right thing. So many things were fundamentally wrong with the relationship. I kept convincing myself that I was more spiritual and I’d change him but I felt drained every time. Yesterday, I heard he has moved on with another lady and I was wondering, so fast?”

Tomi wrapped her arms around her friend. She wondered if she should tell her about Femi. “Everything will be fine.”

When she pulled away, Becky looked at her. “How’s Femi?’
Tomi played with her fingers. “Femi broke up with me.”

Becky stared at her friend, astounded. “We need to pray. I’m not liking all these break up stories. What’s going on? But this is rather shocking. I didn’t expect this from Femi.”

Tomi stared at the empty chocolate box at the foot of the bed. ‘I didn’t expect it too. Becky-"

The door opened and Peju walked in. Tomi stopped talking. Peju noticed the halt in conversation and wondered why they stopped when she entered.

Peju looked at Becky, then at Tomi. “What were you ladies talking about?”

Tomi shrugged. “Nothing really. We were just talking about break-ups.”

Relaxed, Peju rushed to Becky’s side. “I’m so sorry Becky. When I saw your message yesterday, I felt really bad.”

Becky looked at her friends. “I should have carried you ladies along when it happened. I just wasn’t ready to talk about it then. When I heard he had moved

on, I just lost it." She glanced at Tomi. "You have to tell her about your relationship. You can't keep hiding it from her."

Peju shot Tomi a disappointing look. When Tomi turned her face away, Peju rose and stood in front of the mirror. She felt hurt that her best friend could confide in Becky and keep secrets away from her. She reached for a hair brush from the table and turned slightly in Tomi's direction. "You don't have to tell me anything. Your secret is your business."

Becky laughed. "What is wrong with you?"

Peju was clearly upset. "It's the truth. If she doesn't want me to know what's going on in her life, that's fine."

Tomi went to her and hugged her from behind. "You know I love you right?"

Peju stared at her friend from the mirror. Tomi's eyes were teary. Peju turned to face her. Her eyes were filled with compassion for her friend. Whatever this was had to be serious.

Tomi smiled sadly. "Femi and I got into a relationship when you were away in Ghana." Tomi watched for any sign of disapproval from Peju's face. "I didn't know how to tell you because of the way you reacted when you saw me talking with him."

Peju sighed deeply. She remembered the day they had walked into Becky's house and her friend had seen Femi cleaning Becky father's car. Tomi had screamed in excitement and gone over to meet him. Peju had been irritated. She had immediately expressed her disappointment when Tomi came into Becky's room.

Peju pulled her into her arms. "I'm so sorry. I don't know what got over me that day. When I got home, the Holy Spirit corrected me."

Tomi returned to the bed. "Newsflash. He broke up with me."

Peju looked confused. She sat on the bed beside Tomi. "Babe, It's simple. Go back to God and listen for the next step. Find out his mind concerning the situation."

Tomi's phone buzzed. She reached into her bag and pulled out the phone. It was a message from her mother.

We are at your shop. Where are you?

Tomi read the message again. We? Who had her mum brought to her fashion studio?

She held her handbag. “Ladies, I have to leave for my studio now. Mum is waiting for me.” She squeezed Becky’s hands. “We’ll all be fine.”



“Here she is.” Tomi’s mother said as soon as Tomi got down from the taxi.

Tomi noticed there were two cars parked in front of her studio. A white Lexus and a Blue Camry. Standing beside her mother was a tall dark woman in her late fifties. Mama Dedun was her mother’s close friend and the former head of the women fellowship at Garden Assembly.

“Good afternoon ma’am.” Tomi greeted Mama Dedun

“How are you my dear?” She responded, pushing back her round glasses. The edges of her hair were all gone and it gave her head a funny look. Her buggy eyes danced behind the spectacles. “I was just telling your mother how impressed I am about your workspace. It’s so beautiful. In fact when I get home, I’m going to direct all my friends here. You are one fashion designer of a kind.”

Tomi kneeled slightly. “Thank you ma.”

Tomi’s mother opened the door of the white lexus. “Come and say hi to my daughter.”

A fine young man with a short goatee stepped out of the car. Tomi peered closely at him. She covered her mouth in surprise and ran to hug him.

“Segun!”

The women stood aside, watching, a broad smile spread across their faces.

Tomi hit Segun’s shoulder playfully. “I shouldn’t even be talking to you. You just disappeared out of sight. It’s been how many years? No call. No text.”

Segun laughed. “I’m so sorry.”

Tomi couldn’t contain the joy she felt seeing her friend again. Segun was Mama Dedun’s first son. They’d been very close friends at Garden Assembly until he left for Kaduna to stay with his father.

“Dedun and I will be going shopping for a couple of hours. You guys have a lot to catch up on.”

Tomi watched the two women enter the blue Toyota Camry and drive away. As she turned her attention back to Segun, the car stopped and her mother came out.

"Tomi!"

Tomi turned. Her mother gestured for her to come. She went to meet her. "Be nice to him. This is a responsible man. He'll make your life beautiful. I don't want you talking to him about Femi. Is that clear?"

Tomi folded her hands. "Are you arranging marriage for me? I thought we left that in the 17th century."

"I am your mother. I believe I know what's best for you." She waved her daughter away. "Go have fun with your husband-to-be." She slide back into the car. The driver sped away.

When Tomi returned to meet Segun, she became uncomfortable. She liked Segun a lot but not once had she imagined taking the friendship to an intimate level. Even if Femi married someone else, she wasn't sure she would settle for Segun.

"Those women are trying to set us up." Segun said, looking into her eyes.

"Exactly! I don't even understand them."

Segun glanced long at Tomi. "Maybe it's a good thing. Marriage in the family is safe. We grew up in the same church, our mothers are bosom friends."

Tomi's heart raced. Segun couldn't be thinking of marrying her. "Who says I have to marry someone who attends my church. That's not how God works. There are people who marry from the same denomination and their marriages have crashed. The important thing is to seek God's leading. He knows the end from the beginning."

Segun laughed. "This defensive tone of yours. You are definitely in love with someone."

Tomi tried to stay calm. Why couldn't she get Femi out of her mind? Wasn't it time for her to move on with her life? Segun might just be an alternative. The romantic feelings may come later. She imagined telling her parents of her decision to marry Segun. They'd be thrilled by the news.

Segun placed his hand on her shoulder. "There is someone right?"

Tomi wanted to say No. She wanted to push Femi out of her mind and believe something can work out with Segun. But Femi stayed on her heart and she found herself nodding at his question.

"I was joking about the marriage in the family thing. I wanted to see your reaction."

Tomi looked at him. "Are you seeing someone?"

Segun hooked his thumb into his pocket. "Can I really say I'm seeing someone? I have been chasing this babe for a year now. She's just playing hard to get. I really love her."

Tomi felt relieved. The tension she felt earlier was gone. Segun opened his phone and showed her a picture of a beautiful fair skinned lady standing by the beach.

"I don't know why she keeps saying no. I bought gifts, sent money to her several times, stayed with her in the hospital when she was admitted. I don't even know how else to prove that I'm serious about her."

"She might come around. Don't lose hope."

They walked side by side, laughing as they entered her fashion studio. Tomi asked one of her apprentice to get a drink. Another lady pulled out a stool from behind one of the sewing machines.

Segun sat down. "How's Peju, Becky and all those your friends? I've missed Garden Assembly."

"Peju is fine. Becky too. Most of our friends no longer attend Garden Assembly. Some relocated from Ado and others joined other churches. There are more new faces now."

Segun looked around. "This place is really cool. I'm glad you found your path. You make men's wears too?"

Tomi pointed at some clothes hanging on the wall. "I just finished that for a client in Lagos."

Segun looked closely at a blue atiku top embroidered with white designs. "This is really good."

"Thank you." Tomi said, smiling.

"What of Femi? He has been on my heart since I returned."

The question caught Tomi off guard. Why did Femi have to come into this conversation?

"I heard he has relocated to Lagos." Tomi said.

Segun frowned. "And I was looking forward to seeing him again." He stood up. "I know you are very busy but it'll be fun to go somewhere to talk. Take some hours off work jare. We can drive around and look for a nice place to sit and chat."

Tomi smiled. "Not a bad idea."

She glanced at one of her apprentice sitting behind one of the sewing machines.

"I'll be back soon."

They held hands and walked back to the white lexus.



Sunday morning. Pastor Akintola stood on the pulpit in a black suit and smiled warmly at the congregation gathered in the Garden Assembly auditorium.

"Good morning church." He started in a loud voice. He got a mumbled response as members reached for their notebooks and bibles.

The Pastor flipped through his notes as he spoke "Turn to your neigbour and ask him, are you ready for the word?"

The back door opened. Bukola entered, dressed in a torn jean and white tank top. Her hair was dyed red and her makeup heavy. She walked straight to the altar but was stopped midway by an usher. Bukola glared at the lady who kept pointing her attention to empty seats at the back of the auditorium.

Pastor Akintola hesitated for a minute, his gaze resting on Bukola. Quickly, he shifted his attention to the other side of the hall. "Today we'll be continuing with our series on Consecration. Will you please turn your bibles to Matthew chapter five verse forty-eight."

Bukola laughed bleakly and looked around. Some of the members were staring at her.

"I'll be back." She whispered and retreated. As Bukola approached the exit, she stopped.

"Is this not Mama Folake?' She muttered under her breath, her eyes resting on a woman sitting towards the edge of the back row. In Garden Assembly, it was forbidden to refer a woman old enough to mother you as 'sister.' You either call her 'mummy' or you put 'mama' before her first name.

Mama Folake quickly bent over her bible, flipping through it as if confused of where the book of Matthew was in the bible.

Bukola took the bible from her laps. She flung it across the hall and grabbed the hem of her purple buba lace.

"You are a liar! You set my mother up. It was you who took Stella for that abortion! You are wicked! No wonder your husband ran into my mother's arms."

The words struck. A slap landed on Bukola's face.

"You slapped me?" Bukola yelled at Tomi's mother but didn't release her grip on her buba. Before she would retaliate, the head of the ushering department, a huge man with a stony face, lifted Bukola from the floor and threw her over his shoulder like she was a bag of cement. He walked out of the auditorium.

Bukola kept shouting. "My mother is innocent! This church will rot in hell!"

Some women hurried towards Tomi's mother.

"Sis Folake, are you alright?"

"That family is really from the pit of hell." Another woman said.
Another patted her gently on her shoulders. Mama Dedun rubbed her back. Mama Folake smiled and gently assured them she was fine.

Tomi was sitting two rows away and had watched the drama unfold between Bukola and her mother. As she turned her attention back to the Pastor, she couldn't get Bukola's words out of her mind.

Had her mother really been involved in the abortion?

CHAPTER 7

"Sweetheart, you've not spoken to me in a week." Paul, Tomi's father, said softly to his wife.

"I have told you to stop using pet names for me when we are alone in the room. Paul, My name is Folake."

Tomi's father sighed. His patience was fast sipping away. How long would his wife continue to treat him this way? "I'm sorry. Folake, what is it? Why the silent treatment?"

Folake didn't respond immediately. She pulled out the bed sheet and replaced it with a clean one.

"Please talk to me." Paul pleaded.

"Why should I talk to you?" Folake yelled. "What were you thinking when you slept with Bimbo. I was not enough for you, was I? Just look at the way your sins are catching up with you. Your daughter returns home from Lagos and says it is that whore's son she wants to marry. Thank God Segun arrived in time to put some sense into her head."

Paul stared at his wife, his eyes full of tears. When would she stop punishing him for his sins? "Folake-"

Folake raised her hand. "I've told you never to interrupt me when I'm talking." She paused. "Did you see what happened on Sunday? Did you see the embarrassment your evil deed brought me? That stupid and useless daughter of the prostitute you slept with had the guts to confront me. Paul, this is not how I planned my marriage to be. You destroyed all my hopes, my plans, everything! Of all the women in Garden Assembly, why would you even think of picking a public toilet?"

Paul moved away from the bed and settled in the cream leather sofa. He turned on the TV and went to the sports channel. Folake was still sitting on the bed, fuming.

"This is what you always do. Run away whenever I confront you with your sins. But I will not stop speaking my mind until you get it. You are just too stubborn." Folake hissed and left the room.

Paul turned off the TV and sat quietly, a wave of sadness hitting his chest.



Tomi reached for a box of cereal on the dining table and poured some into the small bowl in front of her. As she ate, she scrolled through the pictures on her phone. She stopped at a picture where Femi stood beside her, gazing into her eyes as she looked straight into the camera. She recollected the morning before they went to the studio to take the pictures. Femi had held her hand and said,

"Tomi, no matter what happens, I'll always be there for you.'

Tomi smiled sadly. How easy it was to make promises at the height of emotions. What good was his promise now?

Ayo glided into the dining room in a black suit and a pair of high-heeled shoes. She moved to the other side of the dining room with a tray of bread and fried eggs. She fell silent, keeping her gaze down at her meal.

Tomi pushed the tray away from her sister. Ayo raised her head, frowning.

Tomi rolled her eyes. "Smile *joor.* Why are you frowning?"

Ayo was not in the mood to play. "I'm going to work Tomi. Please let me eat." She took the tray and continued with her meal.

As Tomi reached for the plate again, Ayo pushed her sister's hand away. "Tomi, stop!"

"Later you will be complaining. I'm playing with you now and you are pushing me off."

Ayo forced a smile. 'Not this morning *abeg*. I have a matter in court and I have to get to the office first.'

Tomi pretended to be annoyed. "Okay. God knows I'm trying my best."

Ayo looked at her and shook her head. She wanted to say something but stopped when their mother joined them in the dining room.

"Mum, what will you like to eat?" Tomi asked as soon as her mother was settled beside her.

"Dedun and I are on a three day fast." Folake answered without looking at her daughter. She turned her attention to Ayo. "I hope your father has something to eat."

Ayo pointed at the fridge beside the ironing board. "There is a loaf of bread over there."

Folake looked at the fried eggs in front of Ayo. "Hope you didn't prepare fried eggs for him. Your father and I have stopped eating fried foods."

"No I didn't." Ayo responded, gulping down the remaining coffee. She set the empty cup down and belched.

Since the incident that took place in church the previous week, Folake had been withdrawn and it had bothered Tomi.

"Mum, I'm sorry about what happened on Sunday." Tomi said.

Her mother looked at her, smiling. "It's okay. I'm just glad you can now finally see the reason why I insist you stay away from Bimbo's children. All they bring is trouble. Segun is just the right person for you. When you stay under the right covering, things will go well."

Ayo cleared her throat and turned to her sister. "Ehn, so you and Segun started something and I'm not aware about it?"

Tomi shook her head. "Don't mind mummy. There is nothing going on."

"Yet." Folake completed Tomi's statement. "We will see to it that something comes out of this."

Tomi sighed. "Mum, no matter what, I can't just make a choice like that. I'll have to pray and talk to God about it."

Folake touched her daughter's shoulder. "Dedun and I have been praying. In fact the reason for our prayer meeting this week is for God to confirm his word. We are convinced about this. But I understand. Pray about it with an open mind."

As her mother stood up, Tomi decided to ask the question that had been eating at her heart.

"Mum, what Bukola said about the abortion. Did you have anything to do with it?"

Folake looked as though her daughter had struck a blow on her face. Ayo gathered her dishes and hurried to the kitchen.

Tomi grabbed her handbag and stood up to leave. "I'm sorry. That was a stupid question to ask."

Later that evening when Segun came to pick her up from the fashion studio, Tomi sat beside him in the car, wondering why her mother had not given her a straightforward answer. Was she hiding something? Or was her mother just annoyed that her daughter could entertain thoughts of her carrying out such an act?

"Something is bothering you." Segun asked as he pulled away from Tomi's fashion studio.

Tomi was silent for a long time. "I want to travel to Ibadan. I need to see Stella."

Segun glanced at her. "Tomi, do you really want to pursue this?"

Tomi nodded. "I just want to hear the truth from her lips. I feel like if I don't get to the end of this, I won't be at rest. Bukola's voice still rings in my head. I want to know if it's true that Femi's mother was falsely accused and if my mother had been involved in it."

Segun pulled over and gave Tomi his full attention. "The truth may hurt you. Maybe you should just accept what your mother said."

"Mum didn't answer my question. She just got angry that I asked." Tomi looked away from him. "I feel strongly that God wants me to do this. Yesterday, I got Stella's number from a friend who lectures in her department."

Segun started the car. "I can see that you are determined. Let me know when you are ready. I'll drive you to Ibadan."

Tomi shook her head. "No Segun, I don't want to get you entangled in this. I'll go by myself. I know the university well. I can find my way around."

"Please let me take you there. I promise I won't interfere. I was actually planning to make findings about their doctorate program. So while I'm at it, you can carry on with your investigations."

Tomi smiled and rested her hand on Segun's shoulders. "Thank you so much.'

Segun looked at her, his eyes full of warmth "You are welcome."

Tomi turned her face away but not before she caught the look in his eyes. Was Segun in love with her? He had said he didn't have feelings for her and was in love with someone else. Why that look? Was she just assuming things?

"I found this very nice eatery.'"Segun said, grinning. "Their ice-cream makes sense. Want to grab a cup?"

Tomi remembered she wanted to see someone before heading home. But she didn't want Segun to know about her plans. "I'm sorry Segun. I need to see someone before I go home." She pointed to a filling station a few miles ahead. "You can drop me off at that filling station."

"A customer?"

Tomi tried to find a way to answer the question without telling a lie. "Not really. A friend's sister."

When she thanked him and got down from the car, Segun remained in the car, staring at her. He watched her flag down a motorcycle that took her into the busy street. Segun placed his head on the car rest and tried to calm his racing pulse.

God, take this feelings away. Take this affection for Tomi. Please help me.

The motorcycle stopped in front of a black gate. Tomi paid the fare and stood in front of the gate for several minutes.

Was this a good decision? Would she be welcomed? Now was the time to turn back and go home.

Tomi let out a deep breath and pushed the gate. She stepped into the compound. In the flat facing the gate, a woman sat on a mat playing with an infant. Tomi greeted her and walked to the next flat. She knocked on the door and waited.

The door opened. Bukola appeared at the door. She frowned when she saw Tomi. "What do you want?"

"Bukola, I-"

"Why should I even be listening to you?' Bukola barked. The woman from the other flat settled her child firmly on her laps and was watching them.

"Bukola please-"

"Just go away. Your mother arranged Stella's abortion and still had the guts to slap me. I'm not done with you guys. I'll be back, you all will pay for what you did to my mum. Go back and tell that idiot you call your mother that Bukola is coming for her."

"How did you know my mother did it?" Tomi asked. "I really want to know."

Bukola pointed a finger at her. "You are very stupid for asking me that question. You and your mother are the same. Useless religious bigots. Get out of my house! fool! Get out."

Tomi remained standing, too stunned to move.

"I said Go! Stupid people. You are a big fool for coming here to ask me that question. Your mother sent you abi? She wants to cover her tracks that's why she is desperate to know who gave me the information. Go and tell her that your mission failed. Idiot!"

Bukola slammed the door in her face. Tomi bit her lips. She had never felt more embarrassed in her life. She stepped away from the veranda and walked quickly out of the house.

Tomi was almost exploding in anger when she got home. Peju was in the living room watching a movie with Ayo. She stood up immediately Tomi walked in through the door.

"I have been trying to reach you." Peju said.

Tomi didn't answer her. She marched up the stairs to her room. Peju followed behind. As they entered the room, Tomi faced her, her eyes full of tears.

"I'm done with him. Peju I have reached my limit. I don't want to ever have anything to do with Femi or his sister or their family. They should all get out of my sight!"

Peju held her friend's shoulder. "Calm down, please."

Tomi sat on the bed, tears running down her cheeks. "I have never been more embarrassed like I was today. I went to Bukola to assure her that I was going to see that her mother was vindicated if truly she'd been falsely accused. I wanted

her to know that because I cared so much about her brother, I was willing to dig this up even if it meant hurting my family.

I wanted to get the truth out. But instead, she insults me and calls me a fool."

She pointed at her chest. "Me, Tomi. Bukola called me a fool and an idiot. She shut the door in my face."

Peju pulled her friend into her arms. Tomi wept.



The presentation went better than Femi had expected. Every member of the management team loved the ideas he had proposed.

When his boss, Yemi, had first informed him about the Lagos refuse management project, he had doubted if he'd be able to come up with good strategies. He'd been distracted with thoughts of Tomi. On the eve of the presentation, while preparing his power slides, the ache and longing to talk to her had consumed his mind. He was glad it had gone well.

"Hey Femi. See me in my office." Yemi said, as he came out of the board room. Femi followed his boss into a small but cozy office.

His boss stretched out his hand. Femi shook it. "That was a great presentation. What's your plan for the weekend? We could go clubbing, you know. Let's go have some fun."

"I don't club sir." Femi responded.

The MD looked at him, surprised. He pulled out two bottles of beer from the fridge. He gave one to Femi.

Femi shook his head. "I don't drink too."

Yemi hissed and shook his head. He sat on the edge of the table. "You are just like my wife. Born-again shit."

"Your wife is a Christian?" Femi asked, surprised.

Yemi opened his drink. "A crazy one, I swear."

He sat back in his chair and gulped down the drink. 'My wife spent her annual leave reading bible and walking around our room talking like somebody that's drunk. I still don't get it. Is it that your God does not understand English?'

Femi smiled, understanding that his boss' wife had prayed in tongues.

Yemi went on. "She wasn't always like this. I married a trouble maker. Correct Lagos razz girl. I mean, if you try nonsense, she will scatter everywhere for you. That fire was what drove me to marry her. After she gave birth to my first son, she just changed. The fire died and was replaced with another kind of fire. Babe said she met Jesus.

But I like this new version I swear. There is no decision I take without telling her. That woman has saved me from serious financial bankruptcy. I can't trade her for anything."

"You can be a part of the life she is experiencing. You can accept Christ too."

Yemi laughed dryly. "My wife says she is praying for me. What's that her prayer point again." he stopped talking and tapped his chin as he tried to remember. "Yes, she says that my eyes will be opened to the knowledge of Christ. *Radarada* prayer."

"Amen." Femi said in a low tone, agreeing with the prayer of his boss' wife.

Femi liked his boss very much. When he arrived Lagos, Caleb had presented him with two job offers. One was in a big firm on the island and the other a small one in Ikeja. He had wanted to jump quickly for the one on the island, but he'd felt a restraint in his spirit and had settled for the other one.

Even though the pay was lower, he enjoyed the freedom and peace it brought. At least he got a company car. Caleb had helped him with the accommodation.

Yemi pulled a document from a file on his table. He gave it to Femi. "Go through it and let's talk about it next week."

As Femi returned to his office, his cellphone rang. He reached into his pocket and pulled it up. It was his sister, Bukola.

"Hey, Bukky."

"I don't know how you can reach Tomi. But please tell her never to come to my house again. If she tries it, I will pour hot water on her body."

Femi entered his office and sat down. He crossed his legs. "Tomi came to the house?"

"Yes. Please warn her. I don't want to see her face here ever!"

Femi felt his heart leap for joy. Tomi's heart must have ached for him as his heart did for her. But why would she go to his house knowing he had moved to Lagos or did she think he didn't take the job offer from Caleb?"

"Wait, why was she at the house? She came to look for me?"

"I don't know. I don't want her back here, that's all."

Femi felt hope rise in his heart. "That's fine. I'll tell her. How are you doing?"

"I'm okay but I've missed you. You just left for Lagos and forgot about me."

Femi played with a pen. "I've been so busy here. Easter is in a few weeks away. I should be home for the break. If you need anything, please don't hesitate to call me."

"Yes daddy."

Femi laughed. "Who is your daddy? Bukky, I have to go now. I'll call you later."

When Femi ended the call, he sat back, slowly taking in the information he had just received. Tomi had gone to his house? Does she still love him?

His heart raced. It hadn't taken a week before he realized the foolishness of breaking up with her. She was not her mother. Whatever decisions her mother had taken did not include her. He regretted his actions but was too scared to call and apologize. He was certain she'd never listen to him.

Femi smiled, excited for another opportunity to make things right. He'd explain why he had broken up with her. He'd ask for her forgiveness and beg for another chance. How he wanted her back in his life. He had not been the same since they broke up.

He scrolled down his contact list for her number and dialed it. His heart pounded as the phone rang. When he heard her voice, his body shook with emotions. How he had missed hearing that voice.

Oh God, what have I done?

"Good afternoon."

"Femi Good afternoon. What can I do for you?"

Femi stopped and exhaled slowly. The tone Tomi was using with him was not comforting at all. Where would he start from?

"Bukola called to inform me you were at the house recently."

"Look, I didn't go there to get you back into my life."

Femi sat up, confused. "Tomi I-"

"Let me finish. Going to your house was a big mistake and I promise I'll never bother you or your sister anymore. I have moved on with my life. Please don't call me again."

She hung up. Femi looked at the phone, shocked. He dropped his phone on the table and leaned back on his chair. Letting out a soft sigh, he took his laptop bag and left the office.

He opened his car and dropped the bag in the back seat before settling into the driver's seat. He placed his head on the steering and prayed.

God, I want my woman back, please. I know I was wrong. I allowed my emotions to get in the way. I want Tomi back. Please Jesus.

There was only one person Femi could talk to about this. He reached for his phone and dialed a number.



Becky's phone rang. She stared at the caller ID and quickly tapped Peju on her shoulder. Peju was sitting on the bed beside her, legs crossed, typing furiously on a laptop in front of her. She leaned towards Becky and squinted at the phone screen Becky was holding up to her.

"I have a feeling Femi has finally come to his senses." Peju said and returned her attention to the laptop. Becky answered the phone and waited for Femi to speak.

"Becky, good afternoon."

Becky noticed his voice lacked the usual excitement it carried. "It's been a while. Just yesterday, mum was talking about you over dinner. You just forgot about us here."

"Becky, I can't forget your family. It's just been hectic here. You know how Lagos can be. I'm really sorry about the silence. I should be home soon."

"We'll be happy to have you around."

Silence.

Becky already sensed what was coming. Peju looked up from her laptop and turned her attention to her friend. Becky pinched Peju gently as she waited for Femi to continue with the conversation.

"Becky, I made a mistake breaking up with Tomi. I'm wondering if it's possible to get a second chance."

Becky jumped down from the bed and began to dance in a funny way. She moved her body sideways, kicking her legs into the air. Peju caught the message. She grinned.

Becky wanted to drill him. She needed to know if he was serious this time.

"How sure am I that if she agrees again, you will not repeat the same mistake?"

Femi didn't say anything for a moment. "It won't happen again. Becky, Mum left a diary behind. She was not involved in the abortion that got her excommunicated. It was Mama Folake and Stella's mother that set her up. When I read that, I just lost it. I was angry that my own mother with teary eyes pleaded with me to believe she had no hand in that abortion and I didn't believe her. It was just so difficult to get over Mama Folake's involvement. But I love Tomi. I really do. I shouldn't have done that. If I-" Femi stopped and let out a deep breath.

Becky was filled with compassion for him. "Femi, I'll talk to her. I'll see what I can do."

"Thank you so much Becky. I really appreciate this."

When he hung up, Becky looked at Peju, her mouth wide opened. She couldn't believe what Femi had just told her.

"Why are you looking at me like that? What did he say?" Peju said, impatiently.

"Femi said his mother didn't have anything to do with the abortion. It was Tomi's mother who did it. That information came out of a diary they found after her death."

Peju's eyes widened. Her hand flew to her mouth. "Oh my God!"

Becky stared at her, confused. "What?"

Peju pushed the laptop aside and reached for a pillow. “Few weeks ago, Bukola stormed into the church while the Pastor was preaching. She grabbed Mama Folake’s buba and was shouting at the top of her voice.”

Becky folded her hands. “Are you serious?”

“Tomi didn’t tell you?”

Becky shook her head. ‘We’ve not seen in a while though. I’ve been busy with work. But wait, what if it’s true? What if Femi’s mother didn’t do it.”

“We can’t erase that possibility Becky. I remember eavesdropping on a conversation between my mum and one of those amebo children workers. The woman was telling my mum that she didn’t really see Mama Bimbo sleep with Elder David. She was on her way home from work when she saw Femi’s mother enter the Elder’s car. She concluded they must be having sex. Quickly, she placed a call to the elder’s wife.”

Becky frowned. “Is it not the same Elder David that made advances to me when I was still an undergraduate?”

Peju nodded her head. “It’s the same man. I feel his wife was just looking for someone to put the blame of her husband’s infidelity on. Mama Bimbo just happened to be the perfect scapegoat. Unfortunately, it was barely a year after the scandal with Tomi’s family.”

“That’s why I was happy when dad said he was leaving that church.” Becky said. “The things that go on in that place. Who knows, there might be other cases that she’d been falsely accused of.”

Becky stopped talking when she heard footsteps. She listened. “I think Tomi is here. I can hear her voice.”

The door opened and Tomi entered the room, dressed in a blue jean and blue short-sleeved shirt. She was beaming with smiles as she hug her friends.

“Babe! It’s been a while. I have missed you.” Tomi said, pulling away from the hug enough to peer at Becky’s face. They hugged again before Tomi wrapped her hands around Peju’s neck and planted a kiss on her cheeks. Her smile disappeared when she saw documents scattered on the bed.

“What are you girls up to?”

Peju pushed the papers aside to make space for her legs. She yawned. "Remember the Columbia internship I told you I'm pursuing? The one with UNICEF?"

Tomi nodded her head, remembering their discussion. "Yeah, I remember" She turned to Becky. "Are you applying too?"

Becky chuckled. "Me keh. I don't have any business with NGOs. I'm applying for another master program." She clicked her fingers. "Canada, here I come."

"Ehn.. so both of you want to leave me here in Ado abi?" Tomi said.

Becky smiled. This was a comfortable opportunity to bring up the subject of Femi. "We'd love to take you along but Femi won't allow us take you away."

Tomi looked at her friend, puzzled. "How did Femi get into this discussion for goodness sake?"

Becky closed her laptop. She wondered if she should tell Tomi about Femi's call. "I strongly feel Femi is missing you."

Tomi hissed and lay on her back, her eyes on the ceiling. "I've moved on."

"You can't just make a decision like that." Peju said.

Tomi turned her head in Peju's direction. "See, I'm tired of all these *wahala.* I'm not even interested in any relationship for now. Let me just face my God and my career."

"You think I haven't noticed you've been spending so much time with Segun." Peju said, rolling her eyes.

Becky clapped her hand. "No wonder Tomi doesn't call me often anymore. Segun and I that were paddies before he left for Kaduna, he has only called me once since he returned."

Tomi didn't know what to say to her friends. She turned away from them and faced the wall.

Becky pushed her shoulder gently. "Face us, my friend! We are discussing a critical matter here."

Tomi shrugged. "Leave me *joor.*"

Peju went on. "Every time I go to her shop, I'm always seeing Segun."

Tomi sat up quickly. "I don't understand you people. There is nothing between us. We are just friends."

Becky wanted to salvage what was left of the relationship between her friend and Femi. If it was true Segun had step into the picture, she'd have to redirect Tomi's heart before he stole her heart away.

"Tomi, I think you should still pray about Femi. Find out God's mind concerning this situation. You told me yourself that even after he broke up with you, you still felt drawn towards him."

Tomi didn't like the path the discussion was treading. "Becky, I was drawn to him because I was still emotionally attached to him and not because God wanted us together. I'm done with Femi abeg. You guys should stop pushing this matter."

"I think you should still pray with an open heart, Tomi." Peju pressed.

Tomi was getting pissed. The more she sat there listening to her friends, the angrier she became. What was their problem? She was done with Femi, why couldn't they just understand.

A man broke up with her without any concrete reason. He never called her until he heard she visited his sister. How many nights had she stayed up, praying he'd call to say the break-up was a mistake, pleading to get back with her? She had stared at his pictures for weeks, pained by the memories that left her high and dry. The last thing she wanted was hope. Hope that a relationship with Femi would work.

Tomi stood up, clearly upset. "I have work to do. I'll see you later." She walked out of the room and slammed the door behind her.



"Which of you will go with me to the market this morning?' Folake asked, as she sat on the edge of the bed in her daughters' room. Ayo opened her eyes and closed them.

"Mummy, Saturday morning is for sleeping. I will wake up 6a.m from Monday to Friday and still wake up early on Saturday again? I want to sleep." Ayo faced the wall.

"I just asked a simple question. Don't I deserve sleep on a Saturday morning? Why do I have grown up ladies in the house? An old woman like me will now be running around alone in the market."

"Nobody is saying you should do anything. We will go to the market at the time normal human beings go. I don't even know what you like about this 7 o'clock market sef." Ayo responded.

"It's okay." Tomi said and pushed her blanket aside. "I will go with mum."

Ayo turned slightly. "Good girl. What are firstborns for?"

Folake pulled her daughter's legs playfully. "Lazy girl. Wake up. Is this what you'll be doing when you get married? I didn't raise a lazy child."

Ayo laughed. "Mummy, if it is that one, forget it. 12 noon on Saturday, hubby and I will still be on the bed. There will be plenty of work to do right on that sweet bed."

Folake hissed. "Before we return, make sure you boil the fish. I've removed them from the freezer."

"Oh mummy!" Ayo said, grumbling. "I'm not doing anything. I want to sleep."

After Tomi changed into a simple blue gown, she hurried to join her mother who had already started the car. Tomi stopped when she saw her father standing at the top of the staircase. His face looked drawn and the wrinkles on his forehead seemed to have deepened.

"Dad, are you okay?" Tomi said, wrapping her hand around her father's waist.

Paul smiled sadly and glanced down at his daughter "No."

Tomi pulled away, her gaze never leaving him "What's wrong?"

Her father held her hands. "I want you to do something for me."

"Dad, just say it. It's done."

"Find out if your mother had something to do with the abortion. I want to know if Bimbo was falsely accused." He paused. "Will you pursue that case for me?"

Tomi sighed. She had decided to drop Stella's case after what happened at Bukola's house. Her father was asking her to pick it up again? One long glance at her father and she knew it meant so much to him.

"Okay dad. I'll do my best." She hugged him again and rushed downstairs. When she looked back at her father, her heart broke for him. Where were the eyes that sparkled with joy? What was eating her father up?

Folake was already pulling out of the compound when Tomi got outside. She rushed and jumped in beside her mother. Folake drove off.

At the market, women lay their wares on the floor and on wooden tables in front of locked up shops. The market was crowded. Tomi followed her mother to a group of women squatting with trays of fresh green vegetables in front of them. While her mother bargained with the vegetable seller, she glanced at the list of items they had to purchase and informed her mother she was going to get yams, fresh fish and snails.

After an hour, Tomi looked around for her mother but couldn't find her. She walked to the car park, holding two *bacco* bags and panting heavily. She allowed the bags to lean on the car and waited for her mother. It was another twenty minutes before Folake showed up. Tomi opened the trunk of the car and dumped the items in before closing it.

They'd barely left the car park when Tomi phone rang. Tomi frowned. Why would Segun be calling her early in the morning. Sometimes, she didn't understand him. One minute, he'd be reassuring her they were just friends and the next minute, he'd been acting really intimate with her.

"Pick your call." Her mother glanced briefly at her.

Tomi dropped her phone into her purse. "I'll call him later. I'm really tired right now."

"Make sure you return Segun's call and you must wait after the worker's meeting this evening to talk to him. Don't disappear like you always do."

Tomi glanced at her mother. "Who told you the call was from Segun?"

Folake winked at her daughter and returned her attention to the road. Tomi stared out the window. She'd have to talk to Segun after the workers meeting. She was going to be blunt this time. She was not interested in a relationship and certainly wouldn't go into one with him. He needed to know that, even if it was at the risk of severing their friendship.

CHAPTER 8

"The Pastor wants to see you in his office." The head of the protocol unit said to Tomi after the workers meeting.

Tomi looked at him puzzled, wondering what it was about. When she got to the office and saw Segun sitting in front of the Pastor, her eyes narrowed in anger. Segun had finally gone to tell the Pastor he wanted to marry her. Was he thinking the Pastor would be able to convince her? Why had he deceived her that he wanted them to just be friends? Why hadn't he come out clear with her?

"Sit down." The Pastor said, pointing at an empty chair beside Segun.

Pastor Akintola leaned back in his chair and stared at his members sitting like they had been caught in the abominable sin of fornication. He pulled off his spectacles and rubbed his eyes before putting them back on. He leaned his huge body forward, his eyes darting from Tomi to Segun.

"I'm not happy that I had to hear the good news from your parents." Pastor Akintola started. "If both of you have decided to start a relationship, I should be the first person to know. I'd be more than glad to join you together in holy wedlock."

Tomi shot Segun an angry glance. He didn't look her way. His gaze stayed focused on the Pastor.

The Pastor leaned back again, smiling. "You are surprised right?" He laughed. "I'm happy about this anyway. It is my joy when I hear that the children raised in my church desire to continue the legacy of this church. When you marry within this local assembly, our labour over your lives are preserved."

He looked at his wristwatch. "I have to prepare for a vigil in a couple of hours. I've been away from home since morning and I need to take some rest. Make sure you see me after the service on Sunday. As your Pastor, I have to be carried along on the details of your courtship and the plans for the wedding."

Wedding? Tomi was ready to explode.

"The Lord bless your union in Jesus name." The Pastor prayed.

"Amen." Segun responded. Tomi looked at him again and shook her head.

Immediately they got out of the church secretariat building and rounded the corner that led to the church auditorium, Tomi spun around and faced him.

"Segun, what just happened in there?"

"I'm as shocked as you are."

"Really? How am I supposed to believe that? When the Pastor said, the Lord bless your union, you answered 'Amen' and you are standing here telling me, you know nothing about this."

"Tomi, I was stunned beyond words. I didn't even know when I said amen because I'd stopped listening to him from the point he mentioned our parents' involvement. I just heard in Jesus name and I said Amen."

Tomi glared at him in disbelief. "Segun, I don't like this at all! I have made it clear to you that we are just friends and nothing more!"

Segun was getting angry. "I know okay? The last thing I'll ever do is try to force you against your will. I'm saying I had nothing to with this!"

Tomi let out a soft gasp. "But why would my mum do this?"

Segun was still seething with anger. "If I want a girl, I go after her. I don't do this manipulation shit. I hate it. I have told my mum to let this go. What kind of marriage is birthed when one of the partners isn't in love with the other? This is rubbish!"

Tomi reached for his hand. "Calm down, Segun."

Segun hissed and gently pushed her hand away. "This nonsense has to stop!"

Tomi stood there, watching as Segun walked to his car. She had never seen Segun flare up like that before. A tingling sensation snaked across her heart making her want to run after him to hold him until he was calm.

She folded her hands, her eyes following Segun's car as it left the church compound. She sucked in a breath, wondering at the sudden stirring in her heart towards Segun. It wasn't the usual feelings of friendship. This had some hint of hunger and desire in it.

Folake undressed and changed into a pyjamas. She glanced at her husband who was sitting on the bed, a newspaper opened on his laps. For some days now, he'd been withdrawn and silent. She would do anything to know what was going on in his mind.

She stood up and went to the mirror. Few strands of grey hair appeared on her edges. Tears stung her eyes as memories of her youthful days returned. Paul once adored her. He'd tell her how much she meant to him. She loved to sit beside him while he caressed her fingers and laughed softly into her neck. But that fire was gone. Bimbo took her man away.

She looked his way again, pain hitting her chest.

Just say you love me, Paul. Tell me Bimbo didn't mean anything to you. I want to see the fire in your eyes again. Let's get back to the way we were before that slut stole your heart.

Folake blinked back tears and pulled off her earrings before placing them in her jewelry box.

"What do you want for dinner?" Folake asked as she moved away from the mirror.

"I'm not hungry." Paul responded, without looking at her.

Anger burst through Folake. Paul should be rolling on the floor pleading with her for defiling their union. She should have left him long ago. But she stayed because she loved him. It was his fault their marriage was going down the drain. Why couldn't he be responsible like other godly men?

"Call me a fool if I ever ask you this question again! You don't deserve the love I shower on you. No woman will put up with you, not after the mess you created."

Paul didn't flinch. He fixed his gaze on a section of the newspaper. It hurt Folake to be ignored. She stared a moment at her husband before slipping her feet into her pam slippers. She was about stepping out of the room when she heard a knock. She opened to find Tomi at the entrance.

"Mummy, what in the world is wrong with you?" Tomi said as she entered her parents' room. Paul turned his attention from the newspaper and was looking at his wife and daughter.

"Excuse me? How dare you talk to your mother like that!" Folake barked.

Tomi relaxed. "I'm sorry I used that tone on you. But mummy why? Why will you tell the Pastor that Segun and I are in a relationship?"

Folake shrugged. "Are you not? Today, you are going out on a date with him. The next time, he is visiting you in your shop. Both of you should stop deceiving yourselves. His mother and I had to go to the Pastor so that two of you will stop wasting our time."

Tomi shook her head and walked out of the room. Her mother followed her out. She stopped at the entrance of her room and turned to her mother.

"Mummy, even if we love each other, what you are doing will push us apart. Just stop please."

Folake began to walk away as she talked. "God knows I want the best for you."

Tomi called Segun that night before she went to bed. Why was she missing him so much?

"I'm sorry about my reaction earlier." Tomi started. "I thought you had gone to the Pastor to try to make him convince me about getting into a relationship with you."

"I understand. In fact, I just finished giving my mum a piece of my mind."

Tomi smiled. "I hope you didn't speak to her harshly."

"I didn't but I was firm." He paused. "Tomi, you are my friend and I don't want to lose this precious gift of friendship for any reason."

Tomi closed her eyes. She was falling in love with Segun. What she thought would never happen was happening and she could do nothing to stop the rush of emotions.

"Segun, I understand. I don't want to lose this too."

"I love you so much.' Segun said in a low tone. 'Wait, don't get me wrong. As much as I would love to spend the rest of my life with you, I understand your heart is somewhere else but I value our friendship so much. Please don't ever think I'll try to compel you out to settle for me. I love our friendship."

Desire and warmth filled Tomi's heart. She wished she could see Segun now. If it wasn't late, she'd have asked to see him even if it meant pleading with him.

"I love you too Segun. I mean it. You are a blessing to my life."

Segun was silent for a minute. "When am I going to see you again?"

Can we see now? I just want to be with you, Tomi wanted to say.

"Tomorrow evening is fine."

"I look forward to tomorrow evening."

"Segun, I spoke with my friend at the University of Ibadan. I'm thinking of going to see Stella next week."

"I thought you wanted to drop the case." Segun said.

"I changed my mind. I'm going with the initial plan. What's your schedule for next week Thursday?"

Segun hesitated. "I have a class that day but I'll move it to Wednesday so we can set out early on Thursday."

"Thank you so much Segun. I'm really happy you are going with me."

"I've finally moved to my apartment."

"You have?' Tomi asked, excitedly. 'How's it like?"

"Three bedroom flat. Well furnished. Beautiful décor. I'll take you around after we get back from Ibadan."

"I can't wait." Tomi said. She imagined stepping into Segun's house as his wife. Everything would be so perfect. God was definitely in this.

"Tomi, I have to go. I'm still at my parent's house. I'll call you when I get home."

Tomi ended the call and lay back on the bed.

Segun.

This was too good to be true. Getting married to him would be a smooth ride. His parents were friends with her family. The Pastor approved of their relationship. They attended the same church. He was a lecturer and would have enough time for his family. He was nice and caring. He loved God. The wedding plans would be without stress.

Everything had turned out for her good. Segun already said he wanted to spend the rest of his life with her. This was the green light she needed. She

laughed as she thought of their praying mothers who wouldn't give up on their case. God had finally answered their prayers.

She tapped on her instagram app and scrolled down in search of wedding picture samples. She stopped at the picture of a beautiful bride dressed in a purple lace and heavily stoned gele.

Purple would be perfect for her engagement, Tomi thought.

She screenshot the picture along with some other bridal wears. She wished her sister was around. She'd know the right colour of gele to go with the purple lace but Ayo was spending the night with a friend.

It was almost midnight before Tomi finally put down her phone.

As she knelt by her bed to pray, a scripture dropped in her heart. She reached her bible and rushed to Galatians 4 verse 23.

The son of the slave wife was born in a human attempt to bring about the fulfillment of God's promise. But the son of the freeborn wife was born as God's own fulfilment of his promise.

She read the verse again. When she read it the third time, she held her head.

"God, what are you saying?" she muttered underneath her breath.

No audible voice. But she knew. She knew exactly what the scripture meant.

"God, no!"

How could God ask her to get back with Femi? A man who didn't value her. A man who could stay away for months without calling her. She had deleted his number and every picture they took together. Why wouldn't God allow Segun to be the right alternative? He was perfect for her.

"God, please I want to move on."

...born in a human attempt to bring about the fulfilment of God's promise.

The words hit her again. God had promised she would get married, but was she trying to do this by her own effort? Was she trying to birth Ishmael instead of waiting for her Isaac? Was she going against the will of God by struggling with the decision to get back with Femi?

"I'm confused." Tomi sat down on the floor.

Rest in me and wait patiently for me.

Femi filled her thoughts. Her conversation with Segun interrupted her thoughts of Femi. The two men floated in her mind.

"Oh God!" Tomi cried softly.

CHAPTER 9

Tomi pulled out a flowing Ankara gown from a cabinet and handed it to a young fair skinned lady sitting on a stool. The woman held up the gown and ran her eyes over it.

"You can try it on over there." Tomi said, pointing to a makeshift changing room at the far corner of the studio. The woman walked over to the changing room, drew back the curtain and stepped behind it. After a few minutes, she stepped out and stood in front of a mirror hanging on the wall.

Tomi stopped rolling the hand wheel of her sewing machine and went to her customer. "What do you think?"

The lady's face lit up with a smile. She placed her hand on her waist and gazed at Tomi's reflection from the mirror. "This is so beautiful. You are really good at this."

"Aunty, you look sweet." One of Tomi's apprentices commented.

The lady ignored the remark and turned sideways, staring at her buttocks in the mirror.

"Can you make the hips firmer?"

"Sure." Tomi said. "Is that all?"

"Yes." She responded, facing the mirror again. "I really like it."

She returned to the changing room and pulled off the gown. When Tomi made the adjustment, she paid her balance and left the fashion studio.

Tomi returned to the working table where a flowery material was spread out on the table. She picked up her phone and was checking the style the customer had requested when one of her apprentice called her attention to a couple that had just walked in.

The woman, a very pretty lady, in a long flowing gown held an infant in her arms. A tall man with an afro stood beside her.

"Good afternoon. My name is Tomi." Tomi introduced herself.

The woman with the child wanted to make some wears. Tomi took her measurement and they went back and forth on the style for the Ankara materials. When they settled for a price and the pickup date, Tomi escorted them out and thanked them for coming.

"Forgive my bad manners, I didn't even ask for your names." Tomi said, as they got to a tinted green Sienna.

"My name is Rotimi." The man said. He touched his wife's shoulder. "She is Chidera."

Rotimi? Tomi thought the name sounded familiar.

Rotimi smiled at her. "Does the name Rotimi ring a bell?"

Tomi frowned. "Kinda. Can't place it though. Have we met before?"

Rotimi gave her a long look. The baby started to cry. Chidera stepped away from them and got into the Sienna.

"I am Femi's friend and prayer partner." Rotimi said.

The name clicked. Femi had spoken so much about a friend named Rotimi. They had planned visiting Rotimi's family before the breakup happened.

"Yes, I remember. We spoke on the phone once."

Rotimi nodded. "You have a wonderful memory." Rotimi moved closer to Tomi. "Femi really wants you back. He deeply regrets his actions and he is pleading for another chance."

Tomi looked away. "How sure am I that he won't just wake up one morning and say he is not interested?"

Rotimi thrust his hands into his pocket. "Tomi, sit down with him. He is ready to explain the event that led him into taking that decision. Afterwards, you can conclude if the relationship is worth pursuing."

A white lexus pulled up behind Rotimi's car. Segun got down and sauntered towards them. He pulled Tomi into his embrace at the same time sizing Rotimi up. When Tomi tried to pull away, he kept his hand clamped on her waist. Tomi scowled at him defiantly and reluctantly, he released her.

"Hello." Rotimi said, stretching out his hand. Segun looked at his fingers. No ring. He shook it, annoyed at the calmness on Rotimi's face.

Tomi couldn't understand why Segun was acting weird. Annoyed, she stepped forward and fixed her gaze on Rotimi. "I'll think about what you said."

Rotimi tapped her lightly on her shoulder and walked over to the driver's side. At the same time, Chidera opened the door, the infant now asleep on her laps.

"My husband and I look forward to having you at dinner soon." Chidera said, and glanced briefly at Segun before shutting the door. Segun felt embarrassed as the car eased out into the road.

"Segun, what was that for?" Tomi said, clearly upset.

Segun's eyes burnt with desire as he gazed into Tomi's eyes. He had been up all night thinking about her. She said she loved him. How those words had sounded like music to his ears. He'd know his coming to Ado was divine. It was no coincidence that they had both been led to return to Ado. God had a greater plan for them.

"What do you mean by what was that for?" Segun asked, feigning ignorance

"The way you were clinging to me and the look you gave Rotimi."

I thought he stepped into my territory, Segun wanted to say. "I'm sorry."

Tomi eyed him and returned to her studio. Segun caught up with her and wrapped his hand around her shoulder. Tomi didn't push his hand away. Instead, she leaned into him as they walked into her fashion studio.



Femi stood outside Rotimi's gate and checked his wristwatch. His friend had been gone for over an hour. Every minute felt like eternity. He returned to his Blue Camry and sat down. Restless, he played Creflo Dollar's The art of being alone with God, but he couldn't concentrate on the sermon. He was too distracted.

Tomi.

Would she allow him back into her life? Would she listen to Rotimi?

Femi jumped out of his car when he saw Rotimi's car approaching from a distance. When the car stopped in front of the entrance, he opened the gate and Rotimi drove in. He shut the gate quickly and hurried to meet his friend.

"How did it go?" He asked as soon as Rotimi climbed down from the car.

Rotimi's son, Joshua, rushed out of the house followed by a teenage girl. The girl took the baby from Chidera and was playing with him when Joshua tapped his father's legs and stretched out his arms.

"Daddy, carry me." He cried.

Chidera pulled Joshua away from the men. "Daddy is busy now. Let's go inside."

Joshua wrapped his hands around his mother's finger and followed her in. Rotimi motioned for Femi to get into his car. Femi went around to the passenger's side and sat down beside his friend.

"Do I stand a chance of getting her back?"

Rotimi looked at his friend. "I spoke with her. She was skeptical of you running off again."

Femi flopped back against the car seat. "It's not going to happen again. It won't!" He rubbed his neck, tired. "How do I convince her?"

"She said she would think about it."

"At least that's a way forward."

Rotimi gave his friend his full attention. "I'm not saying this to discourage you but a man showed up while we were talking. It is very obvious he has an interest in Tomi. The way he held her possessively, it's glaring he has a thing for her. So it is either Tomi is at the verge of moving on or she has already started something with this guy."

Femi let out a sigh. "I'm not letting her go. She belongs here with me. No man is going to have my girl."

Rotimi touched his friend's shoulder. "Don't let your five senses lead you in this matter. Let the Holy Spirit teach you what to do."

Femi opened the door. "I have to go now."

"Won't you join us for dinner?" Rotimi asked.

"Not today. There is something pressing I must do." He gave his friend a cursory glance. "I'll see you after church tomorrow."

The door was slightly opened when Femi got home. He entered and quietly closed the door behind him. He jumped back when he saw a body sprawled on the floor. His eyes drifted to two empty bottles lying carelessly on the floor.

Bukola.

He was worried about his sister. Since he came back from Lagos on Friday, he noticed she had withdrawn into her shell. She had left the house that night and returned home Saturday morning drunk and now again it was happening.

He pulled her up from the floor and led her to her room before placing her gently on the bed. He covered her with a duvet.

Femi went into his room and locked the door. There were things he needed to settle with God. Lagos had sapped his time and energy but here he was, back in Ado on a one week leave. He intended to use it well.

Tomi.

He wanted to know what to do. What was God saying concerning this? Was he supposed to let her go and trust God for someone else? She seemed to have moved on. Was it not a waste of time waiting for her?

Then there was Bukola to pray for. The devil was not going to have his sister. No way. He would pray until something happened.

Didn't the scripture say, the effectual fervent prayer of a righteous man avails much?

Femi sat on the floor, his back against the bed. He prayed. He prayed until there was no more strength in him. Hours later, when he got up from the floor and reached for his bible, his heart was flooded with joy.



Segun drove through the entrance of the University of Ibadan and turned to Tomi who had just woken up from sleep.

"What department do you say Stella is again?"

"Microbiology." Tomi responded. "I can call my friend to ask for directions."

Segun got to a junction and turned left. "I know the place."

He drove for a while and stopped in front of some pale yellow bungalows. Tomi looked towards one of the buildings and saw her friend standing in front of a corridor.

"Ireti is over there." Tomi turned to Segun. "Thank you so much."

"Let me know when you are done. I'll just head over to Agric and make my findings for my Ph.D. program."

As she opened the door to get down, Segun stopped her. "No hugs?"

Tomi gave him a quick hug and climbed down. She rushed to meet Ireti who was already hurrying towards her.

"So good to see you." Ireti said, touching her friend's cheeks. "You look so fresh."

"You look good too." Tomi said.

Students began to pour out of the building, laughing and chatting. It made Tomi remember her school days when the only thing she thought of was reading her books and bagging a good grade. If only these students knew that once they stepped out of the four walls of school, life would stare them squarely in the face.

Ireti turned towards one of the classrooms. "Stella should be out in a minute." She looked at her friend. "But wait o, there is something about that girl that bothers me. Whenever I take their class, she seem so lost in her own world. I feel there is something troubling her. I've tried reaching out to her several times but she keeps pushing me back."

Tomi clapped her hands. "Ireti, you carried this your welfare mama attitude into your career. I still remember back at school when you were always checking up on us and encouraging us in the faith."

Ireti smiled. "The lecturing job is just a platform jare. We are here to snatch souls for Jesus. This is a huge field Tomi. But I'm so grateful for what God is helping me do with these students. Some of them are so broken, their stories will make you cry."

"I'm so happy for you. This is-"

Tomi sighted a lady in black pants and green t-shirt walking out of the hall. "I think that's Stella."

Ireti looked in Tomi's direction. "Yes she is."

"Stella!" Ireti shouted.

A dark slender girl in her late teens turned. She held a black handbag hung over her shoulder while some books rested on her arms. She stood for a moment and then began to walk towards the ladies. She stopped when she saw Tomi.

"What are you doing here?" Stella asked, clearly unnerved by Tomi's presence.

Tomi stepped forward "Stella, please can I have a word with you?"

Stella's hand trembled. She began to retreat. "I'm busy. I have a class in an hour."

Tomi reached for her free hand. "Stella, please."

Stella jerked free and started to walk away. Ireti stood there, observing in silence.

"Mama Bimbo is dead." Tomi said, not knowing how else to get Stella's attention.

Stella froze. She spun around, her face white.

"What did you just say?"

"Mama Bimbo is dead. Please I need to talk to you."

Ireti looked from one person to the other. "You can use my office."

Stella walked with her eyes on the ground as Ireti led them down a corner that led to a bungalow behind the lecture rooms. She stopped at a door that had her name neatly inscribed on it. She reached for a bunch of keys in her bag. Slotting the key into the keyhole, she turned it twice and opened the door.

"This should be comfortable enough. Call me when you are through." Ireti said and shut the door leaving Tomi and Stella in her office.

"Stella, please sit." Tomi pointed to a chair. Stella sat down, tears already streaming down her eyes. Tomi sat beside her. She was full of compassion for the teenage girl. She still remembered the day Stella was born. Her mother had come to pick her from the junior church when some women at the back of the church auditorium began to dance in excitement.

Iya Dotun had given birth to a daughter, she'd heard them say.

Tomi's mother had driven them straight to the hospital to see the baby. That baby had grown into a beautiful young lady.

Tomi sat there and waited. Something was eating Stella up. She reached into her handbag and pulled out a piece of Kleenex and gave it to her. Stella wiped her tears with it and stared at Tomi.

"Sis Tomi, why are you here? My parents have left Ado. We don't attend Garden Assembly anymore."

Tomi shrugged. "I came to see you."

Tomi's mission to discover the truth about Stella's abortion was replaced with a genuine desire to reach Stella's heart.

"What killed Mama Bimbo?" Stella asked.

"She was sick." Tomi responded. When Stella didn't say anything again, Tomi took over the conversation.

"What level are you?"

"100." Stella responded quietly.

"Listen Stella, you can talk to me. Let it all out. I believe God sent me to talk to you so you can get whatever is eating you up off your chest."

The tears were back. Tomi drew her into her arms. She covered her face in Tomi's chest and wept.

When she became calm, she stared at her fingers. "I loved Jerry very much. I told him we should wait until we were married before having sex and he said, that was a long time. If I really loved him, I'd give him my body now."

"Do I know this Jerry?" Tomi asked Stella.

Stella shook her head. "No. He is a boy from my secondary school. He was in SS3 while I was in SS2. I was standing on the assembly ground when I caught him staring at me. I was shocked that he was interested in me. You know, Jerry was the ladies' man and I believed I could never be good for him. The following day, he sent a card through one of the junior students, expressing how much he loved me. I was mesmerized."

Stella wiped the fresh batch of tears trickling down her face. "And then we started dating. He'd call to tell me how much he loved me. I was happy to hear those words. And then we started having sex and…" She paused. "I got pregnant. He denied it. Mum found out and rained insults on me and said I had to get rid of the pregnancy."

"You didn't want to do it?"

Stella raised her head. “I was afraid. I felt connected to my child already. I was ready to go through with childbirth but mum said if my father found out, he’d kick me out of the house. Then one morning, I was sleeping when my mum called me to the living room. One of her friends was already sitting there. They had both planned to take me to a doctor who’ll help me remove it.”

“Your mother’s friend, who is she?”

Stella pressed her lips together and shifted in her seat. “I’d rather not say.”

Tomi squeezed her hand. “I’m listening.”

“After the doctor evacuated my baby, I was in serious pains. I felt like I was going to die. I remembered lying helpless in that room and wishing for death so that the pain could end quickly. Right there, I remembered the monthly breakfast meetings we had with Bro Femi and how he spoke passionately to us about God’s love and deliverance from eternal damnation.”

Stella paused. “I remember one particular scripture he quoted. He that believeth on him shall not be condemned but he that believeth not is condemned already because he hath not believed in the name of the only begotten Son of God. Those words came rushing to my mind again. It was then I received Christ. If I was going to die, I didn’t want to go to hell. I drifted into darkness afterwards.”

“Stella, the woman who went with your mother, was it Mama Bimbo?”

Stella shook her head. “No! Mama Bimbo had nothing to do with the abortion. It was a set up.” Stella rose and paced the room. “I know she did some bad things. But she was a nice woman. She didn’t even know I was pregnant.”

Tomi wanted to get to the root of this dark secret. “Stella, Mama Bimbo was falsely accused. We need to get the truth out to clear her name. Please, who was the woman your mother went with for the abortion?”

Stella returned to her seat and remained quiet.

Tomi looked at her. “Was it my mum?’

Stella raised her eyebrow. She stared at Tomi. “Yes.”

Tomi sighed. “Thank you for telling me this. Now, let’s talk about you. Stella, you have to forgive yourself. You can’t keep holding this guilt.”

“I killed my child.” Stella said, her eyes brimming with tears.

“Stella, we can’t change the past. God’s love for us is deeper than any sin we might have committed. He has adopted you into his family. You have been

washed and redeemed by the blood of the lamb. You must embrace this truth. There is no condemnation for you. You have the gift of righteousness. Stop listening to the devil. Embrace the life and the peace God has made available for you."

Stella nodded her head. "Thank you."

Tomi held her hands. "Can we pray together?"

While Tomi prayed, Stella broke down again. Tomi asked God to reveal his love to Stella. She prayed for strength for the teenage girl and for her emotional health.

"God please heal me. Help my heart Lord." Stella cried quietly.

"Amen."Tomi responded to Stella's prayers.

Few hours later, Ireti joined them at the office. She noticed that Stella's eyes were lit up.

Tomi addressed her friend. "I leave Stella in your hands Ireti."

Ireti smiled. "One more soul to disciple. I'm excited already." She pulled Stella into her arms. Stella laughed, keeping her hands around Ireti's shoulders.

"You can't go back today." Ireti said to Tomi. 'It's not safe for you to drive in the dark and there is so much we need to catch up on.

Tomi wanted to object. She wasn't sure Segun would be willing to stay the night in Ibadan. "Ireti, I didn't come alone. I'm not sure my friend planned to stay back. He might want us to return today."

"Don't worry, we'll convince him. There is enough space for both of you here."

Tomi was quiet on the way back to Ado the following morning. Everything began to make sense.

Her mother had been involved in Stella's abortion. Femi must have found out about it and had to end the relationship. He had every right to do so. If she were in his shoes, she'd do same.

Her heart boiled with anger as she remembered the conversation with Stella. How could her mother be involved in something abominable as this and

yet treat her father like trash because of something he did years ago? That was the height of self-righteousness and hypocrisy she'd ever seen.

"We've been driving for more than an hour and you've not said anything."Segun said, interrupting her thoughts.

Tomi looked at him and smiled sadly. She was surprised that the emotions of love she felt the night after the Pastor's meeting had disappeared into thin air. She loved him, but only as a friend and nothing more.

"I'm sorry, I just can't get over what Stella told me." Tomi said.

"What did she say?"

"Femi's mother is innocent. My mum was involved."

Segun sighed and said nothing. After they'd travelled for a while, Segun looked at her.

"What do you want to do now with this information?"

Tomi hesitated before responding. "I don't know yet. I'm still processing the whole thing."

What kind of stony heart does her mother have? How could she sit in the pew and watch the Pastor accuse Mama Bimbo and yet not feel a thing. Tomi shook her head and stared ahead, thinking about Femi.

Something must have happened the night Femi broke up with her. They'd been discussing about his trip to Lagos and he had told her Bukola was at the door. He ended the call and an hour later called to say he was no longer interested in the relationship.

Had Mama Bimbo opened up to somebody before she died? Probably she had left a letter addressed to her children. It had to be the day he broke up with her that he discovered the truth.

"God, Femi wants me back in his life even after this? I don't understand." Tomi muttered under her breath.

Was it possible that Femi had broken up with her for another reason? If he didn't know about her mother's involvement, then the information she was armed with would definitely push him away forever.

"He knows." Tomi muttered. Why else would Bukola attack her mother and accuse her of setting Mama Bimbo up? Tomi's head drummed.

Segun glanced at her, worried. “Tomi, we are already in Ado. You’ve not taken anything since morning.”

Tomi sat straight. “Segun, I’m fine. I’ll eat when I get home.”

“No way, we are stopping at an eatery and I’m getting you a pack. What if lunch is not ready?”

“Thank you.” Tomi mouthed.

Segun pulled up in front of a white building. He turned off the engine and touched Tomi’s shoulder.

“I’m so sorry Tomi. I was praying your mother would be exonerated from this issue but unfortunately, that’s not the case. You have to forgive mum and move on. Some secrets are left buried. Just let it go. It’s not like I’m supporting what mum did, but she might have had a good reason.”

Tomi stared at Segun, irritated. “What are you saying Segun? That my mum had a good reason to take Stella for an abortion? That she had a reason to put the blame on Femi’s mother who was falsely accused before the whole church?”

He rubbed her shoulders. “I didn’t mean to upset you. It came out all wrong okay? Let me get our food.”

Segun left her in the car and went in through the glass door held by a security officer in a brown shirt and dark khaki trouser. Tomi was still seething in anger at Segun’s words. As she reached for her earpiece, she saw Segun coming out of the eatery.

Had he gotten the food so fast?

It was then she saw the other person with him and her heart raced.

Femi.

Tomi stared at him, awestruck. He looked stunning in his white polo and knickers. In his hand was a loaf of bread.

Segun stood outside with him, laughing, hugging and shaking his hand. Tomi could stay glued in her seat staring at this man forever. He was more handsome than the last time she saw him. She wanted to run into his arms and tell him how much she loved him.

“Oh Femi, I’ve missed you so much.” She whispered, holding her chest to stop it from pounding so fast.

Segun pointed at the car and it was then Femi looked her way. Her heart did a flip. She froze for a second as they approached the car.

She opened the car and got down. Femi stopped, his eyes locked with hers. He caught his breath and released it slowly, unsure what step to take with the woman who meant the world to him.

Tomi flew into his arms and began to cry. Femi wrapped his hands around her and held her tight. He felt powerful emotions bursting through his body and raked his hand lightly into her hair.

“Tomi, I’m very sorry. Please give me another chance. ”Femi whispered into her ears.

Segun stood watching them, confused.

Femi held Tomi’s gaze. “Can I see you after church tomorrow, please?”

Sunday seemed a long time even though it was just the following day. Tomi wished they could go somewhere quiet to talk. She wanted to know what he’d been up to since he left Ado for Lagos. She wanted to sit beside him and stare at him all day.

“That’s fine.” Tomi said, finally.

Femi turned to Segun “It’s great seeing you again. We should hang out sometime when I come around.”

“Sure.” Segun smiled. The smile disappeared when he got into the car and Tomi climbed in beside him. Her attention was still fixed on Femi who was now sauntering towards his car.

Money sure does wonders, Tomi thought. Femi looked really good. His skin glowed and his hair was darker. His chest was broader and his muscles well-toned. He must have been visiting the gym, she concluded.

He even has a car, Tomi muttered silently. Femi waved at her as Segun sped out of the eatery. She waved back. When she glanced at Segun, she noticed he was pensive.

“Segun, can you stop at that filling station?” Tomi said, pointing at a filling station ahead. “I’d like to have a word with you.”

A frown creased Segun’s forehead. He turned into the filling station and parked at the far end of the station, beside a wrecked fourteen seater bus. He turned off the engine and stared at the steering wheels.

"I don't even know where to begin." Tomi said.

Segun turned his head slowly and looked at her. "It's clear, isn't it? You are in love with Femi. You chose him over me."

Tomi exhaled slowly. Her friend's eyes were full of pain and it troubled her. She'd thought it was over with Femi and had been ready to give Segun a chance but now she knew where her heart belonged.

"Before you came to Ado, Femi and I were engaged."

Segun raised his brows. "Really? So what happened?"

"He called it quits. I was mad at him and wanted to forget about him completely."

When Segun didn't say anything, Tomi continued. "While we were still together, I told my parents about the relationship, and they kicked strongly against it. Even the Pastor's wife tried to convince me to end it, but I was sure this was who God wanted me to be with. But then Femi broke up with me. I felt hurt and decided to move on with my life. My discussion with Stella opened my eyes to see why he did that."

Segun relaxed. "He must have found out about your mum's involvement and couldn't handle it."

"My thoughts exactly. Now the thing is, Femi has been trying to get us back together but I have been pushing him away."

"It's obvious you love him very much."

Tomi nodded. "Yes, I do."

Segun shrugged and started the engine. "It's okay.'

Tomi touched his hand. "If you don't want us to be friends anymore, I-"

"Haba. It's not that bad. You know, recently God has been telling me to stop trying to figure things out. I think I'm in the phase where I just want to go deeper with God. We are still friends."

Tomi smiled. "Thank you for understanding." She glanced at the back seat. "You didn't get the food again?"

Segun laughed dryly. "I was so distracted by the mushy-mushy between you and Femi. In my mind I was like, how can Tomi explain to me that she is not in love with this brother?"

Tomi smiled. She hadn't realize how much she loved Femi until she stood few feet away from him. She felt like she had been holding her breath since he left and their meeting again brought a release of air into her lungs.

CHAPTER 10

Folake sprung to her feet as soon as Tomi walked through the door.

"As long as you are under my roof, I want to know your movements. How can you just travel without informing me?"

Tomi dropped her handbag on the dining table. "I thought dad informed you. Besides, I sent a text to you."

"Where did you even travel to? I called your lines, you didn't pick my calls."

Tomi hesitated for a moment. When she'd left Ibadan, her heart had boiled with anger but that anger had been quenched by Femi's presence. Should she confront her mother with the information she got from Stella?

"Segun wanted to make some findings at the University of Ibadan. I went with him." Tomi responded

Her mother's face broke into a wide smile. She embraced Tomi.

"Welcome, my dear daughter, how was your trip?"

Tomi didn't answer. She turned towards Ayo who had just come out of the kitchen with a plate of bean cakes.

"You followed Segun to Ibadan and you still want us to believe there is nothing intimate between you and that fine bobo. Who are you deceiving?" Ayo said, biting into one of the balls of akara.

Folake chuckled and turned to her younger daughter. "We have to start preparing ahead. Tomi can just wake up one morning to say the wedding is in a week."

Tomi was getting irritated with the discussion. She took her bag from the table. "I hope there is food for me."

"I think there is still akara and ogi in the kitchen." Ayo said.

"You think? Are you not just coming out from the kitchen?" Tomi asked, "Don't do rough play with my stomach Ayo. I am hungry."

Folake moved closer to her daughters. "That reminds me, your brother's visiting day is next week Saturday. If there is anything you want to send to him, get them ready as quickly as possible."

Tomi missed her brother. She remembered the day she moved back home from Lagos. Seyi had rushed out of the house to meet her. When she thought they'd spend some time together, he'd returned to school the following week. He didn't come home for Christmas and wouldn't be home until he completed his SSCE exams. She wished she could go with her mother to see him but she had a deadline to meet. A wedding dress that must be ready the following week.

"I'm going to my room." Tomi said and reached for two slices of bread on the dining table. She was on her way to her room when her father came in

Tomi's heart pounded. She wondered how her father would feel when she finally broke the news to him.

"Dad." Tomi said and hugged him as he approached the staircase. "I have missed you. Did you miss me?"

Paul didn't smile. "What did she say? I mean Stella."

The scowl on her father's face scared Tomi. Paul relaxed when he saw the horrified look on his daughter's face. "What did she say?"

"We'll talk later dad. I just got back."

Behind her father, Folake stared at her daughter with curious eyes. Tomi quickly went up the stairs, her thoughts torn in different directions.

Tomi's heart skipped when she stepped out of the bathroom and saw her mother sitting on the bed, waiting for her.

Jesus, what does this woman want? Tomi thought as she cleaned her body.

"What was it your father was saying to you?" Folake asked. She had this no-nonsense look on her face that Tomi was familiar with. It was the same look on her mother's face, when as an adolescent, she'd stolen money from her mother's purse.

Tomi frowned. She'd have to wriggle her way of this. "What do you mean? Was dad supposed to tell me something?"

Folake lowered her head. “Tomi, your father has been unusually quiet. I know you are his favorite daughter. I just wanted to know if there is something bothering him so I can help him feel better.”

Lies, Tomi thought. How could this woman feign ignorance of the pain she was causing her husband?

Folake stood up. “I love your father very much. I’ll do whatever it takes to make him happy. If there is anything I need to know, please don’t hesitate to tell me.”

Tomi stared at her mother in disbelief. When Folake left the room, she leaned against the wall, feeling like the grass between two elephants. She wished she had not agreed to her father’s plea to see Stella. But then if she had not gone, she wouldn’t have understood the reason Femi broke up with her.

She could sense her parents’ marriage hanging in the balance. The last thing she wanted to do was rip it apart.

Paul rapped on his daughter’s bedroom door that night. When she appeared at the door, he asked her to join him in the living room. Tomi knew she couldn’t hide the truth anymore.

“Tomi, I want the truth. Trust me, I won’t do anything stupid no matter how it turns out. Was your mother involved in Stella’s abortion?”

Tomi stared at her father sitting on a recliner he had just ordered few weeks ago

“Yes, she was involved in the abortion. Mama Bimbo didn’t have anything to do with it.”

Paul laughed dryly. Tomi shifted uncomfortably on the sofa.

“Thank you so much. I knew I could count on you.” Paul stood up and left the living room.

Tomi paced around, scared that she had blown out the dim light left of her parents’ marriage.



Femi looked around the park where he had planned to meet Tomi. He checked his wristwatch. 3.24p.m. They’d agreed to meet at 3. Had she changed her mind?

He was about dialing her number when Tomi tip-toed behind him and snatched the phone away from his hand. Femi spun around, saw Tomi smiling broadly and pulled her into his arms.

"How are you?" Femi asked in a boisterous voice. He held her hand and led her to one of the slabs.

"I'm good. How was church?"

"Splendid." Femi responded.

"Sorry I'm late. Mum insisted I prepare lunch before leaving the house."

"That's fine."

They sat down. Femi took a long glance at the woman he loved. Tomi kept her eyes fastened on him.

Femi cleared his throat. "Tomi, I shouldn't have allowed my emotions control me. I-"

"Is this about Stella and my mum's involvement in the abortion?" Tomi asked, interrupting him.

Femi stared at Tomi, shocked. "You know about it?'

Tomi nodded. "Yes. Yesterday when we met at the eatery, Segun and I were just returning from Ibadan. We went to see Stella. She confirmed your mother wasn't involved. Femi, I'm so sorry."

Femi touched her shoulder. "It's not your fault."

"But my mum was involved."

"We can't let the past take hold of our future. We leave it where it belongs."

Tomi let out a soft breath. "It was Dad who insisted I get the truth from Stella after the incident that happened in the church."

"What incident?" Femi asked.

"Bukola came to the church, shouting at the top of her lungs. She said my mum was the one who set your mum up. She had to be carried out of the auditorium.

Femi opened his mouth in surprise. "Oh my God!"

"Last night when I returned, dad asked for the truth and I told him what Stella said. I'm just scared he might take it out on mum. She's already hurt him with guilt of the adulterous affair he had with your mum."

Femi exhaled. Why should life be this complicated. “Tomi, my parents’ marriage didn’t end well. We can’t have our kids grow up to discover that none of their grandparents had a marriage that worked. We must pray for God’s intervention.” he stopped and rubbed his head. “Look at me talking about kids. I haven’t even asked if you want me back into your life.”

Tomi rested her head on his shoulder. “I love you Femi.”

Femi felt a tide of emotions burst through his heart. He drew back slightly, enough to wrap his hand around her waist.

“I love you too Tomi.”

They sat there, catching up on what they’d missed since their separation and talking deeply about their future. They left the park and drove round town. They stopped at a barbeque spot and ate dinner in Femi’s car.

“It’s getting late.” Femi said, looking at his wristwatch.

Tomi grumbled. She didn’t want to leave. “Can’t we stay for a few more minutes? You’ll be travelling back to Lagos tomorrow morning and I don’t know when next I’ll see you.”

Femi sat there, staring at her face through the dim light in the car. One touch and he knew his resolve would weaken.

Tomi’s arm brushed his and his body felt ready to explode. He closed his eyes and held his breath before releasing it slowly. They were parked in a quiet spot and it was dark. They could have sex right in the back seat and nobody would know.

Femi shook his head. What kind of stupid thoughts were flying in and out of his head? He sighed and started the engine.

“Tomi, let’s get out of here before I do something I’ll regret. I’m vulnerable right now.”

Tomi sighed. “When am I seeing you again?”

Femi glanced at her briefly. “Saturday. I’ll come home every weekend.”

When he pulled up in front of her gate, Tomi sat back in the car, reluctant to get down. When she looked at him, Femi pulled her into his arms. She held on to him tightly. His heart beat faster and a strong urge to kiss her consumed him.

But he wanted to wait till the wedding night. He didn't just want sex abstinence, he wanted kiss abstinence too. It looked impossible as their eyes locked and they couldn't tear away from each other's arms.

Femi lowered his head to touch Tomi's forehead. "God knows I want you so much. I want to kiss you badly."

"You know we can't do that now."

Femi let out a deep breath. "Yes I know. We receive grace to wait."

Tomi chuckled and pulled away from him. Even when her feet hit the ground, their fingers were still locked together. Reluctantly, Tomi stepped out of the car.

"Goodnight." Femi said as Tomi shut the door.

"Make sure you go straight to bed immediately you get home. If you have to be out by 5, you must sleep early."

"Yes ma'am." Femi responded. She stood at the gate until the car disappeared out of sight.

Shrieking in excitement, Tomi entered the house. She stopped when she saw Ayo leaning on the wall, a troubled look on her face. Her mother was sitting on the sofa in the living room, one leg crossed over another, staring blankly.

"What's going on here?" Tomi asked her sister. Ayo pointed at two boxes standing by the freezer.

Tomi heard footsteps and raised her head. Her father was descending the stairs with a brown leather box. Tomi ran to him.

"Dad, what are you doing?"

Her father didn't respond. He kept walking. Tomi blocked his path at the foot of the staircase

"Dad?"

"I'm sick and tired of your mother, okay? I can't live anymore with that hypocrite. For ten years she tortured me over an affair that happened once! Yet she is a murderer, a liar and a conniving fool. She disgusts me."

Tomi went on her knees, tears welling up her eyes. She couldn't believe what was happening to her parents. There had to be a way.

"Dad, please, you and mum can talk things over. You can't just throw away twenty-eight years of marriage."

"Our marriage ended long ago." Paul stepped around Tomi and rolled his box to the car. He returned to take the rest of the boxes. His daughters stood on the veranda, watching their father throw the last box into the trunk. He got into the car and drove away.

Ayo shot her sister an angry glance. "Mum said you had a hand in this. Right now, I wish you had just stayed back in Lagos." She hissed and walked back into the house.

Tomi stood on the veranda, tears streaming down her face. Her sister was right. She was the cause of her parents' failed marriage. Didn't Segun say that some secrets were better left buried?

"Leave my house now."

Tomi turned. Her mother stood behind her, a stony glare on her face. Did her mother just ask her to leave?

"Are you satisfied now that our marriage is over?"

Tomi stared at Folake in horror. Her own mother was sending her out? This had to be a joke. "Where do you expect me to go tonight? It's late already."

"I don't care! I just don't want to see you here. Get out now!"

Angry words filled Tomi's heart but she restrained herself from spilling them out. Blinded by tears, she went into her room and pulled down one of her boxes stacked on top of her wardrobe.

Ayo stopped ironing. "Where are you going to?"

Tomi didn't respond. She continued to throw in her clothes until the box was full. She zipped it. "I'll come for the other things later."

Ayo looked at her alarmed. She turned off the iron. "What nonsense are you talking about?"

"Go and ask your mother."

Ayo stormed out of the room. The door to her parents' room was slightly opened. Tomi could hear Ayo exchanging words with her mother as she pulled the box out of the house.

She stepped out of the gate and looked down the street. Everywhere was dark. Tomi shook with anger. She was never going to have anything to do with her mother, ever again.

She pulled out her phone from her bag. Four missed calls and a text message. Femi must have called when she was pleading with her father to change his mind. She dialed his number. It didn't go through. She tried it again. Same response.

Who else could she call? Peju had travelled to Abuja for a conference. She couldn't call Becky. Her parents would ask questions. They'd want to know what happened. Segun was her last bet.

She dialed his number. She'd only stay the night. By morning, she'd find somewhere else to go. If only she had not emptied her account to settle a loan, she'd have had enough cash to book for a week at a cheap hotel.

Segun answered. "Hey."

Tomi voice trembled. The more she fought the tears, the faster they poured down her face. She held her hands to her mouth and tried to steady herself.

"Tomi, you are crying."

"Segun, please come and pick me. I'm in front of my house."

"I'm coming right away."

Few minutes after he ended the call, Ayo appeared at the gate. "What are you going to do now?"

Tomi folded her hands and stared into the darkness. Ayo stood in front of her.

"I can call my friend to come pick you to a hotel." She held out some crispy one thousand naira notes. "Take it."

Tomi shook her head. "I don't want it."

There were tears in Ayo's eyes. "I'm sorry I spoke to you that way. I was wrong. It's not your fault that this is happening to our parents." Ayo paused. "Tomi, you can't stand here all night."

"A friend is coming to pick me up. I'll be fine."

Ayo stood for a while and returned to the house. Segun arrived. He jumped out of the car and went to Tomi.

"You were kicked out of the house?" He said, looking at the box beside Tomi. Seeing the tears running down her face, he grabbed the box and put it in the back seat before opening the door for her. She cried all the way to Segun's flat.

Segun's living room was inviting. The walls were newly painted. Bright yellow walls that matched brown leather settee. The marbled floor was sparking clean.

Tomi settled into one of the armchairs. Segun entered the kitchen and returned with a mug of hot coffee. He placed the mug on a stool in front of her.

Segun sat beside her, unsure of what to say or do. Tomi looked devastated. He wished he knew how to reach into her heart.

Fresh batch of tears filled Tomi's eyes. Segun moved closer and squeezed her hand.

"It was my fault. I shouldn't have gone to see Stella. Now, I've spoilt everything."

Segun patted her back gently. "Stop talking like that. It's not your fault."

She leaned into him and he locked his hand firmly around her waist. Tomi felt his chest heave up and down in quick beats and an alarm went off in her head. She sat up quickly.

Segun stood up. "Let me show you to the guest room."

There was something about Segun that frightened her. He looked restless as he led her to the guest room.

"Segun, I'm sorry I bumped into you at this time of the night. I promise I'll find another place by morning."

He smiled as they entered the guest room. "You can stay here as long as you want." He dropped her box beside a large mattress on the floor. "I'm sorry I've not made a bed stand yet."

"This is fine. Thank you so much."

As she bent to remove her sandals, Segun grabbed her from behind and turned her to face him. He planted a kiss on her lips and began to run his hands roughly over her body.

Fear gripped Tomi. "Segun, what are you doing?"

Segun didn't stop. His eyes burnt with lust. He pushed her towards the wall. Tomi struggled to get away from him but his hands were strong.

"Tomi, please, stop fighting me." Segun pleaded as he unbuckled his trouser. 'Give me this chance. Every night I imagined your body entangled in mine. Listen, I know you are a virgin. I'll be gentle with you. I'll teach you

amazing styles. I was watching a video when your call came in. I swear, it's the best position ever."

She stared into his eyes and saw a monster. His trouser had slipped to the floor. She was going to be raped tonight. The devil had finally gotten a way to break her spirit.

"Segun, please don't do this. I'm begging you."

Segun was not listening anymore. He tore her shirt opened and pushed her to the mattress.

"God, please. Don't let him do this to me." Tomi cried, waiting for the worse moment to pass.

Someone knocked on the door. Segun stopped. Tomi began to scream for help. Segun slowly stood up from the bed and stared at Tomi, shame filling his eyes.

"Oh my God, I almost raped you." Segun said and fled out of the room.

Tomi's phone rang. It was Femi.

"Femi, help me!" Tomi yelled.

"Where are you?"

She grabbed her box and ran out of the room. Segun was not in the living room. He was not outside either.

"I'm in Segun's house."

Femi hesitated. "What are you doing there?"

"Just come. I'll explain."

"What's the address?"

"I don't know. I think it's around Ekiti State University. Help me please."

"Sweetheart, calm down. Where is Segun?'

"I don't know and I don't want to know."

Tomi saw a lady coming out of another flat. She ran to the woman and gave her the phone.

"Someone wants to talk to you."

The woman spoke to Femi and gave him directions to the house. She returned the phone to Tomi.

"I'm on my way now." Femi said and hung up.



Femi glanced at Tomi as he pulled into the street that led to Bethany Hotel. He had been fast asleep when he'd felt someone tap his shoulder. He opened his eyes, looked around and didn't see anyone. As he returned to sleep, he felt a strong urge to pray for Tomi. The sleep disappeared from his eyes and he stood up and began to pray. The burden got stronger.

What was happening?

Call Tomi now.

A still small voice whispered. Quickly, he turned on the phone and called her only to discover she was in trouble.

What had she gone to do in Segun's house? What had Segun done to her? He'd find out the details later but first, he had to ensure she was okay. Femi pulled into the car park of the hotel.

Tomi shivered. "He almost raped me."

Femi eyes widened. "What?"

"When mum told me to leave, I tried your lines but they weren't going through. Peju was out of town and I didn't want Becky's parents to ask me questions. I should have just taken the money Ayo offered me but I was so angry with her for taking sides with mum. I-"

Femi held her hands. "It's okay dear. Let's get you settled in first."

He climbed down from the car and went around to open the door for her. They walked into the hotel lobby and stopped at a pretty fair skinned lady behind a counter.

Femi paid for seven nights. The receptionist handed Tomi a key to her room. Together they went up the elevation and stopped in front of the room.

"You want us to talk?" Femi said, holding her shoulders tenderly.

Tomi shook her head. "No. I want to be alone. You need to rest. If I keep you here, I won't let you drive to Lagos in the morning."

He hugged her. 'I love you very much.'

Tomi smiled. "Thank you Femi. I love you too."

When Tomi entered the well-furnished room, her phone beeped. It was a text message from Segun.

Tomi, I'm so ashamed of myself. I can't believe I almost raped you. I know you'll never forgive me and that's okay. I just want to say I'm sorry. I ran away from Port-Harcourt because of this. I thought coming here would be a fresh start for me. But I was wrong. Lust follows me everywhere. I'm so sorry Tomi.

Tomi sat on the bed, the incident at Segun's house playing back in her mind. Had Segun really tried to rape her?

CHAPTER 11

Tomi didn't leave the hotel room all day. She turned off her phone and stayed under the blanket, her bible opened beside her. She prayed for her father and for the restoration of her parent's marriage. She prayed for the grace to forgive her mum. She prayed for Femi and the future before them.

It was almost 8p.m when she finally turned on her phone. Femi's call came in immediately.

"I've been trying to reach you all day." Femi said.

"I sent a text to you before I went to bed last night. I just realized that it didn't deliver. I wanted to let you know that I'll not be available for a couple of hours. I'm so sorry."

"It's okay. Hope you enjoyed your day?"

Tomi smiled. "Actually, I did. There is something sweet about shutting yourself away from the noise and getting into fellowship with God. I feel so much at peace."

Femi chuckled. "I like the tone of that."

"Femi, I perceive God wants me to see my dad's spiritual parents. They were part of our lives until that adultery took place. Dad cut off communication with them. I feel I should let them know what's going on."

"Where do they reside?"

"Lagos. Will you go with me?"

Femi squealed in excitement. "My baby wants to come to Lagos. I'm thrilled already. So when should I be expecting you?"

Tomi hesitated. She had three Ankara gowns to deliver by Thursday evening. "Friday. I'll pass the night at a friend's place and go see them on Saturday."

"Saturday is perfect. We'll have enough time to talk before you return to Ado. You'll have to stay over till Sunday so you can meet my Pastor."

"Alright." Tomi paused. "By the way, Peju will be back this Friday. I'll be moving to her place until I get my own apartment."

"That's cool."

Tomi thought she heard cars honking "Where are you?"

"I'm on my way home. I'm close to the house though but this traffic is unbelievably crazy. I've been at this spot for almost twenty minutes."

"That's serious. I hope you've had dinner?"

"I just did." Femi paused. "I was thinking we could pray together for a couple of minutes. With the traffic, I might probably be on the road for another one hour."

Tomi reached for the remote of the television and turned the TV off. She sat up and propped up a pillow against her back.

"Please, don't close your eyes while praying."

Femi laughed. "Of course, I won't."

A prayer that was set for a couple of minutes went on for over an hour. They were still praying after Femi drove into his compound. He turned off the engine and relaxed against the head rest, listening to Tomi share a scripture she had read that morning. When she finished, he shared his thoughts on the verse which led to another prayer session. Afterwards, they played, laughed and talked about other things.

It was almost 11p.m before Tomi finally ended the call. Her heart was bubbling with joy and she was finding it difficult to stay still.

"Oh God, I love Femi so much." Tomi whispered and pulled the blanket over her head. She pulled the blanket down and began to laugh again. She raised her legs and kicked them into the air.

Does love make a person act like a child?

Tomi reached for her phone and went through her picture gallery, searching for Femi's pictures. She found one and her eyes lightened up. Femi was standing in front of his house, in a white sleeveless t-shirt and knickers. He wore sunglasses and with his hands in his pocket, smiled at the camera. Tomi thought he was the

most handsome man on earth. She stared long at the picture. This was her man. Her lover. The man she wanted to spend the rest of her life with.

Tomi turned off the light. It was time to sleep. She had to be at her fashion studio very early in the morning. There was work to be done. She felt refreshed enough to commence work again.

As she faced the wall, Femi's thoughts crossed her heart. She closed her eyes and imagined she was married to Femi and they were holding hands as they walked down the street of Lagos on a windy evening.



Paul buried himself in his work. The week after he left Folake, he landed two building contracts. He drove his men hard and a job that would have taken six months was completed in three. Each time he returned to the bungalow, one of the houses he built across town, he felt gloomy. He missed his children. He'd been haunted by the tears in Ayo's eyes and the shock on Tomi's face the night he left. What kind of father would Seyi think he was? He knew his wife would concoct lies in an attempt to prove that he was a terrible father.

Folake was wicked, Paul thought. She was the most heartless woman he'd met. How could he live with such a woman?

Monday morning, Paul returned from inspecting one of the building sites to find his partner, Damola, perched on the edge of his table.

"Paul, what's going on?" Damola asked, as soon as he entered the office.

Paul didn't respond immediately. He reached for a bottle of water from the fridge and poured it down his throat. He threw the empty bottle into the waste bin and turned to his friend.

"I don't understand what you mean."

"You've been acting like a wounded lion for the past few weeks." Damola pointed out. "What's eating you up? If you need a break, say so. Stop treating our staff like animals."

Paul exhaled. "That's a harsh judgement to make. How am I treating them? Did they-" Paul stopped. "I'm sorry."

"You and Folake, are you good?"

Paul wondered if he should tell his partner about his plan. “I’m getting a divorce.”

Damola grinned. “Finally! This is good news. For eleven years, you took nonsense from that woman. You deserve a good life Paul. Women are useless. Remember all I did for Felicia, she still left me for that rouge.”

Paul looked down. “I miss my kids.”

The secretary knocked and peered into the office. She turned her attention towards Paul. “A man is here to see you sir.”

Damola moved away from the table. “Another client, I suppose. Can you see how business is booming for us? I have a feeling this company is about to step into a new level of glory. Kick that woman out jare. We have a business to build.”

“Send the man in.” Paul said to the secretary as Damola left the office.

A handsome man with full grey hair appeared at the entrance. Paul’s eyes widened when he saw who it was. He prostrated flat on the floor. The old man tapped him gently and pulled him up.

Paul couldn’t believe he was standing before the man who had become part of his life at the early years of his marriage.

He had attended a crusade where Pastor Adepoju had ministered. Paul had felt a strong connection with the man. When Pastor Adepoju moved to Ado few months later, he had submitted to discipleship. It was from the Pastor he had learnt to walk with God. But barely two years later, the Pastor had gone on a two year missionary trip to Sierra Leone before relocating to Lagos. They had maintained communication until the affair with Bimbo.

How many years had passed since they last spoke? Paul felt tears well up his eyes. He’d missed his spiritual father.

“How are you?” Pastor Adepoju asked, as he settled into a comfortable chair. His wrinkled face bore compassion.

Paul sat beside him and the moment he opened his mouth, he spilled all that had happened between him and Folake. His business had crashed and the financial difficulties they faced brought a strain on their relationship. His affair with Bimbo. His confession of his adulterous act. Folake’s anger and the way their

relationship had deteriorated. His discovery of her involvement in Stella's abortion. His decision to file for a divorce.

Paul sighed and waited for his spiritual mentor to speak. The old man didn't say anything for a while.

"We've not stopped praying for you Paul. I know you want me to say something about this. But God has instructed me to keep quiet. He's been saying something to you for some time but you've not been listening. When I leave, listen. Do exactly what he is instructing you to do."

Long after his spiritual father left, Paul bowed his head, confused. Just when he thought his spiritual father would give him the answers he needed, he blurted a few words and he was gone.

"God, I'm so hurt. I can't even think."

This is real love-not that we loved God, but that he loved us and sent his Son as a sacrifice to take away our sins.

Paul stopped. What did he just hear? He understood that Christ's love was unconditional. He knew that while he was still wallowing in sin, Christ died for him. But how did that relate to his present predicament?

Love as I have loved you.

Paul stood up and rested his hand on the wall. 'God, she doesn't deserve this love. I stayed with her for years even when she kept taunting me of a sin you had forgiven me of. How do I go back to a stubborn and unforgiving woman like that? She always wanted her own way.'

Love as I have loved you.

"This is difficult. God, I'm tired. I'm not going back there."

No response.

Paul rubbed his hand on his head. "God, please help me. I don't want to go back to her."

"Are you sure you don't want to take the day off?"

Paul raised his head and saw Damola standing at the door. Paul grabbed his jacket hanging on his chair and stepped past his business partner. He had to sort out this restlessness. One thing was sure, he was never going back to Folake.

Tomi was on her knees praying. Several months had passed since her father left the house. Everything was on a standstill.

Was God really listening to their prayers? Every weekend when Femi returned from Lagos, they met at Rotimi's church for prayers. They'd spent hours praying for the restoration of her parents' marriage but there had been no changes. Just the previous week, Ayo informed her that a divorce petition had been filed. Her mother had spoken little since her father left and had resorted to depending on pills.

Was there really hope? Tears trickled down her face. She looked at Femi, praying beside her. Her love for him had grown stronger as they got closer. This was the man she wanted to be with forever but how long before he got tired of waiting for her parents' consent and settle for another lady.

Femi stopped praying and looked at her. "Don't ever think I'm going to leave you. I'm not going anywhere. We are in this together."

Tomi looked at him, puzzled. How could he tell what she was thinking? She smiled, rubbing the engagement ring he had given her some months ago with the back of her thumb. The smile disappeared and was replaced by fear. What if things turned sour? Would they have to wait forever?

Femi squeezed her hand. "We have not been given spirit of fear but of power and of love and of a sound mind."

Tomi pulled her hand away, laughing. "When did you become a mind reader?"

Femi chuckled. He turned his attention fully towards her. "Where is dad residing now?"

"In a three bedroom flat he just completed."

"I want to see him." Femi said quietly.

Tomi stared at him. Why would he want to see her father? "What for?"

"I don't know. While we were praying, I felt a strong leading to see him. I think you should go see mum too."

Tomi considered the matter and thought it a good idea. Maybe this was direction the Holy Spirit wanted them to take. Would her mother still be mad at her?



"Mum, you've not touched your food." Ayo said, pointing at the rice and vegetable stew on the dining table.

Folake turned her face away. "I'm not hungry."

She stood up and went to the chair beside the window. The drapes had been pulled aside. Since Paul walked out of her life, a recliner had been placed permanently by the window. She'd sit there and stare out the window every evening until bedtime.

The bell rang. Ayo went to the door. She shouted when she saw Tomi standing on the veranda.

"Is mum in?" Tomi asked, and stepped into the house.

Folake turned slowly towards the door. Tomi stopped when she saw her mother sitting by the window. Folake turned her face back to the window. Tomi stood there, wondering whether to proceed or not. Her mother had lost weight and her eyes were shrunken. Ayo held Tomi's hands and together they walked to Folake.

"Mum." Tomi said, in a low tone.

Folake kept her gaze fixed on the window. Tomi hugged her from behind.

"I miss you mum. I'm so sorry."

Folake reached for her daughter hand and held on to it tightly. She blinked back tears. The ladies sat side by side their mother. When Tomi looked out, she noticed the window was facing the gate.

"You know why I sit down here every day?" Folake asked, looking from Ayo to Tomi.

Her daughters shook their head. Folake smiled and slowly returned her gaze to the window.

"Your father is coming back home to me. This is where he belongs. Not out there in the cold. You'll see, he will come back."

Ayo placed her head on her mother's shoulders while Tomi held her hands. Now that Tomi was around, Ayo felt it was a good opportunity to plead with her mother to eat something. As she stood up, the gate opened. A red jeep drove into

the house. Tomi glanced at her sister in surprise. Ayo jumped to her feet and ran out. Tomi followed behind.

"Could this be true?" Ayo shouted as she pushed the front door open.

"Let's find out." Tomi said, and rushed out with her sister. A man in a blue t-shirt that hardly hid his pot belly came down.

"Dad!"

The girls ran to hug their father. Tomi couldn't believe what she was seeing. How long had she prayed for this day to come? What did Femi say to her father that made him change his mind? Was it possible he had come to get the rest of his things from the house? Tomi kicked the fear nudging at her heart.

"Is your mother in?"

They led their father into the house. Folake was now standing at the entrance. Paul stood and stared at her, his eyes full of compassion. There was worried concerns on his face.

Folake hissed. "What do you want? You think you can just come in here anytime you like?"

Ayo and Tomi stared at their mother, with their mouths opened. What kind of woman was this?

"You heard me, Paul. Leave my house! You want a divorce right, run and get it. I can live without you! I don't need you."

Paul didn't budge. All he saw was a woman screaming to get into his arms. Since Damola convinced him to file a divorce petition, he had lost his peace. When Femi showed up few days ago, they had talked at length. Everything Femi said had been a confirmation of the instructions he'd been running from. How a young man could be full of so much wisdom still baffled him. Femi had quoted the scripture God gave him the day Pastor Adepoju visited him at the office.

Paul turned to his daughters. "Can you excuse us please?"

Tomi and her sister went to their room. When they shut the door behind them, Tomi turned to her sister.

"Is mum okay at all?"

Ayo sighed and sat down. "I don't understand her too. I hope she is not losing her mind. Dad may leave again and I'm sure he won't return."

Tomi paced the room, praying under her breath. God had to do a miracle. All their prayers could not end in vain. She sat down.

"What about Garden Assembly?" Tomi asked.

"Mum didn't want to have anything to do with them anymore. They were here a couple of times but they stopped coming."

Curious, Tomi went to the door and opened it slowly. She tip-toed towards the staircase and sat down. Ayo joined her. They sat listening to their parents' conversation.



Paul held his wife's shoulders. "I've missed you."

"Paul, you hurt me. You just left me like that after everything I did for you. I was there for you when you messed up."

God help me, this woman had not changed, Paul thought. She was still as self-centered as the day he left her. Was this what he was coming back to?

Love as I have loved you.

Paul touched his wife's chin. "I never loved Bimbo. Lust drove me to do what I did. It is you I love. I'm sorry for everything."

It was as if something was let loose in Folake's head. She began to sob so hard Paul had to hold her tightly. He was confused.

"I waited all these years to hear you say those words. I thought you didn't love me anymore. You just kept mute after it happened. That was why I wanted Bimbo out of the way so I could be the first in your heart again. I just wanted to hear you say those words."

"Folake I was angry that after I confessed to you, you could immediately run to the Pastor to report me. I felt you had gotten your pound of flesh. I felt there was no point apologizing when you've embarrassed me before the church. I was wrong and I'm sorry."

Paul led her back to the sofa and wrapped his hand around her. Folake nudged closer to him.

"I'm sorry for the way I've been treating you. Can you forgive me please?" Paul kissed her. "I have." He kissed her again.

Folake closed her eyes. *God, I have been so carnal and wicked. Will you make me a woman after your own heart. Please God.*

Paul wiped the tears pouring down her face. "You didn't tell Seyi about our separation?"

Folake shook her head. "How did you know?"

"He called me a few weeks ago asking when I'll be coming home. He told me you said I had to gone on a trip."

Folake heard the gate open and stood up. She went to the window and motioned to her husband.

"Your son is back." Paul joined his wife at the window and weaved his hand into hers. He felt a fresh love for Folake and knew it could only be God.

Almost a year ago, he had sworn never to have anything to do with her but here he was, an overwhelming sense of peace flooding his heart. They watched their son bounce towards the house. Seyi stopped to stare at the jeep. He ran into the house.

"Dad!" Seyi shouted. Paul met him at the door and hugged his son. Tomi and her sister descended the stairs, a broad smile on their lips. Tomi couldn't wait to call Femi to share the good news.

Paul winked at his children "Get my boxes from the trunk."

When Paul's children disappeared out of the house, Paul cupped Folake's chin in his hands. "I booked two nights at Orange Brew Hotel before coming."

Folake smiled. "What if I had thrown you out?"

"God already told me you won't."

Paul pulled her into his arms. "By next year, we'd been celebrating a milestone in this marriage. I can't believe I almost threw all that away."

Folake gazed into his face. "There are things I need to set right. Since I disgraced Bimbo openly, I want her vindicated openly. I'm ready to stand before the church to let them know what I did. I want her children to be there when I say it."

Paul pulled his wife closer. The storms had pushed them apart but God had in his mercy united their hearts again.

Segun lifted his laptop and hit it against the wall. He took his phone and did the same. The phone smashed against the wall and the screen shattered to pieces. Segun sat on the floor, frustrated.

"Do I have to struggle with this forever? I hate myself. I'm tired!"

Every time he vowed to stop visiting porn sites, he found himself going back there. He was possessed, Segun concluded.

One of the nude women must have jumped out of the screen and planted a demon in his body. This demon was determined to send him to hell.

He'd left Port-Harcourt in shame when he raped a teenager in his church. Before the rape, he'd watch the girl swing her enormous hips in church. He'd returned home fantasying over her body and craving to touch her. When he became the assistant teen coordinator, it had been easy to draw her close. He'd invited her to his house and had raped her. He could still hear her screams.

He'd been arrested and nearly beaten to death but the girl's parents had refused to push for prosecution. He ran from Port-Harcourt, hoping to get a fresh start in Ekiti after his father, a registrar in the university, helped him with a lecturing job. But he had almost raped Tomi. It would have happened if not for the knock that brought him back to his senses. When he fled the room, he'd gone outside and found no one at the door.

Segun hated the man he had become. What woman would want to live with a man like him? There was no hope for him. No matter the resolutions he made, the demons would always follow him. He hated church. All they screamed about was, Hell and how hot the place was. Like he didn't know already. Pastor Akintola had mentioned his demon at the Sunday service the previous week.

"Some of you are consumed by lust. You watch pornography and masturbate in the secret. If you don't ask for mercy, you'll be destroyed!" The Pastor had yelled.

How many times had he cried to God for mercy and yet he went through the same circle. How much crying was he supposed to do? He had gone without food for several days hoping God would see that and rescue him. He was doomed. Doomed for hell.

Segun pulled his knee up and bowed his head, fighting back tears.

Someone rapped on his door. Segun raised his head, annoyed. He didn't want to talk to anyone. When the person got tired, he'd leave. He bowed his head again. The knock came a second time and a third time. Reluctantly, Segun stood up and went to the door. He panicked when he saw who it was.

This had to be about Tomi. Maybe Femi had come to tell him he was going to prosecute. He deserved to be locked up. He would rot in jail this time.

Femi smiled and stretched out his hand. "Hello Segun."

CHAPTER 12

Segun shook Femi's hand. "Hello Femi."

"Can I come in?" Femi asked. Segun stepped aside. Femi entered the living room and went to the sofa. Segun stood behind a three-seater chair, anxious to get to the bottom of the reason for Femi's visit.

Femi clasped his hands. "Tomi told me about what happened."

Segun came around to settle on the edge of the chair. He kept his eyes on the floor. 'It was a stupid thing I did. If you want to take this up with the law, I'm ready for the consequences."

"That's not why I'm here. Listen, I want to help you."

Segun flared up. "No you can't! What do you know about the struggles I am going through? You are a perfect gentleman. Have you ever slept with a woman before?"

Femi looked at him and didn't say anything.

"Answer me please." Femi barked.

Femi wondered if paying Segun a visit was not a huge mistake. "No."

"Have you ever battled pornography?"

"No."

"Masturbation?"

"No."

"Have you ever kissed a woman in your life?"

"Segun, let's-"

"Answer!" Segun insisted. His lips were quivering and his eyes fierce.

Femi hesitated. Segun should be rotting in jail for almost raping his fiancée. What right did he have to question him this way? His eyes flashed with disdain at a man who couldn't control his libido. When Femi glanced at Segun, the anger

disappeared and was replaced with compassion. He saw behind the stony glare, a man screaming for help.

"No. I have never kissed a woman in my life." Femi responded dryly.

Segun gave a bleak laugh. "So how do you want to help me? You can't understand the demons I fight every night. I would kill to be in your position right now. But that's not possible because I am ruined beyond repairs. Hell is what I deserve right now."

Femi sighed. "It was for you that Christ came. He went to the cross to rescue us from hell. I may not have done any of the things you mentioned but I know God's Love. I know the freedom in Christ. I am fully persuaded that our unflinching faith in the finished works of Christ is the victory we have to overcome this corrupt world. Segun, when the revelation of the finished works become life to you and the reality of your position in Christ consumes your mind, sinful habit will have no room to thrive."

Segun closed his eyes and tears trickled down his face. He bowed his head. "I want to be free. I've watched hard porn videos every day for more than six years. Lust is driving me to my ruin. I'm tired Femi. I don't even know if I'm saved."

Femi grabbed one of the stools and placed it in front of Segun. He sat down. 'God loves you. He is not mad at you at all. Jesus Christ took all of your sins in his body and put an end to sin's power. When he resurrected, you rose with him to a newness of life. All you have to do is believe and accept his offer of salvation."

Femi opened up his palms. Segun placed his hands in them. They bowed their heads and Femi led him to Christ.

When the prayers ended, Femi smiled, his hands still locked in with Segun's hands. "This is the beginning of abundant life for you. You have received the gift of righteousness and abundant grace to reign in this life. Never let anyone talk you out of what you have received. You are joint heirs with Christ. Not even when you find yourself slipping back into those habits should you doubt your position as a son. If you will maintain your stand and constantly renew your mind with the Word, you will see transformation."

Segun listened to every word Femi said. He didn't want him to stop talking. There was something about this man that gave him so much hope. His heart felt light. He was joyful too.

As he saw Femi to the door, he decided to say what had been on his mind while Femi prayed for him.

"Femi, I really need someone to help me grow." Segun said, standing in front of the door. "Will you be willing to disciple me?"

Femi smiled. "I'll be glad to do so." He stopped. "There is one more thing. You can be filled with the Holy Ghost right now."

Segun's eye widened. "Really?"

"You want that?" Femi asked.

"Yes!"

Right there, as they stood at the entrance, Femi spoke to him about the baptism of the spirit. After a few minutes, he laid his hands on Segun's head and began to pray in the Spirit. Suddenly, Segun began to hear sounds that stayed in his throat but he was afraid to open his mouth.

"Until you open your mouth, nothing will happen."

As Segun obeyed, his lips felt dried and no words came out. But as he responded slowly to the incoherent words, he felt an overwhelming force take control of his lips. He fell to his knees and words he couldn't understand flowed seamlessly from his lips.

"That's it!" Femi laughed aloud. "Glory!"



"We'll fix a time every weekend where we'll meet to discuss and pray." Femi said, as they walked towards the entrance where his car was parked.

Segun couldn't control his excitement. He was bouncing with his hands in his pocket like he had just won an award of hundred million dollars.

Femi continued. "I'll be calling you every week by God's grace. Possibly, once in a week, we'll have morning devotions together. There are lots of things I'll love to share with you."

Segun exhaled slowly. Who was he that God could love him this much. When he thought his life was never going to make sense, God in his mercy had sent Femi to him. He couldn't explain the joy that filled his heart. He was a son in the kingdom. He was seated in heavenly places in Christ. What other greater thing could he ask for?

When they got outside the gate, Segun was surprised to see Tomi sitting in Femi's car. Her eyes were glued to her phone screen. The air-conditioner was turned on and the windows rolled up. Femi had to tap the window to get her attention. She opened the door and stepped out of the car.

Segun closed his eyes for a brief moment, memories of the night he had brought Tomi to his house flooding his mind. Tomi had every reason not to forgive him. He had almost raped her. He wished he could run away and never see Tomi again. Had Femi convinced her to come?

"I forgive you Segun." Tomi said, leaning on the car.

Segun looked at her and what he saw in her eyes was not what he'd expected. No mockery. No taunts. Instead he saw compassion and love. Segun couldn't understand it. He just stood there speechless. Femi moved closer to him.

"Always remember, there is no more condemnation to you. You are in union with Christ and everything God has provided to every child of his, is available to you. Stand in the victory you have received by declaring what God says about you. When I get home, I'll text you some scriptural verses.'

Femi hugged his new convert and climbed into the car. Tomi waved at him as Femi drove away.

An hour later, Femi pulled up in front of Tomi's shop, his heart still bursting with so much joy. When he'd received a strong urge to pray for Segun, he had at first kicked against it. This was the man who almost raped his girl. But the urge had stayed strong in his heart throughout the day until close of work. He had responded and while praying he had known God wanted him to speak to Segun when he came to Ado for the weekend. He was happy he obeyed. He could feel God's hand squeezing him gently on his shoulder as he said, 'Weldone my dear son.'

"What happened with you and Segun in his house? There was this glow on his face."

Femi smiled. “He needed help. God chose me to help him. Christ is glorified.”

Tomi looked at the shop and saw her apprentices laughing as they worked. She turned to face Femi. “I’m so privileged to have a man like you in my life.”

Femi touched her cheeks. “I want to ask for a favour.”

Tomi frowned, wondering what Femi could possibly want. She searched his eyes for a clue. Nothing.

“Spill.” Tomi said.

“Remove your wig.”

Tomi’s hands immediately went to her head. “No way! I’m not removing it.”

Femi stared long at her, grinning. “Tomi please. For God’s sake, you are going to be wearing this from our bedroom. Why not let me see what I’ll wake up to every morning.”

Tomi shook her head. “Femi, No. You can’t see my hair.”

Femi’s hand went to the braided wig. Tomi slapped his hand away, laughing.

“Can we do this some other time?” Tomi pleaded.

Femi shook his head. “I want to see the hair now. When I video call you for our morning devotion, I’m always eager to see that hair but you are either wearing a hair net or tying a scarf.”

“My front hair is all gone. I’m just trying to grow it back.”

Femi’s eyes were focused on the wig. “Can we get the wig out of the way already?”

Slowly, Tomi pulled off the wig and threw her head back on the headrest. She felt exposed. Panic seized her at first, but gradually, she relaxed and slowly turned her face towards Femi. There was a broad smile on his face.

Femi touched her bald hair edges. “My beautiful princess.”

“Becky introduced me to some natural hair remedies to grow back my front hair. I just pray it works. I’ve used onions and rice water but none of it worked.”

Femi chuckled. ‘Rice water to grow your hair. Women!”

Femi’s phone rang. He raised his eyebrows when he saw the caller ID. “It’s your dad.”

Tomi wore back her wig, using the side mirror to arrange it properly while Femi answered the phone.

"Good afternoon sir." Femi greeted.

"This is Tomi's father." The voice on the other line said.

"Yes sir."

"My wife and I will like to meet with you and Bukola tomorrow evening at your place. Is 5 p.m okay?"

"Yes, it is. We'll be expecting you."

When Tomi's father hung up, Femi repeated what Tomi's father said. Tomi smiled and continued to arrange the braids.

"Wait o. You've been arranging this braids since. Are you sure we will not be going late to church every Sunday morning like this."

Tomi rolled her eyes at Femi and returned her attention to the mirror. She held the tip of the braids and wrapped two rubber bands firmly around it. She released the tips to fall back to her shoulder.

"I wonder what you said to my father when you went to see him. I don't know what you do to these people that just bring them back to their senses."

Femi smiled. "I just shared mum's last words with your father along with some other things God placed in my heart to tell him."

Tomi weaved her fingers through Femi's fingers and stared lovingly at him.

"I can't wait to be your wife." Tomi muttered. Warmth and desire filled her eyes.

Femi couldn't tear his gaze away from her. "My beautiful princess."

Paul woke up Sunday morning. He glanced at his wife sleeping beside him and checked the time on his phone. 4.37a.m. He got down from the bed and went to sit on the sofa.

What was wrong with him? Why did he wake up with this deep seated anger? He looked around the sitting area of the bedroom and remembered the times he'd pretended to watch TV while his wife taunted him on the adulterous

affair. Had they not decided to let go of the past and start afresh? Why was he still feeling this way?

Since they returned from the hotel, Folake had completely changed. She'd treated him with so much care that it had first scared him. Not once had any foul word come out of her lips. Yet he felt angry. He couldn't get over the emotional trauma he had suffered from her words.

Paul paced the room, fighting the thoughts and the voices trying to choke him. They were all demanding for a pound of flesh.

Deal with her, the thoughts screamed at him.

Don't let her get away with this. Remember the time you were depressed and had to take anti-depressant pills? Look at what she did to Bimbo. What sane woman would act that way?

Paul sighed and pulled out his phone from under the pillow.

He called his spiritual father. It was not dawn yet but he had to talk to someone. Pastor Adepoju picked the call on the second ring.

"My dear son, in whom I am well pleased." The Pastor said softly.

"Good morning sir." Paul greeted.

"I just finished praying for you. How is Folake?"

Paul turned slightly to his wife who was still fast asleep. "She's asleep."

"You sound bothered." Pastor Adepoju noted.

Paul let out a deep sigh. "When I reconciled with Folake, I was happy and I was ready to let go. We even lodged in a hotel for some days. It was fun. We let our feelings out in the open and I apologized again and she did same. We prayed together. I was really glad to have my marriage back. Right now, I don't understand why I feel so angry and upset. Every wrong thing she has done to me just keeps rushing back into my mind.'

Pastor Adepoju didn't say anything for a while. "Can you remember when Jesus asked Peter who he thought he was?"

"Yes I remember." Paul said. "Peter said, you are the Christ, the Son of the living God."

"What was Jesus' response?" The Pastor asked.

"Flesh and blood has not revealed this to you but my father in heaven."

"I trained you well in the word." Pastor Adepoju laughed. "Now, remember what happened afterwards. The same Peter who had by the Spirit of the Lord declared Christ's identity was rebuked by our Lord when he bluntly told Jesus he would not go to the cross. What did Jesus say?"

"Get thee behind me Satan." Paul responded.

Pastor Adepoju continued. "How could a man move from a declaration birthed by the spirit to one spearheaded by the flesh within a short period of time?" Pastor Adepoju paused. "Paul, the mind is a battlefield. The fact that you won a victory over a particular situation one minute does not mean the flesh cannot attack the next moment."

Paul exhaled, taking in every word his mentor was saying to him. He had to take charge of his mind. This was exactly what had happened. He had allowed thoughts of the past take room in his heart and it had left him with anger and bitterness.

"Speak to your mind Paul. Don't just sit there and wonder where those thoughts originate from. Declare God's word over the union between yourself and your wife. Paul, pray. Never give the devil any room in your life."

Paul jumped up from the sofa and began to march round the room. He held the phone close to his ear while he listened as his mentor raised prayer declarations.

"My family is blessed." Paul prayed. "The love of Christ is shed abroad in my heart. Oh there is fresh love for my wife! That love that passes all knowledge consumes my heart in the name of Jesus."

He stopped in front of the bed. "I bring every thought to the obedience of Christ. I have the mind of Christ. I think the thoughts of the Lord. I love my wife as Christ loves the church. The deep realities of the love walk is revealed to me, in the name of Jesus."

The more Pastor Adepoju prayed, the stronger the fire Paul felt in his bones. At a point he got on his knees and was lost in prayer.

Husbands, love your wives, even as Christ loved the church, and gave himself for it; that he might sanctify and cleanse it with the washing of the water by the word.

The scripture dropped in his heart with an understanding that he had never seen before.

Long after Pastor Adepoju ended the call, he remained on his knees praying. Calmness settled in his heart with an inexplicable joy. When he stood up from the floor, Folake was already up, kneeling by the bedside, praying.



"Tomi's parents are coming to see us? For what?" Bukola asked, as she sat in the living room with Rotimi and her brother. Femi had just returned from church and Rotimi had stopped by to pick a parcel his sister-in-law had sent through Femi.

"Calm down, at least let them get here first." Femi said to his sister.

Bukola hissed. "That's if I'll not first pour hot water on their bodies. Let me guess, they are coming to bribe me so I can keep my mouth shut. They have not seen anything yet."

Femi removed his shoes and took them into the room. He came out to meet Rotimi on his feet. He was set to go home.

Bukola was still ranting. "They ruined our family. Things would have been better if not for their wickedness. That church has not heard the last of me."

"Keep quiet!" Rotimi barked. Bukola glanced at him, shocked. Femi too was surprised.

"What is wrong with you?" Rotimi said "How your life will turn out eventually is your responsibility. Yes, they treated your mother terribly. But right now, she is in heaven resting while you are here, squeaking like a duck. You stopped school. Got into prostitution. Started drinking. You refuse to do anything tangible with your life. Bukola, you are in your late twenties, for goodness sake. Figure out what you want to do with your life or else all you'll ever be known for is that you came to this world to whine."

Bukola looked away hurt. Femi stood there liking every bit of the conversation.

Rotimi was not done. "We don't allow the bad experiences we've encountered push us further down the valley. We use those circumstances as stepping stones to get the best from life. My mother abandoned me in an old farm.

What if I had decided to live recklessly in an attempt to get back at her? Who will suffer the consequences at the end? Thank God for the gift of salvation. Your mother received it. Your brother and I received that life too. Christ transformed us. He will do same for you too. Take a stand. The choice is yours to make."

When Rotimi finished talking, he walked out of the house. Bukola stared blankly at the wall and remained that way even when Tomi's parents came to the house.

Femi received the visitors warmly and set two bottles of orange juice before them. As far as Bukola was concerned, Tomi's parents could as well have been invisible.

"I'm sorry about the lie I told against your mother." Folake started. "She had nothing to do with the abortion. She was falsely excommunicated from the church. I had a hand in it. Please find it in your heart to forgive me."

Tears welled up Bukola's eyes. "Forgiveness, does that word still exist?"

Folake ignored her question. "I'm inviting you to Garden Assembly next week Sunday. I am going to stand before the congregation to tell them what I did to your mother."

Bukola raised her head and stared at Tomi's mother. This was not what she expected to hear. She kept looking at the woman even after they stood up to leave. Could Mama Folake really mean what she said?

Folake apologized again and left the house with her husband. Femi followed behind. When they got outside, Paul stopped and faced Femi.

"So what's the situation report? You still want to marry my daughter?"

Femi's eyes widened. He was tongue-tied for a second. "Yes! Yes! I want to marry her. We-we -love each other."

Folake laughed and walked to the car. She turned slightly towards Femi. "Who wouldn't want a man like you for a son-in-law?"

Paul smiled. "You have our consent. Just let us know your plans."

Femi prostrated flat on the floor. "Thank you so much."

"Stand up." Tomi's father tapped his shoulder gently. "Go break the news to your girl."

When he got back to the house, Bukola was still sitting at the spot where he had left her. He would have to tell her whether or not she liked the news. He sat quietly beside her.

"Bukola, I finally got the consent of Tomi's parents. I'm getting married to Tomi."

Bukola stared at her brother, dumbfounded. "Wait, is this a super story or what?" She wanted to say more but instead she stood up and walked angrily into her room. Femi picked up his phone to call Tomi.



A heap of clothes lay on Becky's bed. Shoes of different colours were scattered in different directions on the floor. Tomi leaned close to the window, watching Peju fold clothes into a big box. Becky was sweating profusely as she arranged her shoes into another box.

"Babe, hope you know you can't take all these clothes to Canada. It does not make sense. Go and buy correct clothes there and leave these for us."

Becky laughed. "You know most of my clothes cannot size you."

Peju held up a beautiful purple gown. "This will."

Becky tried to snatch the gown away. Peju hid it behind her.

Becky shook her head. "Peju please, I just bought that gown. See, I'll definitely give you some of my clothes and you can even take any of my shoes but you see that gown, it's going with me to Canada."

Peju glanced at Tomi who had refused to join the conversation. "What's wrong with this one?"

"She is still vexed that I'll be out of this country in a couple of days. I don't know what she wants me to be doing here." Becky said.

Peju went to Tomi and tickled her. Her body remained stiff. Peju noticed there were tears in her eyes.

"*Omo, babe don dey cry o.* I wonder what will happen when we get to the airport on Wednesday."

Becky went to her and put her hands around her neck. "I'm going to miss you too. It's a pity I won't be around for your wedding."

Tomi chuckled. “Wedding that we have no idea when it’s going to happen. The last thing I want to do is ask my parents for their consent. I need to give them some time to figure out their lives.”

“At least there is hope.” Peju said.

Becky held her hand and pulled her away from the wall and towards the bed. As Tomi sat down, her phone rang. She smiled and glanced up at her friends.

Peju pouted her lips. “That must be Femi. No long discussion o. Tell him we are having girl time.”

Tomi answered the call. “Hey sweetheart.”

“You won’t believe what just happened.” Femi said, laughing loudly. “Your dad was here and while I was seeing him off to the car, he asked when we’d love to get married. *Lorokan sha*, He has given us his consent.”

Tomi jumped to her feet. “Jesus!” She turned to her friends, in excitement. “My parents have agreed. I’m getting married soon!”

Her friends hugged her so tightly that the phone almost fell from her hands. Tomi couldn’t contain the excitement. Tears of joy trickled down her face.

“I have to go home now. I need to see my parents.”

Tomi grabbed her bag and ran out of the room. She flagged down a motorbike and gave directions to her house. Her heart raced as the bike man sped down her street and finally stopped in front of her house. She jumped down, paid him the fare and ran into the house.

Tomi’s mother was engaged in a conversation with Ayo when Tomi entered.

“Mum, is it true? Femi said you and dad agreed for us to get married.”

Folake nodded, her face beaming with smiles. Tomi ran to hug her.

“Thank you so much. Where is dad?”

“He went out with your brother.”

Tomi hugged her mother. “I love you mum.”

Ayo clapped her hands. “You too like man abeg. See tears in your eyes.”

“Leave my daughter alone.” Folake cautioned her younger daughter playfully and pulled Tomi into her embrace.

CHAPTER 13

Femi drove down a narrow dusty road that led to Garden Assembly. Harmattan was in full gear and the crust from the dry untarred road left tiny patches on his Toyota Camry, a car he had taken time to wash early that morning. Bukola sat beside him in silence and stared out of the window.

When Femi drove into the church's compound, he sighted a man carrying a stack of offering baskets out of the usher's room. The man was followed by a lady holding a long broom. Their faces were not familiar. Femi wondered if there were still old members in the church. How many years since he left Garden Assembly?

He parked close to the fence and turned off the engine. He glanced briefly at his sister.

The previous night, Pastor Akintola had called Femi. He wanted to see him and his sister before service kicked off that Sunday.

Femi wondered what the Pastor had to say. Would he apologize? Would he admit he'd been wrong for not carrying out a proper investigation before excommunicating his mother from the church? Definitely, he'd be sober now. Pastor Akintola was a hard man who always wanted his own way. But the evidence was clear. His mother had been falsely accused. If for anything, this error would teach him a lesson on how handle his flock better.

Femi opened the door. He noticed Bukola didn't make any attempt to climb out of the car.

"You're not coming down?"

Bukola kept a straight face. "I don't want to see him. I'll go into the church when the service starts."

Femi tried to persuade her to go with him. Bukola refused. He shut the door and walked alone to the church secretariat located behind the church auditorium. As he walked down the corridor of the auditorium, someone shouted his name.

He turned and saw a lady dressed in a black shirt over a black skirt with a green beret placed firmly on her head. The lady flew into his hands and started crying.

Femi laughed as he pulled away enough to peer at her face.

Cynthia.

The epileptic teenage girl who fell into a seizure at the hangout organized by the Garden Assembly youth group some years ago. Most of the members had fled from the scene that day. Femi along with some of the executive members had stayed by her side, clearing away bottles and sharp objects. They prayed quietly, watching her muscles stiffen and her arms and legs jerk uncontrollably. Nurse Deborah had gently placed Cynthia on her side in an attempt to keep her airway clear.

Femi remembered that as he prayed for her, he had seen in a flash, a young man dressed in white. The man had touched the side of Cynthia's head. The vibration stopped. She'd stood up, her eyes full of wonder and amazement. Femi opened his eyes as the vision cleared from his memory. Cynthia was still on the ground. Quietly, he drew close and touched the side of her head. Cynthia became calm immediately. It was the last time she had any seizure.

"Good to see you Cynthia."

She wiped the tears from her eyes. "We missed you. Please tell me you are back.'

Before Femi would reply, a lady popped out of the auditorium. She stared at him in surprise and disappeared into the church. She returned with more people. They rushed at Femi. All of them were talking at once. Femi noticed some unfamiliar faces standing aside, looking at him with curious glances

"Listen, I'm going to have enough time with you later. Right now, I have to see the Pastor." Femi said and pulled away from the small crowd.

"Where is Sister Bukola?" A teenage girl asked.

"She is in the car."

The girl rushed to the car park followed by two other girls. Femi continued to the Pastor's office.

The Pastor's P.A smiled when Femi walked into the office. He was led through another door that had the words, 'Pastor's office' inscribed on it. Pastor Akintola sat behind a large mahogany table, a deep frown planted on his face. Femi sensed the meeting would not go well.

"Sit down." The Pastor ordered.

Femi obeyed and waited. The Pastor leaned forward.

"I must confess, your family has caused this church so much trouble."

Femi stared at the Pastor, shocked to hear him say those words. He felt anger building in his heart and quietly pushed it down.

"I do not regret my decision. I would still have excommunicated your mother from this church anyway. She was already a thorn in our flesh. Sis Folake might be sincere in her desire to tell the truth, but you must understand that I had every right to believe her story of your mother's involvement in the abortion. Your mother had already laid a bad foundation here. You should know that I am not a Pastor who isn't sensitive to God's leading. I don't do things anyhow. I have pastored this church for more than thirty years. I am not a baby in the things of the Spirit."

Femi sighed. He could sense pride oozing out of the Pastor's words. What would it take for him to admit that he hadn't properly investigated before making such a decision?

Femi exhaled. He was grateful Bukola had stayed back in the car. "It's alright sir."

The Pastor looked down at the bible in front of him. "That will be all for now."

When Femi got out of the office, for a moment, he couldn't get a grip on himself. He went behind the secretariat and leaned on the wall. He had trained himself not to fly off the handle but this was overwhelming. He closed his eyes and let out a deep breath. He didn't want to talk to God. He could tell what response he'd get.

Love. Do not repay evil with evil but with good. The wrath of man worketh not the righteousness of God. You do not belong to this realm. You can't act like

the world. You are different. Live out your very own nature. You are a man in Christ. Forgive as I have forgiven you.

It wasn't easy. His flesh was screaming for revenge. He wanted to drive out of the church and never look back. But he knew accepting the responses of the flesh would drive him closer to the self-life. He understood that standing firm in the face of temptation was a deeper call towards the life of the Spirit. He would win this time.

Femi smiled, even though the hurt still pierced deep at his heart. He returned to the auditorium. The crowd that met him at the entrance threw the pain farther away. There were men, women, teenagers excited to see him.

Tayo, the youth coordinator pulled him aside. "I know you are upset with us for not standing by you when your mother died. I hope you find a place in your heart to forgive us. When we heard about her death, I gathered the members together. We made plans to pay you a visit that week and to see how we could be of help. But the Pastor gave a clear order that none of us must contact you or attend the burial ceremony. I didn't know what to do. I'm so sorry."

"I knew it! I knew that man had a hand in it." Bukola said from behind them. The two men turned to see Bukola fuming with anger. Tayo reached for her hand. She jerked free.

"I'm sorry." Tayo said.

Bukola glared at him. "You of all people. Tayo, I thought we were friends. But no-" She shook her head. "I just want to get over with this service."

Tayo reached for her hand again. "Bukola, please forgive me. I tried your number several times until I got your text message. You didn't want me to contact you again."

When Bukola pulled her hand away, Tayo held it tight and drew her close. He hugged her. Bukola wept in his arms. Femi looked around and saw some women rolling their eyes at them and murmuring as they walked into the church.

Tomi hurried to where Femi was standing. "Hello."

Femi gave her a warm side hug and together they walked into the church. Tomi joined Peju and some of her friends at the middle row while Femi got a seat close to the front row, flanked by his sister and Segun.

The service went well. The Pastor concentrated on his sermon, 'A call to holiness.' without chipping in words pointed at Bimbo's excommunication. When he finished, he announced that Folake had something to say.

The hall went silent as Folake walked to the front of the church in a long gown and blue hat. Her eyes scanned the crowd and stopped at Femi. Femi smiled. She smiled back. Her eyes stayed on Bukola who was looking at her intently.

"Almost four years ago, Sis Bimbo was excommunicated from this church for her involvement in an abortion she had no part in. I was the one who set her up."

Sighs and mutterings went round the hall.

"I was angry at her for what she did with my husband. I wanted to hurt her. I wanted her to feel the excruciating pain I was going through. I loved my husband very much and at that time we were not in good terms and so the news of the affair drove me crazy. I suggested excommunication to the Pastor's wife and convinced the elders that Bimbo was a trouble to the church of God. That was a selfish and wicked thing to do."

Folake stopped and dabbed a white handkerchief at her teary eyes. "I wish she was seated here so I can ask for her forgiveness. But she is gone. I'm happy her children showed up today." She turned in Femi's direction. "I want to say I'm sorry for the pain I've caused your family. Please forgive me. I'm begging you in the name of God."

Bukola sat there, stony faced. Folake bowed her head, heaving sobs tearing from her throat. Femi stood up and walked to the front. When he hugged Folake, the congregation stood up, clapping thunderously. Across the hall, handkerchiefs were dabbed across tear smeared faces. When the clapping died down, Femi took the microphone from her.

"These were my mother's last words before she died. She said, "I have hurt a couple of people in Garden assembly. I hope they forgive me. For those who hurt me deliberately or not, I forgive them all. I'm going to heaven to rest."

More women came out. They confessed the times they had falsely spoken against Femi's mother. Each pleaded for forgiveness.

Bukola couldn't listen to them anymore and the tears wouldn't let up. She roused from her seat and hurried out of the auditorium. Tayo and two ladies from the youth executive unit followed her out.

At the end of the confessions, Pastor Akintola climbed the podium, annoyed. He grabbed the microphone from the usher who had run up the steps of the altar to give it to him.

"Can we have the child dedication now?" He turned to the praise team. "Give us a song while the family and well-wishers get ready for the dedication service.'

As a song was raised and the congregation danced to the 'Oluwa e tobi' song, Segun moved close to Femi.

"Pastor Akintola can never change. I have never met a more insensitive and arrogant Pastor in my life."

Femi smiled sadly and returned his gaze to the Pastor. This was the last time he'd step his feet into Garden Assembly.



"Selfie time." Peju announced.

The three ladies, Becky, Peju and Tomi, stood in front of the Murtala Mohammed International Airport, grinning broadly into Peju's phone camera. It was the morning of Becky's departure to Canada. After she checked in her boxes, she'd come out to say farewell to her friends.

Becky's father held out his phone to Peju. "Our turn."

Tomi moved aside while Becky stood, flanked by her parents. Peju took several shots with the phone.

"Thank you." Becky's father said, taking his phone from Peju.

Becky hugged her friends. "I'll miss you so much. We have to keep in touch."

The ladies hugged their friend and promised to keep her abreast of the latest happenings in their lives.

"We'll be out in a couple of minutes." Becky's father said to Tomi and Peju as he walked back into the airport with his daughter. Becky waved and blew kisses at her friends before disappearing through the glass door.

Tomi wrapped her hand around Peju's shoulders and watched the travelers at the entrance roll their boxes into the opening of a cabinet x-ray machine before stepping through the glass door manned by security officers.

"I can't believe Becky won't be spending Christmas with us." Peju said, leaning into her friend. She straightened and faced Tomi. "Have you fixed a date for your wedding?"

"Yes. Next year. March 6th."

"Lucky you. I wish God can speak very clearly to me like he did to you."

Tomi smiled. "God leads, Peju. You told me specifically when you wanted to take that bank job that you were restless. God kept prompting your heart towards working for an NGO. Look how you are flourishing in your purpose. God will not speak to you in a strange way. Just follow the pattern he has been leading you."

"Segun has been coming to my mind." Peju said.

Tomi's eyes widened. Her mouth opened. She quickly shut it. Peju frowned, wondering what was wrong.

"Why are you looking at me like that? I didn't say God is leading me to him. It could as well just be my emotions."

Tomi caught Becky's parents coming out of the entrance. She glanced briefly at Peju.

"Pray more. Be sure you are not led by your emotions."

Peju sighed. "Yeah. Right."



Segun stood in front of the mirror and combed his hair as he declared God's word.

"I am the righteousness of God in Christ Jesus." He said, smiling. "I have been set free from sin. Glory! Sin shall not have dominion over me. I am not under the law. I am under grace."

Someone knocked on his door. Segun dropped the comb on the table and hurried out of the room. When he opened the door, Femi was standing, his hand thrust in the pockets of his blue jean. He winked at Segun from under a black face cap.

"Look who is back from Lagos." Segun said and gave Femi a quick hug. "You can't imagine how much I look forward to our bible studies every weekend."

Femi smiled. "Christmas is in a week. Thankfully, It's on a Friday. I'll be home till Tuesday morning."

Segun yelled in excitement and opened the door wider. "Come in."

Femi didn't move. "You look ready for a prayer walk."

Segun looked at him puzzled. "Prayer walk? What's that?"

Femi turned his face towards the sky. "It's a beautiful Saturday evening, isn't it? Let's take a walk to the university and move around the school praying in tongues."

Segun stepped out of the house and locked the door. "This is going to be exciting."

Femi touched his shoulder. "Let me teach you how to stretch in the place of praying in the spirit. We'll start with three hours today."

Segun's eyes widened. "Three what? You mean we are going to be praying three hours in tongues. How can somebody survive that?"

Femi grinned. "Very soon, we'll be talking about fifteen hours at a stretch. It's not by might, nor by power, but by the spirit of God."

Segun glanced at his mentor with admiration. Femi was a blessing to his life. He had watched his life transform to a completely different person. God had become very real to him.

"Watched porn videos in a while?" Femi asked as they walked away from Segun's flat.

Segun's countenance fell. "It happened last week."

Femi sighed. "Hmmm…What did you do when it happened?"

"I felt really bad because it hadn't happened in a while."

"It's ok to feel remorseful as long as you don't take the guilt trip." Femi responded. "So what happened next?"

"I went straight to Ephesians 1 and reminded myself of the forgiveness of my sins made available in Christ. For an hour, I declared who I was in Christ because at that time, I was already losing a sense of God's love and all kinds of depressing thoughts had attacked my mind. I continued to reassure myself of God's love and the gift of no condemnation that I'd received until my mind became calm and joy welled up in my heart."

Femi smiled. "You are learning very fast. I'm happy."

They were outside Segun's house. Femi reached for his wallet inside the car before locking the car again. They walked down the street that led to the express road.

Segun continued. "It was then the Holy Spirit opened my eyes to see why it had happened. I'd met some young lecturers here who always liked to talk dirty. I sensed God restraining me from getting close to them but I'd been reluctant to tear myself away. The night it happened, one of the lecturers had shown me a sex clip. I got home and my mind was so triggered by what I'd seen. I watched more porn videos and masturbated. But I've learnt my lesson."

Femi touched Segun's shoulder. "I'm glad you are understanding this communication channel we have with the Holy Spirit. We walk in the spirit by the Spirit."

Segun nodded. "That's true."

Femi kept talking. "You have no business with how sinful habits slip away from your life. It's not your business to chase after it. Your part is to renew your mind with the Word, pray as if your life depends on it and listen to the Holy Spirit. Oh boy! That habit will completely break loose."

Segun began to sing. "I am the righteousness of God in Christ Jesus. Sin has no power over me. I am the righteousness of God in Christ Jesus, sin has no power over me. God has already accepted me, I'm his very own. Oh yes, God has already accepted me, I'm his very own."

"That's the spirit!" Femi said, laughing loudly. "Lest I forget, how far about relationship? Any babe nudging at your heart yet?"

Segun chuckled. "Relationship keh? I don't even want to pray or think about it. Maybe in the next three or four years. What I want to do right now is dig into God's word and eat until I'm full. I'm too messed up in my mind to get into

a relationship right now. This is the healing phase for me. I know God is preparing her wherever she is. I also want to meet her prepared."

Femi smiled. "That's great. Let's pray."

The two men walked into the campus gate and began to pray. For hours, they moved from one department to another, lips muttering incoherent words. Segun got tired at a point and Femi held his hand. Suddenly he felt strength course through his body. Smiling, he regained momentum and joined Femi who was already declaring God's promises.

CHAPTER 14

Silent Night, holy Night
All is calm, all is bright.
Round yon Virgin, Mother and Child
Holy Infant so tender and mild
Sleep in heavenly peace
Sleep in heavenly peace

Femi smiled sadly as he listened to the song blasting from a speaker outside a shop on Tomi's street.

It reminded him of his late mother. When he was six, his mother would enter his room very early on Christmas morning, singing at the top of her voice. His father would join her and they'd both lead the children to the living room for prayers. Many times, he was already awake, dreaming of the chicken and fried rice for brunch and the pounded yam that followed later in the evening.

There was always something to eat. He'd eat until his stomach was ready to burst. At night, they'd sit in the living room and listen to his father tell bible stories in a funny way. His parents looked so perfect together. How had they fallen apart?

Femi kicked the thoughts away and focused on the present. Tomi's parents had invited him and his sister for lunch. Bukola had declined. She was not ready to get familiar with Tomi's family. He'd decided to go alone. It was an opportunity to get closer to his fiancée's family.

He parked in front of Tomi's house and walked to the entrance. He knocked and waited.

The door opened. Ayo stood there, grinning at him.

"Come in." She said and stepped aside for him.

Femi's stomach growled at the aroma of grilled chicken that wafted through the living room. He followed Ayo to the sitting room and dropped the hamper gifts he had brought beside the sofa. The living room was colorful. Christmas lights lined the wall and beneath it hung an inscription 'MERRY CHRISTMAS' in bright colours. The T.V was turned on. Little children appeared on the screen singing, 'Oh little town of Bethlehem.'

"Let me get you water. Lunch is almost ready." Ayo said.

"Thank you Ayo."

As Ayo went to get the water, Tomi ran out of the kitchen roaring with laughter. She held a small plate of chicken wings. Her mother followed in pursuit.

"Don't come into my kitchen again. Let my chicken rest." Folake said, pointing a finger at her daughter.

"Mummy, really? After I have finished slaving in that hot furnace you call kitchen, I will not enjoy the reward of my labour. I just took three pieces. Haba, mummy!"

"Thank you for preparing the fried rice, but don't let me see your legs in my kitchen." Folake said and shut the kitchen door.

Tomi turned to her sister as she bit into one of the wings. 'See me see wahala o. Ordinary chicken."

She caught Femi staring at her from the living room and her eyes widened.

"Oh my God! Ayo, you didn't tell me my bobo had arrived."

"He just got here *jare*. See how you are behaving like one agbaya in front of your husband." Ayo rolled her eyes and went into the kitchen.

"If I don't behave like that to him, who else I won do am for?"

Tomi dropped the plate on the center table and hugged Femi.

"You look…" Femi paused. "Homely."

Tomi laughed and reached for the plate. She held up one wing to Femi's mouth. He shook his head.

"Say the truth, I look terrible. I've not even had my bath."

Tomi had been in the kitchen since daybreak. She still had a hairnet covering her hair and her t-shirt was smeared with particles of food. She was surprised she no longer felt anxious at his silent stares. She was comfortable just being with him.

Her eyes settled on hamper baskets. "You got these for us?"

Femi nodded. “I got something special for you. I’ll give you later.”

Tomi smiled. “Thank you.”

She called Seyi to take the hampers upstairs. Her mother came out of the kitchen and met her son heading up the stairs with the baskets.

“Mum, Uncle Femi got me one hamper. The other one is for the family.”Seyi said, standing in front of his mother.

Folake laughed. “One hamper is for you *nibo*. My friend, will you take the baskets to my room.” Seyi stood there, grumbling. Folake pushed him aside. “Move away and let me greet my son-in-law.”



Lunch was splendid. Femi relaxed, listening to Tomi’s family chitchat at the dining table.

“Have you decided where you want to have the church wedding?” Tomi’s father asked as the ladies cleared the table. Tomi dropped the stack of plates in her hands and glanced at Femi.

“We are thinking that after we finish at the registry, we’ll go over to my Pastor’s house for his blessings. We’ll have the reception afterwards.” Femi responded.

Tomi’s mother looked at her husband and shrugged. “If that’s what you want. The most important thing is that there is a wedding.”

Paul reached for a tooth pick. “What date did you pick for the introduction?”

“First weekend in January. I’ve spoken to my aunt. She’ll be here with some of my cousins. We’d rather not let the other relatives know yet. They are trouble.”

“Your aunt confirmed that.” Tomi’s mother said. ‘By the way, she’s really a wonderful woman. The few times we spoke on the phone, we connected very well.”

Femi smiled. “Aunty Morenike is like that. I have also spoken with my father’s brother. He’ll be standing in as my father.”

"You mean Pastor Idowu?' Tomi's father asked. 'He called me yesterday. Wonderful man. But, have you tried reaching your father?"

Femi hesitated. "No one knows where he is."

There was silence at the table.

"So how many people are we expecting for the introduction from your end?" Folake asked, breaking the silence.

"Ten."

Tomi stood there listening. Ayo returned from the kitchen and cleared the remaining plates from the table. Tomi heard voices outside and shot Femi a quick glance.

"Let's get out of here." Tomi said in a low voice but enough for her father to hear.

Paul chuckled and rose. "This house is ready to take on a different atmosphere. I'm out of here too."

Tomi's mother laughed. Ayo came out of the kitchen and pulled the curtain outside. Approaching the door were women in beautiful lace materials. Beside them were children and infants.

"Mum, I'm going out."

Folake shook her head. "No way. Who will take care of my guests?"

"Mummy, please let me go." Ayo pleaded. 'Seyi is here. We've dished the food into different warmers. Chicken. Rice. Plantain. Everything is set. It won't be difficult to locate anything they need.'

"Fine but first, you must deliver that package to Taiwo's grandmother."

The women at the door knocked. "*E ka san o.* Merry Christmas."

Tomi and her sister flew up the stairs to their room. Tomi quickly powdered her face and returned to the staircase. She waited for the women to settle into the living room before descending the stairs. She greeted the visitors and stepped out of the house. She didn't slow down her pace until she got to Femi's car.

"Where are we going to?" Femi asked as he opened the car.

Tomi jumped into the car. "Anywhere. Anywhere away from those women."

"Rotimi called earlier. He'd love to have us around. He said we could bring some of our friends along. I think we should stop to pick Peju, Segun and my sister. Tayo too. That's if they'll be willing to go with us."

Tomi locked her seat belt. "Sweetheart, let's get out of here before my mother changes her mind."

As they sped out of Tomi's street, she decided to tell him what had been eating her up since she woke up that morning.

"Femi, I had a dream about us." Tomi started.

Femi glanced at her. "Oh that's interesting. I hope it's a good one."

Tomi nodded. "It was our wedding day. We were standing in front of Pastor Akintola. He joined us."

Femi looked ahead and didn't say anything for a while. "We can't have the wedding in Garden Assembly, you know that."

Tomi sighed. "You've still not forgiven the Pastor."

"Not so." Femi took a defensive stand as he dialed a number. "I don't have anything against him. I'm not just comfortable in that church."

He placed the phone to his ear. "Bukky, we are heading for Rotimi's place. Should we stop over and pick you up?"

Tomi kept her gaze on him. Her mind went over the dream again. The church had been packed full. They exchanged vows on the altar and she had been full of excitement even after she woke up. The idea of going to a Pastor's house to receive his blessings did not sit well with her.

Garden Assembly was her church. That place was her life. It was true that many things were not right there, but she couldn't deny that her childhood had been formed in that church.

Femi called the others. He'd pick Tayo and Peju at designated bus stops while Segun would join them at Rotimi's house.

Tomi fell into silence. Femi touched her shoulder lightly. She flashed him a quick smile.

"What's wrong?"

Tomi sat up. "I'm okay."

"Are you sure?"

Tomi smiled again. "I'm fine." She pointed ahead. "Bukola is over here."

Femi wasn't convinced. Did she really want the wedding to take place in Garden Assembly after everything he had gone through?

He stopped for Bukola to hop in and continued down the street before turning into a corner that led to the Peju's street.

"You smell really nice." Tomi said to Bukola.

Bukola chuckled and played with the strands of her weavon. "Thank you."

"Hope you are good." Tomi asked, trying to keep the conversation flowing. There was still tension between the two ladies.

Bukola shrugged. "I'm fine."

Tomi sat straight and reclined on the headrest. For reasons she couldn't explain, she felt moody and wanted to be alone. She wanted to be far away from Femi and his sister. Would Bukola ever forgive her family?

She sighed. This was Christmas for goodness sake. She was supposed to be having a great time.

Femi touched her arm. "We'll talk about the wedding later, okay?"

Tomi looked at him. "Your Pastor's house is fine. Forgive my selfishness."

Peju was standing at the bus stop in front of her street. She got in and hugged Bukola. She slapped Tomi a high five.

"Femi, thank you for the call. I was so bored at home and I don't want to go to my parents' house."

"Why?" Bukola asked.

Peju faced her. "All my mother's sisters are around. The house is so full. Those people can ask question. 'When are we coming to eat rice? You should be carrying your first child now? Is there any guy in the picture?' Abeg this Christmas, I want peace of mind."

Bukola chuckled. "I know how to deal with people like that. Just one stare and all of them will shut up."

The ladies laughed. Tomi relaxed. Bukola shared some funny experiences that had them bursting into fits of laughter. When Tayo joined them, conversations became more interesting at the back seat. It felt like the days back in youth group of Garden Assembly when they were one big family.



Tomi noticed that Peju let out a deep breath when she saw Segun sitting with his legs crossed on Rotimi's sofa. Segun stood up to greet his friends. He stopped to smile at Peju.

"The young shall grow." Segun said, grinning. "Peju with the tiny voice. The first day she was asked to take a solo, I was on the keyboard when I just heard one tiny sonorous voice and my hands couldn't move from where they were."

Peju laughed. "Segun you are not serious."

Segun continued. "In my mind I was like, who be this fine girl o. So we have someone with a voice like this in this choir."

"I also remember the first time she led the praise team on a Sunday service." Bukola chipped in. 'Her voice was shaky at first and before we would say jack, babe don enter spirit."

Peju covered her face. "Now I'm shy."

Tomi looked at her. "I wonder why you left the choir for sanitation. You can be weird sometimes."

They settled into more comfortable discussions. Rotimi brought a topic about football and the men went for it.

Rotimi's son jumped on Bukola and it was difficult to get him to stay still. Tomi was amazed at Bukola's patience with the boy. Behind the mask, Bukola was sweet and warm. Tomi wondered how long before she put up the mask again.

Peju's gaze kept returning to Segun. She laughed at his statements and listened with rapt attention when he spoke. He narrated his encounter with Christ and his desire to know God more. Peju was enthralled by his knowledge of the scriptures. Tomi was worried for her.

"I have a question." Tomi asked Femi after they had dropped off Bukola.

"Shoot."

"Is Segun interested in anyone?"

Femi cleared his throat. "Why do you ask?"

Tomi wondered if she should tell him about Peju. "I'm just asking for someone."

Femi smiled. "This is about Peju right? It's obvious she is smitten by him."

Tomi kept quiet. She faced him. "What do you think?"

"Segun isn't ready for a relationship. I'm not just saying this because he said that to me, but as his spiritual mentor, he is not prepared for a relationship. He needs some more time. If she is truly led by God, she'll have to wait for some time."

"Like two or three years?"

Femi turned around a curve and continued down the express. "When he is ready, he'll know."

When he pulled up in front of Tomi's house, he faced her. "We still have an unfinished discussion."

Tomi looked at him, wondering what it was. He stared long at her.

"You want the wedding to hold in Garden Assembly?"

Tomi remembered. "Oh. Yes. But I understand your reasons and I'm fine with it."

"Do you think the Pastor will agree? That man doesn't like me one bit."

"We could try. But Femi, if you don't want it there, I'm okay with the other arrangement."

"Let's see the Pastor."

Tomi looked at him, surprised. "What happened? You were determined never to step your foot into that church again."

Femi drummed the steering with his fingers. "I just realized that I'm connected to that church more than any other place. Right there, I have raised sons, I have experienced the power of God. I have had platforms to touch the lives of several teenagers. Why should I allow the Pastor's reaction make me throw all that away."

Tomi smiled. "You never cease to amaze me. Goodnight sweetheart."

"Goodnight dear." Femi said. Tomi climbed down and shut the door. She waited until he left before heading to the house.

Tomi had barely changed into her pyjamas when Peju called.

"Hey girl, I just want to ask a question." Peju said over the phone.

"Okay. Go on."

"Do you think Segun likes me? You saw the way he was all over me this afternoon. I'm not jumping into conclusions that he is the one. I just want to know if you noticed anything."

Tomi sat on the edge of the bed and turned slightly towards her sister. Ayo was fast asleep.

"Peju, Segun is not ready for a relationship now. He is not even thinking about one. I'll advise you take your mind off him."

Peju exhaled. "Pastor called me last week Sunday. Apparently, one guy in the technical team had approached him of his interest in marrying me."

"Who is the guy?"

"Fisayo. You had moved to Lagos when he joined the church. One very slender brother with small body."

Tomi thought for a while. "I think I know him. Dark skinned. Hairy hands."

"Yes. He called me this morning. We'll be meeting somewhere in town tomorrow. Then there is this choir guy too that has been making some moves. I told him straight I was not interested. At the last human right conference I attended in Abuja, I met a guy. We've been close. He came to Ado to see me a couple of times. I'm not into him abeg."

"Ehn, see hot chick o. Na you dey reign for town."

"I think I'm just one confused person right now."Peju lamented. "I'm not interested in any of them. Like there is this sad way I feel when I think about them."

"And when you think about Segun?"

Peju sighed. "I feel joyful. With him, it's different. There is this excitement I can't explain. I feel so connected with him. I still prayed about it this morning but it's so hard getting him off my mind."

"Peju, I don't want you to get hurt. I've told you already that I made my findings and Segun is not even thinking about a relationship. What if you decide to wait and then he goes for someone else?"

"What if God wants me to wait until he is ready?"

"Peju." Tomi stopped, thinking of the right words to say. "Waiting is not the issue. I just want to be sure you are not assuming this and filling your head with thoughts about this guy."

"I understand. I'm just tired jare. God knows I can't wait to get a proper job. Pray for me. This NGO people in Abuja should call me."

"God will perfect all that concerns you."

"Amen. I believe."

Tomi's mother knocked gently and entered the room. Tomi raised her head.

"Peju, let me call you back."

Tomi ended the call. Folake smiled and sat beside her daughter.

"How was your outing?"

"Mum, I enjoyed every bit of it. Hope your guests enjoyed themselves?"

"Yes, they did." Her mother paused. "Just want to say a few things before I forget. Your wedding is close and it's going to get busier as the day draws nearer."

Tomi shifted into a more comfortable position. "Okay mum. I've been longing for this talk."

"When I first married your father, we took our spiritual walk very seriously. We would pray and read the word together. Even while we courted back on campus, it was what we loved to do. We enjoyed spending time with God. But then I got pregnant and you came on board.

We got so busy and gradually as the year rolled by, many unhealthy things crept in. Of course, I was still very active in church but I had lost my spiritual breath. You and Femi must do everything to keep the spiritual atmosphere intact in your home."

Tomi nodded, taking in her mother's words.

Folake continued. "I remember there was a time your father was going through a very serious financial crisis. It had happened shortly after we got married. I had warned him not to take the deal but he didn't listen. He lost all the money he invested.

I could sense that the devil wanted to use that to pull us apart. Your father flared up at any slightest mistake I made. He talked to me anyhow. My dear, I had to go on my knees. I prayed. I knew he was weak at that time and I was the stronger person. I prayed until things turned around. I still remember standing up to find your father leaning on the entrance to the guest room where I usually spend praying. He looked at me and said, 'What even happened to me?'

Tomi smiled. “I can just imagine his expression when he said it.”

Folake held her daughter’s hand. “One of the most challenging things you might face as you begin your new home is the ability to maintain spiritual momentum. You must do everything to keep it on fire. Your sensitivity to the Holy Spirit must stay intact.

Tomi, you can’t rely on your senses or run your marriage based on how others run theirs. Again, I know in your generation, the distractions are more than I experienced in my days. There is Youtube, Facebook, instagram. There is one particular one that your sister can’t do without.”

“Twitter.” Tomi said.

“Yes! Twitter. I don’t know what she sees in that thing. I have talked and talked. Now, my dear, when I began to lose momentum, it didn’t start in a day. I kept slipping further away until I became something else.”

Folake hesitated. “Be concerned when your prayer and devotion lacks life. Your father and I got to that point. We were just doing devotion as a mere activity. We had lost touch with life. Please, crave the quickening of the Spirit in your home. You saw what happened between me and your father. I was just lucky to have another chance. Not many had their marriages rebound. Deal with issues before they get out of hand. I’m glad that both of you have been trashing different issues and setting things straight from this point. I’ll still talk about other issues before your wedding.”

Tomi sighed. “Thank you mum.”

“I know both of you are deeply in love right now. You can’t see each other’s flaws so clearly. When you get married, reality will set in. Understand that the bonding process comes with some frictions which can quickly be handled for anyone yielded to the Holy Spirit. Deal with hurts as quickly as possible. Never let them take roots in your heart.”

Tomi nodded. “Yes mum, I’ll put all these to heart.”

Folake stood up. “Come, let me show you the Christmas gifts your father and I got for you.”

Folake held her daughter’s hand and they walked out of the room.



"Can we talk?" Bukola stood with her hands folded at the entrance of her room.

Femi was in the living room, watching a movie. He paused the movie and glanced at her.

"Sure." He gestured for her to sit beside him.

She sat and placed her hands on her laps. "I want to go back to school." Femi opened his mouth in surprise. He hugged her. "Halleluyah!"

He jumped to his feet. "What do you want right now? Pizza, sharwama, ice-cream, barbecue fish. Just name it."

Bukola smiled. "Femi, I don't even know where to start from. I've been away from school for more than two years. I'm thinking of going to see my H.O.D."

"Listen, even if they say they can't take you back, there are other options. You could start again at the Open University and get a job while you study. Just let me know if you need anything. You can do this Bukky." He put his hand into his pocket and brought out his wallet. He counted some crispy naira notes and gave them to her.

"Thank you" Bukola said. "I got a new sim card today. My madam has been calling my old line. I've not been to the hotel in two weeks."

Femi frowned. "Just tell her you are not interested in sleeping with men again. You've got a life to make for yourself."

"I sent her a message but she kept calling me. The best option was to get a new phone number."

Femi put his hand around his sister's neck. "I'm here for you."

Bukola pushed his hand away. "I hear you. March next year, you will marry and leave me alone in this house."

Femi laughed and drew his sister close. "Maybe mum is watching us from heaven. She is saying, 'My sweet daughter, I am so proud of you."



Femi and Tomi sat in front of the Pastor's office. It was a week to the wedding. Pastor Akintola stared long at the pregnancy test result in his hands.

"Negative." He said quietly. He looked at the intending couple and sat back in his chair.

"Let's go through the routines." He reached for a file with the heading, 'Intending Couples.'

In the file were some documents and cards. There were also handwritten notes. The Pastor pulled out a blue card with the heading, 'Questions to ask couples before the wedding.'

"You are going to answer Yes or No to these questions. Femi you'll answer first and Tomi will give her own response."

"Yes sir." They chorused.

"Have you had sex with each other before?"

"No." they responded in turns.

"Have you touched any sensitive part of her body?" The Pastor asked Femi.

"No sir."

He asked Tomi same. She replied in the negative.

"Have you kissed?"

"No." They chorused.

The questions kept pouring in.

"Has Tomi slept over at your place before?"

"Have you kissed his cheeks before?"

"Have you fed him anything? This is what I mean. Has he opened his mouth to receive any food item from your hand?"

"Have you seen him wearing only a boxer?"

"Has your hand touched his bare chest?"

"Have you ever run your hand over her thighs?"

"Have you ever sent nudes to each other via any electronic device?"

"Remember I am standing as God's priest, if you tell a lie, the judgment of God will come upon you. Tell me the truth!"

Tomi was getting irritated. They had answered No to all his questions. Did he think they were lying? Why was there a look of disappointment in his eyes? She glanced at Femi. His face was calm. He fixed his gaze on the Pastor.

When the Pastor Akintola had exhausted his questions, he told them to see the wedding protocol committee for further instructions.

"Why was he looking so disappointed?" Tomi asked as they walked back to the car park. Femi just smiled and held her hand.

"I'm happy we didn't fail any of those questions. He was obviously looking for something to nail me down with. I guess he just realized that the fact that I stopped attending Garden Assembly didn't mean I became a vagabond."

Tomi chuckled. She remembered the times they had been tempted to kiss and play with their bodies. One particular day, they had almost convinced themselves they won't have sex. Just foreplay. Femi had immediately called Rotimi to tell him of the thoughts running through his head. Rotimi didn't end the call until he was sure Femi had dropped Tomi off at home that night.

"Have you noticed how the youth group members are mobilizing for this wedding? Everybody is busy." Femi said, interrupting Tomi's thoughts.

"I am surprised too. They went the extra mile."

Femi shook his head. "To think that I didn't want to have this wedding in the church." He pointed at the auditorium. "That place holds unforgettable memories."

Femi's phone beeped. It was a text message from Pastor Akintola.

I wish you a happy married life. I must confess, I am so proud of you. I'm sorry about the way I treated your mother and I want to say you are a man of a unique breed. You will go far in life. It'll be an honour to join you and Tomi personally in holy matrimony this Saturday. Pastor Akintola.

"Tomi, see what I just got." He showed Tomi the message.

"What are you going to do?" She said, after reading it.

"I'll respond."

Tomi leaned closer, reading the words as he typed a reply to the Pastor.

Thank you so much sir. I respect God's grace on your life. You would usually have delegated this to one of your pastors but you have chosen to be present this Saturday. I'm lost for words sir. Thank for giving us a wonderful cover in this church. Thank you for your commitment to our lives. The Lord bless you sir.



The wedding ceremony turned out to be successful. The church compound overflowed with cars. The hall was filled up. Pastor Akintola declared the couple husband and wife.

Femi gazed into his wife's eyes. Finally, the day had finally come. He was married to Tomi. His dream had come true.

The reception ceremony flew very quickly with Tomi giving in her best dancing steps. Afterwards, Segun drove the couple to a hotel in the heart of the city. When they got to the hotel, Femi gently pulled his wife out of the car. Another car parked behind them. The chief bridesmaid, Peju and Femi's best man, Rotimi, got down.

They walked into the exquisite lobby of the hotel and were greeted by two attendants who followed Rotimi outside to get the couple's luggage. The attendants took the bags up the elevator.

"Here's where we draw the line." Rotimi said as they approached the elevator. Hugs went round again and the couple stepped into the elevator. They waved at their friends. The elevator closed, taking them up to the floor of their hotel room.



Tomi was nervous as they got off the elevator. What would it be like to be alone in a room with Femi? Wasn't she supposed to be excited? This was their first night together and her heart was pounding very fast.

Femi led his wife into the hotel room. Everything was perfect for the first night. The bed was king sized with white cotton sheets. The wall was cream. The dark walnut couch and the light brown curtains gave the room an evenly spread of colors. Why was she still nervous?

Femi stood in front of Tomi and rubbed her shoulders.

"You are nervous." He said, searching her eyes.

Tomi laughed. “I’ll get over it.”

“No, I’ll help you get over it.” Femi leaned down and kissed her. When he pulled away to catch his breath, Tomi fell against his chest and breath into the scent of his body. He raised her chin and saw the bags under her eyes. He knew she was tired. He wanted her badly but his desire would have to wait.

“Let’s just take a shower and go to bed. It’s been a long day.”

“Yes.” Tomi said and didn’t move. Couldn’t he just give her some privacy? Why was he staring at her like that?

Femi laughed. “Tomi, we are married.”

“I know.”

They lay on their back, laughing.

“I know I’m acting really weird.” Tomi said.

Femi pulled her close and wrapped his hands around her. Gradually she relaxed. When he would look at her face again, she had slept off. He lay on his side and touched her cheeks tenderly. He kept staring into her face until his own eyes became heavy. He fell asleep.

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