A NOVEL

Beautiful WINGS

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Author of ***Stolen Kisses***



Beautiful Wings

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Dedication

For Jesus, the Editor of my life. You crumble to rebuild.

You refine fiercely to make me better.

Thank you.

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Note from the Author

Beautiful Surrender (2020)

Beautiful Surrender Excerpt

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When I passed by you again and looked upon you, indeed your time was the time of love; so I spread my wing over you and covered your nakedness. Yes, I swore an oath to you and entered into a covenant with you, and you became Mine," says the Lord GOD.

Ezekiel 16:8

CHAPTER 1

"I'm going to kill them both!" Lara yelled, pacing the room as her friend Mabel tried to pacify her. She reached for her phone scrolling through with trembling hands, while a gamut of emotions coursed through her. Exhausted and emotionally drained, she flung the phone on the leather couch and rubbed a hand against her throbbing temples. Right now, all she wanted to do was shoot the people that had betrayed her.

She couldn't believe it, two of the most important people in her life, her best friend and her fiancé had been having some twisted affair she'd only just heard about. It had to be some kind of joke. This couldn't be happening to her. It was probably some bad dream she would soon wake up from. She'd only heard of things like this in movies and gossip articles she read online.

"Lara, please take it easy..." Mabel consoled but rather than soothe her, it only agitated her further.

"How long have you known about this Mabel? How long!" She cried making futile attempt to wipe away the tears streaming down her face.

"I knew you would be hurt." Her friend tried to explain. "And the last thing I want is for you to be hurt like this. I thought if you found out, you would know the kind of man Soji is and cancel the wedding."

"And Aisha! Of all people? My best friend! Aisha that I trusted with everything! I wasn't afraid to share my feelings and everything I had with her. Mabel, Aisha was like a sister and she heartlessly did this to me?"

"Lara please… just calm down. Let me get you a glass of water while you sit here and relax. You'll be fine. I'm really sorry you had to find out this way."

"She was sitting there, on his lap when I caught them." She went on, infuriated. "In his office! Soji didn't even look like someone getting married to me in a few months' time. He even had the guts to lie to my face, like I'm blind. You know what? I can't even think right now. How am I going to survive the next few weeks? I'm going to be the laughingstock of Lagos. What are my parents going to do about the invitation cards and the wedding plans?" She seethed. How could Soji do this to me? With everything I did for him…"

"He's a gold digger and a womanizer."

Lara knew Soji was no gold-digger. He'd womanised in the past but that was all it was. He was a chartered accountant working in one of the top banks in the country. His father was late but his mother was a prominent fashion designer and had chosen to design her wedding gown. Soji was well employed and had enough to take care of the both of them. If he wasn't capable, her parents wouldn't have blessed their engagement in the first place.

"I need that cup of water." Lara marched toward the kitchen and Mabel followed behind. While her friend reached for a glass to fill, Lara snatched a knife from the kitchen counter and slit her wrist.

Mabel screamed.

Nimi was staring out her window when her roommate Kemi Adeoti barged in and sank into the bed, disrupting her thoughts. She'd been trying to meditate on

God's word earlier but her mind wasn't settled. There was a burden she'd been praying about for a while but she still couldn't place her hands on it.

"I have to go home this weekend. My cousin was involved in an accident and my parents obviously need me around her for child support." Kemi blurted out.

Nimi noticed the sarcasm dripping in her friend's voice and turned to look at her. Kemi's words stirred something inside her and she searched within. A girl had been bleeding in her dream this morning. Could the accident be related to the dream she'd had?

She had never seen Kemi's cousin in person, but Nimi knew the cousin she was talking about. Omolara Olakitan was the prettiest girl she'd ever seen. Her face was littered on the media and blogs and her roommate wouldn't stop talking about her; from the things Lara owned, to the guy she was getting married to and how she was running the show in terms of her father's oil company.

As the only daughter of the Kitans', Lara was the second heir to the Olakitan dynasty. The first heir, Dapo Olakitan had refused to take on his role, so it was only natural for the second child Lara to take on the responsibility. She was in charge of the Olakitan's Oil and Gas business. Nimi had seen her appear on several TV shows and she had a huge following on social media where she dished out tips on becoming a successful entrepreneur and a very fashionable one. Men adored her and ladies admired her. She was a role model to both young and old. Nimi was only aware of this because her course mates wouldn't stop ranting about it and Kemi enjoyed the perks of being affiliated with the Kitans.

Nimi knew Kemi might not have befriended her if not for Kemi's grades that had gone on a downward spiral in the first semester. Nimi and Kemi's friendship bond had grown ever since they became study partners. When Kemi

saw an improvement in her grades, it was only natural for her to keep Nimi close.

"What happened? I do hope she's alright."

“I can’t say exactly. It could be someone has offended *Baby* Lara, or she bruised her nail while doing her manicure." Kemi chuckled.

"Don't be mean."

"I'm not mean; she's my cousin and trust me when I say she’s the most annoying person to ever exist.” Nimi was the only person Kemi could rant to about the petty side of her cousin. “I could get home now and find out she just missed a step and I have to be at her beck and call because you know, it's ‘Baby Lara’"

Nimi sighed. "I do hope she's alright."

Kemi shrugged, and headed towards the wardrobe to pack a few clothes. Looking back, she beamed. "Come with me."

"What?" Nimi looked up, startled by the turn of events. Perhaps she hadn’t heard her roommate right.

"Please! It would be fun I promise. Don't be such a bore." Kemi said, coming to sit beside her.

"No way, what will I tell my mother if she finds out I followed a friend to the Kitans’ Mansion?"

"Many things. That you're working part-time in one of their companies."

"Are you stylishly offering me a job?" Nimi asked teasingly.

“Will you say yes if I agree that I'm offering you a job?"

Nimi shook her head suddenly appalled by the thought that they had changed the Lara centred discussion to her search for an opportunity to work somewhere. Yes, she wanted a job, but this wasn’t the right time to think or talk about it.

"We should be more concerned about your cousin and not what we seek to gain from her misfortune."

"I never said you got the job, I was just trying to entice you." Kemi grinned more to herself. Her phone buzzed and she picked it up. Distracted by the messages coming in she forgot her conversation with Nimi for a while.

Nimi who was already used to Kemi's short attention span dropped her Bible and picked up her school notes. It was a wonder Kemi had enrolled in a post-graduate program when she could hardly focus on one thing at a time.

Kemi glanced at her. "Are you coming with me? Look at the bright side. We'll get picked from school in a limousine and we can wave at our course mates like celebrities." Kemi wiggled her eyebrows producing a smile from her roommate. 'C'mon Nimi, just this once, or did you ask boyfriend Number one and he said no?"

Nimi nudged her playfully.

"Is it not you?" Kemi teased. "I know you *na*. The one who asks Jesus about every single thing. *Awon Team Jesus is my husband*. I wonder when you guys are going to realise that Jesus cannot marry all of you and you need someone real and touchable, someone to give you some good loving like Dare, your earthly boyfriend."

"How many times do I have to tell you that there's nothing between Dare and I? First it was Noma and Bridget and now you. You see a guy with a girl and the next thing you do is come up with stories or conjure up a relationship that's not happening and will never happen." She snapped.

Kemi saw the frown on her friend's face and blinked. "You need to take a chill pill madam."

"I'm sorry..." Nimi apologised. "It's just that when you do that, I subconsciously start thinking of him as an option when he shouldn't even be in the picture. He isn't God's will for my life. I have prayed about it to know if he's someone I should consider. God said no and I decided to close the chapter. Case closed."

"Oh right. I just worry about you sometimes that's all. I mean you're a good girl and you deserve a good guy and you're not getting any younger y'know. I heard the best place to build a relationship is in school."

She smiled sadly. "And who says I'm good?"

"Uh, well, obviously if we are going to classify the good people, you would fall into that category for sure. You don't do drugs, no tattoos, no alcohol, you read your Bible like it's the next best thing after chicken and chips, you've never kissed anyone, there are no dirty linens in your closet and you'd rather find satisfaction in God's cloud nine than in a club where you can get high." Kemi shrugged.

"Thank you for analysing my life Miss Adeoti."

"Look, it's just that you growing up alone as an old maid in some church or house creeps me out and that's what happens to some good girls who live in denial. For someone like me, I don't think I can do without physical contact. It's crazy! Like, how do you do it, do you recite a mantra or something?"

Nimi ignored her friend. She was used to her teasing.

"Okay, so are you coming with me or not? Please say yes. Besides, doesn't the good book say mourn with those who mourn?"

"It's now you know scripture." Nimi rolled her eyes while considering her friend's request. She waited hoping to get the leading within. She didn't feel uncomfortable or restless about it and her mind flashed back to the image of the bleeding girl in her dreams.

She felt the sudden nudge to go.

"When do we leave?"

CHAPTER 2

"She'll be fine Chief and Mrs Olakitan, there's nothing to worry about." The doctor who had attended to Lara explained immediately he stepped out. The muscles on their faces relaxed when he delivered the news. "No major blood vessel was affected. She will be discharged tomorrow morning."

Sumbo sighed. She wasn't ready to lose her baby girl just a few months to her wedding. She wondered what had gotten into Lara's head. Mabel had explained it was an accident but Sumbo didn't believe it.

She suspected it had to do with her son-in-law to be, but she wasn't going to tell Chief about it. He would be furious and ensure Soji was miserable for the rest of his life. It wasn't the first time Lara and Soji's Love-Hate relationship would lead to something this preposterous. One part of her felt their bond was majorly fuelled by lust than love, but they'd been together for years. She thought they'd be matured enough to handle things like this.

"Can we see her now?" Sumbo asked

"She's been sedated but you can check on her briefly."

"Thanks so much Dr Philips. We're glad this isn't more than we can handle. I do hope you can come to the house to check on her from time to time.

You're the only one I trust my life and that of my children with, I'm sure you know that by now." Chief Olakitan said, feeling grateful for the doctor's help.

"Of course Chief, I know how precious Lara is to you, she's precious to me as well." Dr Philips took off his glasses, wiping it cautiously. "I would advice that you keep a good eye on her so she doesn't repeat this 'mistake' again and do something irreversible."

"Are you saying my daughter tried to commit suicide?"

"Well, I won't call it suicide…" Dr Philips glanced briefly at Mrs Olakitan and could decipher that she didn't want the suicidal word leaked to her husband. Over the years he'd gotten to know every member of the Kitan family but Lara was also his special jewel. He was only 'too old for her' as she'd put it to him several times.

"I think her accident was stress induced. Anxiety maybe. I'm aware she's getting married soon and it takes a lot to plan a wedding. Anything can lead to feelings of anxiety. She probably feels overwhelmed. I believe we will know what happened when Lara wakes up. It's not an established theory yet."

There was deep frown seated on Chief's brows as he got up and his wife joined him.

"Thank you Doctor. We'll see our daughter now."



Lara roused from sleep to see a pair of brown eyes staring back at her. She'd heard her parent's voices piercing through her dream but they weren't the ones looking into her eyes right now.

This was the familiar face she wanted to see; the one she was hoping would show up, the one she bled herself for. She'd told herself she would do all she could to keep him.

He belonged to her, not Aisha or anyone else.

"Lara..." His voice caressed her and she felt her body grow warm and alive. This was what Soji did to her. He made her glad she was alive. He made her want to be a woman over and over again. Her friends saw this and were jealous of her. They knew what the two of them were about and wanted to separate them. She'd seen them ogling him and heard them say over and again how lucky she was to have Soji all to herself. It was no surprise; her fiancé was built with features that could sway any woman.

But he was sensitive to her feelings and he loved her. He chose to marry her, no one else. And she was going to use everything within her to fight for their love.

"I'm sorry..." He sobbed kneeling beside her bed and placing his head on her stomach. "Why would you do that to yourself? Were you trying to give me a heart attack? I can't do without you and you know this..."

She nodded and her eyes stung. She reached to hold his head and stroke his back soothingly the way she always did after their intimate moments together.

They were like that for a while before he spoke up. "About Aisha, she was the one who tempted me. I swear on my life I wouldn't touch her but she came on to me all of a sudden and I didn't know what to do..."

"It's okay..." Right now Soji was here and that was all mattered. Mabel had told her more than she needed to know.

He looked up at her. "Have you forgiven me?"

She smiled, her mind thinking of what she would do with her best friend turned enemy. "I haven't told Daddy just in case you're wondering."

He heaved a sigh of relief but she ignored it, allowing him kiss her when he leaned close. She pulled him close and reached for his jacket, creating space beside her on the hospital bed. His signature scent wafted up her nose and she breathed him in; a musky sweet woody fragrance with notes of citrus and

sandalwood. He leaned close and interlinked his fingers with hers, draping the other one around her until she was safely tucked inside him.

“Stay with me.” She mumbled kissing him again.

“I’m not going anywhere.”



Soji was driving back home in the early hours of the morning when his phone rang. Recognizing the caller ID, he hesitated. Inhaling deeply, he thought of ignoring the call but it wouldn’t stop ringing. After much contemplation, he picked it.

"Hello Aisha."

"Soji I've been calling you for the past three hours and you refused to take my calls. Are you avoiding me?"

He scoffed. Aisha was more delusional than he’d presumed her to be.

"My fiancée is in the hospital because of us and this is what you call me for? That I am not taking your calls? Look we have to stop this. My wedding is in four months’ time and the last thing I want is this happening. This thing between us has to end Aisha. I keep telling myself I can't see you again but you just keep hanging around. Lara is your best friend. Why are you doing this to her… to us?"

"Because she doesn't deserve you Soji! I do." She sobbed. "She always gets what she wants. I saw you first and she snatched you from me. It's not fair!"

He sighed. What had he gotten himself into? One woman was enough to give him a headache and now two? Aisha was as persistent as Lara. The two women were indeed birds of a feather.

Lara had the upper hand with her manipulations. He knew the role her parents played in getting him favors, including his current promotion. Although she wouldn't admit it, she knew he would come running back to her if their

relationship hit the rocks. If Chief ever got wind of his affair, he would be ruined. All he had ever worked for would go down the drain. Her father would make sure no good company took him in.

He'd told himself time and again that the favours he got being engaged to Lara Kitan had no role to play in their love life. But he couldn't help when it came up. He relished the look of envy on his friends' face the moment they discovered he would be Chief's son-in-law soon. Besides, Lara was madly in love with him as he was with her and she wasn't going to give up on him.

He thought of their budding relationship which started four years ago. She'd fought for them. How could he give up on her? She'd used her influence to get him a job, he'd received a letter indicating he was to resume as a branch manager.

No interview, no aptitude test, nothing!

His days of writing aptitude tests and settling for less were over. He had excitedly resigned from the auditing company he was working with when he was presented with a generous monthly salary and benefits to follow.

He recalled the look on Lara's face when he told her about the new job offer. She'd jumped on him excitedly showering him with kisses and praising his intelligence and exclaiming with all the enthusiasm she had brimming within.

"Oh baby, you don't know how happy I am." He'd squeezed her and rolled with her on the carpet kissing her all over her face. He'd been living in a small two bedroom apartment at Ojuelegba then with little furniture to adorn the house. Lara hadn't minded spending some of her nights with him. But he wanted to give her more. He'd tried to impress her in the past but he knew Lara was hardly impressed. With the kind of girl she was, she deserved a castle and he wondered what she saw in a *small boy* like him. She could have any other rich guy but she chose him and elevated his destiny. He wouldn't be someone

without her influence. Within a couple of months of his new job, he'd gotten an apartment at Parkview Estate.

"But you know you shouldn't have done whatever it is that you did."

"I didn't do anything..." She feigned innocence stroking his matted beard playfully.

"You better speak up." He nibbled her chin as he slipped his hands beneath her arms so he could tickle her.

She giggled and tried to fight her way out of his grip playfully. "Nooooo... please noooo."

He tickled her senseless and kissed her. "Are you ready to talk?"

"I just spoke with a few friends of my Dad about it. You know that man that's been trying to ask me out… Mr Ayu. I told him you had potential, the right degree and I added a little lie that we've been friends since childhood and he was like, why not?"

Soji who had been caressing her stopped. "What?" He knew the Mr Ayu she spoke of. He'd seen the man once at a dinner he attended with Lara. She'd introduced him as her father's business associate. The man was quite old but that didn't stop him from ogling his girlfriend's cleavage shamelessly. Soji knew when a guy had eyes on his woman. But it felt pathetic when it was a man old enough to be her father.

She frowned. "Why are you upset?"

He got off her and sat on the carpeted floor. "Does your father know about this?"

"I didn't want him to know but he found out at the end of the day. C'mon Soji, there's nothing wrong with me helping out in any way I can."

"What did he take from you?" He spat.

She shrunk back shocked at his suggestive remark. "What do you mean by that? Are you calling me a slut?"

"Men like Ayu are perverts and would always want something in return..."

She hit him hard and stood up, moving away from him. Picking up her blouse on the floor, she threw it on and headed for the front door. He caught her hand in time and swung her around to face him.

"Let go of me!" She yelled into his face. He pinned her to the door and kissed her. When she weakened, he pulled back and looked into her eyes. "I'm sorry baby, I shouldn't have said that..."

"You're a jerk Soji, a stupid, good for nothing idiot!" She allowed him kiss her again till she could do nothing but kiss him back. When he lifted her from the ground, he knew he was in control.

They had fought, broken up and made up in the four years they'd been together. Their misunderstanding wasn't unusual but Lara cutting herself was something he didn’t see coming. He hoped her parents would not investigate the reason for her action or he'd be doomed.

Whatever he had with Aisha was a fling, together with the hopes and promises she was holding on to. Aisha could go to hell where Lara and his privileges were concerned.

"I've got to go. I'm on the road." He snapped.

"I'm pregnant Soji. Let's see how Lara will feel about me carrying her fiancé's baby."

And she hung up.

CHAPTER 3

Dapo Olakitan stepped out of the car, preoccupied with thoughts of Lara. His mother had called him the night before, panicking. He'd assured her he would be coming over to see Lara first thing in the morning. When he heard she'd been discharged earlier, he surmised it wasn't serious. Perhaps, she was having one of her usual fights with Soji.

It was amazing how the two *lovebirds* had spent three years together without one killing the other. He'd tried everything within his power to convince his sister she could do better than the guy but Lara loved having her way. The fact that she was the only daughter of their parents and the one running their father's company didn't help the situation.

She'd been born ten years after him; years after his mother had been told her chances of giving birth to another child were slim to none, after three consecutive miscarriages. So it wasn't a surprise they'd spoiled her, ensuring she lacked nothing. She was sent to the best schools, given the best treatment and it wasn't long before she became a media sensation.

He hadn't been so fortunate. Chief Olakitan had spent time disciplining his son so he would grow up being like him and even better. Unlike Lara who was born into wealth and always wanted more. His mind briefly flashed back to

their childhood days. She'd been the most beautiful sister to him. Although her intrusion into his life wasn't something pleasant, he'd always hoped to have a sibling he could play with. There was a time she asked for his opinion about everything, like he was all that mattered, like it was the two of them against the world. Years before the world stole her innocence; he'd always imagined Lara to be a princess and the guy that would marry her would be lucky. Lara's beauty gained her favours, even as a child. Their father used to say Lara took their mother's eyes.

But she wasn't going to remain a child forever. Lara grew up to prefer the company of her shallow-minded friends to his company. Money fascinated her and fame turned her into someone different, someone shallow and vain. Dapo recalled how his father had grown upset that he wasn't going to take over the company. He'd politely refused knowing it wasn't God's will for his life. For days the old man had refused to communicate with his son revealing how deep seated his disappointment was.

It wasn't the first time Jesus would be prioritised in his life. He'd gotten into trouble often because of it, but he was getting used to it.

"Dapo love!" His mother greeted immediately he stepped into the foyer of the large house. His lips curved into a smile on seeing her. As a tall lithe woman in her mid-sixties, her presence commanded authority and power. Like good wine, she only grew beautiful with age. The years were fair on her. Even after two older kids, she was still in shape.

He was beginning to see one of the reasons why his father stuck with her as his only wife. Chief Kitan's colleagues had married more than one wife, but he'd been with their mother for about forty years now. He knew his father had concubines out there, but his mother was the one running the show, the one sharing his name and his business. He didn't know what happened behind the scenes, and sometimes he wondered if he only saw what he wanted to see. His parent had a cordial relationship and he hoped they maintained it that way.

He pulled her into a warm embrace and lingered for a while. She released him, running her lean manicured fingers on his blazer while assessing him to her satisfaction.

"You look good, I'm so glad you honoured my request my dear."

"You're my mother. I'd be a fool to turn you down."

She smiled softly and caressed his arm. He knew what she was thinking and he hoped she wouldn't bring it up this time. His reluctance to bring a wife home at his age was something that always spilled into their conversation and he doubted it would end soon.

"How's Lara? I hope she's better now." He broke into her thoughts, reminding her of the reason he was here in the first place.

"Oh she was discharged this morning and we're glad it's nothing serious. Her friends are with her upstairs. She would be elated to see you."

Isn't she supposed to be resting? Isn't it too early for her friends to flock around her?

Smiling at his mother, he decided to keep his thoughts to himself.

He looked into her eyes and he could tell she felt the same way but chose to remain mute.

"I've told the maids to make breakfast. I do hope you can join us when you come downstairs and at least stay for a while. We have so much to catch up on."

He nodded. "How's Dad?"

"He's fine. Up and about as usual. He took the first flight to London this morning, said he had a meeting. You know your father and his never-ending meetings…" His mother replied with a stiff smile, her emotions retreating underneath her confident mask.

He released her and found his way upstairs wondering how so much had changed since the last time he came home. His mother had told them they were renovating but he wasn't aware so much would change. New paintings, railings and imported leather upholstery adorned the house. The smell of leather mixed

with jasmine permeated the room and generous amount of sunlight poured into the house giving the mansion a stunning glow. The house looked like a palace made for royalty, even the stairs had been exquisitely decorated and, on the walls, hung unfamiliar landscape paintings alongside those of his parents in their youth.

He heard voices coming from the room and knocked.

"Who is it?"

"Dapo."

He heard someone squeal and run towards the door. When the door gave way, Lara stepped out looking hale and hearty. She jumped on him excitedly.

"I've missed you, I've missed you!!" She squeezed him till he thought she would suffocate the life out of him.

"Hey prettiest girl in my universe." He managed, coughing playfully so she would release him. She slid her hands into his pulling him into the room.

"Brother Dapo, I'd like you to meet my friends, Mabel, Tola, Clara, Maxine and Angel. Girls, meet my one and only, most amazing brother in the world Dapo Kitan also known as D.K."

"Hi ladies."

They waved shyly and flashed him their gorgeous smiles. He hardly noticed any of them. He was here for his sister only.

"How are you feeling now?" He asked. Clad in denim shorts and a pink tank top, she looked well. When his mum told him his sister had an accident, he'd thought he was going to meet someone in bed, looking sober.

But here he was, meeting the same Lara he left behind. And she seemed excited, a little over the top for someone who was reported to be near death.

"Oh I'm better." She smiled. "I hope you're staying for breakfast. I'd love you to stay. Kemi is also coming over! Your favourite cousin. The way you two talk makes me jealous sometimes."

He smiled, allowing the latter remark about Kemi slide. The last thing he wanted from Lara was a comparison game and he chose to let sleeping dogs lie. "I'm glad you're better. I won't be staying long but I do hope we get to talk."

"Oh of course. I wanted to talk to you too."

He grew hopeful. Maybe she was having a change of heart about Soji. "It's ditto then."



Nimi tried not to feel intimidated when they arrived at the Kitan mansion. She'd heard so much about the house in Lagos but had never seen it in reality. The driver skillfully manoeuvred his way through the compound till he halted at the garage, miles away from the gate. Nimi followed closely behind Kemi, feeling like she'd been translated into a new world draped in dazzling lights, topiary mazes of well-trimmed trees and beauty spilling everywhere. Like a mini tourist attraction centre, it reproduced a kind of life only the wealthy could have. The water fountain at the centre of the compound gushed without restriction and intricately designed sculptures were positioned at every angle. Money was definitely not a problem for the Kitans.

"I hope we're in time for breakfast." Kemi broke into her thoughts and Nimi managed a smile before her stomach growled in response, slightly embarrassing her. She'd had no time to prepare breakfast as their ride had arrived earlier than expected.

Kemi rang the bell and some maids stood at the door to attend to them. As they found their way in, Kemi spotted Dapo coming down the stairs with Lara.

"Bro Dapo!" Kemi screamed excitedly and ran to him, dropping her bag on the floor.

"Kemistry!" Dapo smiled receiving her in a warm embrace.

He teased, "What have you been smoking? I want some of it."

She nudged him playfully. "Aww c'mon! What did I do this time?"

"See you looking almost taller than me. I feel young when I should be feeling old."

She chuckled and hugged him again. "Oh I've missed you D.K."

Someone coughed and Kemi turned to see Lara rolling her eyes. "Some people obviously didn't miss us as much as they miss our brother."

Kemi forced a smile and reached for her other cousin. "Of course, you're the reason I'm here sweetheart, and I've missed you too." She leaned close to embrace her and Lara received her.

Nimi watched the false exchange between the two, fascinated at the way Kemi played her role so well. She saw Lara Olakitan and couldn't believe her eyes. The girl whose life everyone envied online, the girl who swam in wealth and was tagged Nigeria's *Kim Kardashian*. She had everything every girl could wish for, even an Adonis brother that made the word gorgeous pale in comparison to him. He was handsome, draped in a simple tieless blue shirt beneath a grey blazer and navy-blue chinos.

Just then his eyes caught hers and she knew she'd been staring too long. Slightly embarrassed, she looked away immediately and focused on her friend Kemi who was still chatting with Lara excitedly, one would think they were best friends.

"Who's the young lady?" Dapo asked his gaze not leaving Nimi.

"Oh, that's my friend and roommate, Nimi Adeyemi. I invited her over." Kemi glanced from Dapo's eyes to Lara's. "I hope you don't mind."

"Of course not, as long as she's not a reporter or one of those pathetic gossip bloggers." Lara smiled and waved. "Hello...nice to see you."

"Hi." Nimi waved politely. "Nice to see you too."

Lara walked towards her and touched her cheeks playfully. "How old are you, you look like a baby."

Nimi shrugged smiling back. "Twenty-Six."

"Ladies don't say their age..." She pouted childishly. "You're not a lady."

"Lara!" Her brother scolded.

"What? I'm just saying my mind." She turned back to Nimi. "I like you already though. You seem like an honest person. I hope you were honest enough to tell Kemi the truth about her teeth."

Kemi bit her lip and would have slapped the smirk off Lara's face if Dapo wasn't holding her hand. Nimi was aware one of Kemi's front teeth were chipped off and had spaces in between.

"I think she has beautiful teeth." Nimi smiled. "Just the way I think you're beautiful without your make-up."

"Oh, thank you."

"You're welcome."

"Come with me, you'll sit beside me at the table. I think we'll do well together."

Lara winked at Kemi before walking away. Kemi knew what Lara was doing. The smug smile explained it all.

You can have my brother but I'll have your friend.

Her only fear was Nimi might be who Lara needed to manipulate once more to her advantage. Kemi just hoped her friend was wise enough to tell the difference between someone who wanted to be her friend and someone that wanted to use her.

CHAPTER 4

Nimi mumbled a prayer over her food before digging in, tempted to sigh in pleasure at the exquisite taste. She looked up and caught Dapo staring at her with the same curiosity he'd been watching her with at the stairs. She looked away and continued eating hoping her silly heart would stop doing those ridiculous stunts whenever he looked at her.

She glanced at him again and saw he'd turned his attention to the young lady sitting close to him, one of Lara's friends. She was beautiful and obviously taken with Dapo the way he was with her. She whispered something that had him laughing and Nimi felt somewhat relieved.

Guys like him did not roll with girls like her. His first reaction to her presence in their house made it obvious. Why couldn't her stupid heart get the memo and stop its silly attraction to him?

She'd just met the guy for goodness sake, and they had hardly shared a conversation. Deep down in her heart she knew he wasn't her type. Though she had never been asked out on an official date, she knew the type of guy she wanted to be attracted to in the first place. Someone who loved God above all else, more than she did and loved her for who she was. Someone who wasn't ego-driven but had God as his anchor and confidence.

She wondered why she suddenly considered Dapo Olakitan an option when he was nowhere near one. She'd been by herself for so long that the moment one guy finally looked her way; her mind wandered to thoughts of a need she'd tried so hard to push away.

"What are you studying for your masters?" Lara broke into her thoughts.

"Media and Communications."

"Oh really, that's so cool."

"Thanks."

"I have an MBA from London Business School and you won't believe when I tell you I find it hard to organise myself on some days. I tell my mum I need a Personal Assistant, but she feels the one I have at the office is good enough. I have just one secretary and the last thing I want to do is burden her with my problems by adding PA to her list of things to be on the lookout for." She leaned close. "If you know anyone that's good with that kind of stuff, something temporary, I don't mind, really."

"Oh okay."

"You know what, I'm sure you would do well in building my personality online since you know one or two things about Media and advertising. Do you mind interning in my company? I'll treat you nice."

Nimi raised an eyebrow surprised by the turn of events.

"I--I- don't know what to say."

"You can say no if you want. It's not like I'm forcing you or anything but I'd love to learn from you. I know we'll do well as a team but at your own time and convenience."

"I'd like to think about it."

Lara patted her on the arm and smiled as if she'd agreed to her proposal. "Thanks."

Nimi glanced at Kemi who was shooting daggers at Lara. Lara ignored her cousin throughout breakfast while the light conversation continued at the table.

Nimi was beginning to doubt if her coming over to the Kitan’s mansion was a good idea after all.



"You should have just said no!" Kemi snapped immediately Nimi delivered the news about Lara offering her an internship at Olak Oil and Gas, the Kitan’s business company. She knew why Lara was doing this. She was probably trying to get back at her or do something sinister. She was sure something dark was going on in that girl’s mind.

She knew her cousin pretty well.

"Well, I haven't said yes yet."

"It's like you don't know Lara. There's no good bone in her body. For every single thing she does, there’s a selfish motive behind it."

"Well, there's something called free will isn't there? She can't force me to do something I don't want to do, neither is she going to manipulate me if I don't allow her. I don't see why you're getting all worked up Kemi."

"Well, it's not an option, I just want you to tell her that it's a no for you. Didn't you see how she insulted me today? If not for Dapo I would have smacked her brain out of her head."

Nimi stifled a smile. “I think you should just try and ignore everything she does. She keeps doing and saying things to you because she sees that they hurt you. Once she realises she has no hold on you, she'll tire and move on to something else."

Kemi shook her head and settled on the bed staring at nothing in particular.

"Besides, all I see is a girl desperate for real love and only does the wrong things to get it and will do all she can to hurt anyone who tries to stand in her

way. It's the only way she understands love and we need to help her, not bring her down."

"That's my problem with you. You always feel everyone needs help, love or a second chance. That Jesus somehow can see what others can't see in people. Well bad news honey, Lara is an exception. She's being given chances and all she does is throw it in your face and tell you she doesn't need it. She can do fine on her own. If you want to step into her den before you believe me, go ahead. I just don't want you to come back feeling sorry you did."

"I'll pray about it. If it isn't God's will, then that's fine by me."

"Okay." Kemi shrugged. Twice she'd been fooled by her cousin and twice she'd been bitten. Everything she did was because of her aunt and Dapo. She remembered what happened years ago in secondary school between herself and Lara. Lara and her friends had mocked her ceaselessly. She would go to bed crying because she felt ugly. No one would ever ask her out because Lara had a way of making guys see only her, no one else. Kemi had vowed they would never grow close but years later, she allowed Lara back in and she had hurt her again.

"You'll never stop being my friend Kemi, you know that right? Lara can never take your place." Nimi said turning to face her. Though they didn't share the same faith, they'd been friends for a long while.

"I hope so."

"Hey..." Nimi joined her on the bed and pulled her close. "You know I should be the one feeling sad because you have gazillion friends and sometimes, I wonder if you would ever miss me if I happen to leave your life."

"Friends are different." Kemi snorted.

Nimi smiled. "That I know."

"And to be honest, I like hearing about your Jesus when you talk about him. He seems to be one of a kind. Sometimes I wonder if you read the same bible I try to read when I get curious."

"You just have to open your mind and let the Spirit work in you. And all you need do is believe. Just say the word, Jesus is always waiting."

Kemi smiled. "Nimi I'd like to ask you a question."

"Go on."

"Is God's love really satisfying? Is Jesus really worth all your waiting… is he worth being foolish for?"

Nimi closed her eyes nodding. "In a world that's going to pass away and with so little time that can be swallowed up in eternity, yes. He's worth it. If a whole God could be despised for my sake, then who am I really? My measly sufferings cannot compare to what he did on the cross for me."

"You really think God did that for you?"

"For me, you... all of us."

"How, why do you believe that kind of thing? It's just... I don't know, it just feels so unreal you know. I grew up Methodist but sometimes I have so many questions. I doubt this whole Christianity thing is real. Why did he have to go through all of that if he's God? Why couldn't he just do things because He's God? He has all the power, he has everything, I didn't need him to die, and I didn't beg him to die. I didn't beg to be born; I didn't beg to exist."

"Mercy made him stand in for us. You had no say when you were birthed into the world. You didn't beg to be born but you have a choice right now. You have the choice to choose him or be lost forever. He created you because he loves you and wants you. He wants you to come into all that he has. Is it wrong to love someone and want to share everything you have with them?"

"I used to love a guy once, everything I had I wanted to give him, no restrictions and what did he do with it? Throw it in my face."

"But God isn't like that."

"Yes, God isn't like that because he's good and kind and every nice thing you have to say about him. Well, I didn't see him trying to heal my broken heart when I thought I couldn't do without James. I healed on my own pretty fine.

You can't touch him, you can't hold him neither can you see Him. He is just there being ‘God’. Don't you just get tired?"

Nimi sighed knowing she’d battled similar thoughts in the past when she'd been going through certain things. Years ago when she didn't know God except for what she was taught about Him. She'd craved and cried for the mundane things others craved for in the past, but recently she was learning to grow past that stage as she drew closer to her saviour and into Him. Some days when the thoughts came and her mood wanted to take advantage of her, all she just needed to do was come into His presence and everything would be alright. She just needed to remember God was good and that He loved her more than she could fathom. She was also learning to find contentment in her current season.

She knew her love couldn’t match His, but she was assured He saw her heart and how it yearned for Him. Throughout the years she'd learned to pour her love and herself on Him and that was satisfying at the moment. She knew God's love was enough and she wished she could spell it out to people who doubted.

"When you draw close, all you get is hungrier, not tired." She mumbled and rubbed her friend's back soothingly. Nimi felt the tension in Kemi’s body relax.

People often said she had a gift of making things look and feel better than they were before. She knew she had the gift of comforting others and God was going to use her as he deemed fit. As long as he strengthened her to keep following him, she would be content, with Him being her strength.

CHAPTER 5

Soji Bello stared blankly at the documents on his table. His work had suffered since he received news of Aisha's pregnancy. Initially, he'd thought she was only bluffing but the results proved him wrong. He thought of different ways to deny the baby because he was certain she must have had other men in her life. But going down that route would only stir up more problems. Lara would know they'd been together for a while and not the way he'd implied it was only a recent affair; a mistake, a fling.

If word got out, his life would be over.

Aisha on the other hand was ready to prove the child's paternity by going for a DNA test when she delivered the baby. She was so certain it was his claiming he was the only one she'd been with since her last break-up.

He placed his face in his hands. All his hopes and dreams of being adopted as Chief Olakitan's son-in-law were at stake. If Chief even got wind of his cheating ways, the man would not only strip him of all he had, he would also make sure he had nowhere to run and hide. Lara loved him no doubt, but he knew her love burned and it would leave him scorched if he betrayed her a second time.

Both father and daughter would make sure he was a dead man walking. Lara was the apple of Chief's eye and anyone hurting his daughter was in for it. Chief had shown doubts during the first year of their relationship. He'd snubbed him assuming he was a gold digger, only present for his daughter's inheritance. Right now, he wasn't ready to prove the man's assumptions right.

The thought of him leaving the country and not returning for a long time dropped into his mind but it vanished almost immediately. He couldn't hide forever. Besides, he would be forfeiting his dreams of running Olak Oil and Gas alongside Lara. He'd been placed on the family wealth the moment he got engaged to Lara but it was all tied to the Kitans like a blood covenant.

Things were good as long as he was good to Lara and they got nasty if he tried anything funny.

He stood up and adjusted his tie wondering why his air-conditioned office suddenly felt hot and uncomfortable. He'd suggested that Aisha travel out of the country, but she was adamant on sticking around in Nigeria till she was due.

He'd asked her what she intended doing with her pregnancy since she refused to listen to him.

Aisha's plans included her gloating right in front of Lara with her protruding belly. He wasn't about to let that happen. Aisha was out of her mind if she thought carrying his baby would make him stick with her.

She was Lara's childhood best friend. They'd practically shared everything together except for guys. Aisha was so welcome in the Kitan home it became like a second home to her. She was from the Northern part of Nigeria although she was born and bred in Lagos. Fair-skinned beauty with a body shaped like a goddess, she'd had her own share of suitors.

He recalled how he'd met both women. Aisha had been the one to catch his attention first. He'd been invited to a friend's birthday party that was thrown in grand style and he had gone to have fun.

Things took an interesting turn when he saw a pretty young girl sitting by herself at the corner of the club. He wasn't a charmer, but he knew he had to try before someone else beat him to it. She was so beautiful he prayed he wouldn’t mess up. She looked like a lady who could have men at her beck and call but that didn't intimidate him. He'd had his own share of women in his lifetime and knew with the looks and the right words, he could get going.

"Hi..."

She blinked and looked up under her beautiful lashes. If he was superstitious, he would have thought her a mermaid. She was even more beautiful than he initially thought her to be. The lights did not do her beauty justice.

Her body in the blood red halter neck sheath dress screamed at him.

She waved shyly and looked away like he was just a distraction. At least she’d waved. That was a first step. He settled beside her and in a couple of minutes, he had her laughing and opening up to him. He was about to ask for her number when someone bumped into them interrupting their conversation. He looked up and saw a girl that looked like Aisha. Same bobbed hairstyle with a fringe in front, and the same red dress. The only difference was her face and eyes. The intruder was Lara. Beautiful Lara with well defined cheekbones with full lips painted blood red.

It was probably the light that made them look alike, because the two were as different as East was from the West. She waved beaming brightly. The way her eyes shone; he could tell she was slightly drunk.

"Who's the hunk?" Lara asked her friend grinning more to herself than to him.

"Uh, Lara, this is Soji Bello, Soji, this is Lara; my best friend turned sister."

"Oh... nice to meet you." She stretched out a hand and shook him slightly belching. She tripped but he caught her on time. “Oops sorry.” She giggled into his face. "Care to dance?"

He looked at Aisha waiting for her to explain to her friend they had something brewing between them but she shrugged, as if the couple of minutes they’d spent together meant nothing to her.

He turned back to Lara who was already sliding her fingers into his. "C'mon, Aisha doesn't mind. Or you know what? You could dance with the both of us." She winked at her friend. "Hey girl, let's show this guy who's got the moves."

Aisha shook her head. Soji was almost convinced she was Lara’s babysitter with the way she composed herself, trying not to get involved in the life of the party and at the same time watching Lara and ensuring she didn’t lose it.

"Don't say I didn't ask *o*." And the both of them were gone. They made out heavily that night but due to her drunken state, he’d stopped things from going too far. He didn’t want her having regrets the morning after. She’d been twenty years old at the time. He didn't sleep with her but made sure she got home safe.

They met again years later in London where he was running his master’s programme while she was just rounding up hers. That was the beginning of their relationship that bloomed into what it was presently.

His attraction to Aisha re-awakened when they returned to Nigeria, two years into his relationship with Lara. He’d thought what he felt for Aisha in the beginning was gone but like a fire, it consumed his thoughts whenever she came to mind. One look at Aisha after so many years and he wished he’d resisted Lara and stuck with her friend. He silently wished there was a way he could eat his cake and have it. Apparently, Aisha had felt the same way. He’d caught her staring at him several times and whenever they stood close, she’d linger until their bodies brushed or their gaze locked.

It turned him on that a girl who didn't want him years ago wanted him now and was passing the message across in subtle and seductive ways. So it wasn't a surprise when he attended one of his parties on a Friday night and found her with a couple of friends drinking and laughing. Lara had been absent. This time Aisha was the one who came forward asking for a dance. The rest was history. Their rendezvous had continued since then and he couldn't bring himself to stop lusting after her.

A knock on the door disrupted his thoughts and his secretary peeped in. He wondered why she didn’t use the intercom to communicate with him.

As if reading his mind, she explained. "I called you on the intercom, but you were not picking sir."

He nodded urging her to go on.

"Your Mum is here to see you sir. She mentioned she has a lunch appointment with you this afternoon."

Soji blinked. He had almost forgotten. "Please let her in."

His mother strolled inside and smiled at him proudly. She was an epitome of beauty. He was proud of her as well. Reaching to hug her, he tried to bask in her warmth hoping he could escape into her bosom and leave all his problems behind.

She rubbed his back tenderly sensing something amiss. "Soji, are you alright?"

He nodded releasing her. "I'm alright Mum, I just miss you that's all. It's been so long we've had lunch together and I can't wait."

"You can lie to yourself but you can't lie to the owner of the womb that carried you for nine months. You may be grown *o* and even be the governor of the state next year but you're still my baby. Something is wrong." She caressed his cheeks. "Talk to me my darling, is it Lara? I heard she's better now, did something happen between you two? Is it the wedding?"

He sighed. He was dying inside. Even his friends had made crazy suggestions, but he wasn't going to listen to them. Listening to them had gotten him into this mess in the first place. They'd been hailing him when they knew he was sleeping with two of the most desirable women in town but as soon as they heard he was going to be a father, they left him to himself and advised he find a way to bury his secret as Chief Olakitan didn't treat his enemies too nicely.

"We can talk about it at Lunch." He finally gave in to his conscience.

His mother relaxed. "Okay, where are we having Lunch today?"



Abiola stared at her son for a long time after he was done narrating his present situation and for a moment, she was tempted to slap him. She was beginning to doubt she'd raised him well alone. The absence of a father figure in his life had probably made him this way. He was her only son and she'd made sure he didn't lack anything as a child.

She'd been happy he was getting married to Lara and would become a son-in-law to the great Kitans. No one could blame her for her ambitiousness. Chief had been so generous to her and her business ever since Soji started dating Lara. Contracts she never even dreamed of came her way. She'd thought she was popular enough as a fashion designer but the Kitans showed her that she was just a *learner*. She got invited for interviews, her business was the reigning thing in town and even senators were eager to have her design dresses for themselves and their children. Within a span of one year she was already thinking of launching her own clothing line and was planning to have a business centre in London.

Now her son was here telling her he'd impregnated some girl called Aisha. Some witch who wanted to destroy all they had going on for them. She'd seen the girl hanging around Lara a few times. Abiola had sensed the pretty Fulani

girl could breed trouble for her son but she ignored it thinking the forthcoming wedding was enough to prevent anything from happening. She should have paid attention to her intuition and warned her son on time.

And now he was in this mess.

This wasn't how she had planned her lunch. She wanted to tell her son about the new man in her life whom she'd met through Mrs Kitan on one of their outings. Babatunde Kujore was an old friend of Chief Olakitan and Sumbo had explained how he'd gone through a bad divorce years ago. They'd only been dating for about three months and he seemed pretty serious about her. He showered her with gifts and was attentive to her. He was charming and made her remember what it felt like to be a woman who was loved, cherished and desired. He was also into the arts and appreciated her work. They'd gone to Zanzibar the weekend before. Their time together had been beautiful. He'd asked her to become his wife.

She'd never thought to remarry but right at that moment, she knew saying yes to his proposal was the best thing to do.

"So, what do you plan to do?"

He shrugged. "Seriously Mum, if I had it all figured out, I wouldn't need to ask you for help." His eyes were bloodshot, and he buried his face in his hands. "Oh Mum, I didn't mean to do this, to hurt Lara, to get Aisha pregnant. Lara is going to kill me and kill herself. When she found out about my affair with Aisha, she cut herself."

"You mean she knows about you and Aisha already?"

He nodded. "I don't know what happened. Aisha just came to my office in the evening, saying she wanted to talk to me about something important. I told her I was trying to keep our affair as discreet as possible, so we had to meet somewhere safe. She thought my office was safe because some of her friends were already getting suspicious and paparazzi could be lurking somewhere if we stepped out together. She said Lara had gone shopping with her friends but

Aisha lied she was sick so she could opt out. I called Lara to clarify. Lara said she would sleep in after shopping, so I felt at ease y'know.

"Aisha and I got talking and she started crying, clinging to me and telling me how she loved me and wanted us to be together. What was I supposed to do, chase her away? I held her to comfort her and before I could even blink, Lara barged into my office. She charged at us and she would have clawed out my eyes if I hadn't caught her hands on time. She tried to hit me and I went on my knees to beg her but she got all dramatic and ran out. Minutes later, I heard Lara has been rushed to the hospital. I was scared that she probably crashed her car on her way back home but I got news that she slit her wrists because she was upset. That was a clear warning for me."

Abiola sighed shaking her head. This was a real mess. She'd never known Lara had suicidal tendencies. It meant Lara was willing to do anything and everything to keep Soji for herself and would go the extra mile to eliminate any obstacle in her way with that calculating mind of hers.

She wondered if Chief or Sumbo knew Soji was responsible for Lara's impulsive reaction. She signalled the waiter to refill her coffee. As if reading her mind, her son spoke up. "She told me she didn't tell anybody. The warning was for me alone."

"And she hasn't heard about this recent turn of events?"

"No mum she hasn't, except Aisha is brazen enough to tell her."

"Then we must beat her to it."

"How?"

"You have to come clean." She deadpanned.

"What?" Her son stared at her like she was crazy. "Were you even listening to me at all? You know that's not possible."

"Don't you trust me?"

"It's crazy Mum, how can I tell Lara her best friend is carrying my baby just a few weeks to the wedding? Chief will hunt me down and kill me if Lara doesn't do it first."

"You know the way to her heart don't you? I'm sure you must know by now. She's a woman just like me." She smiled, her mind already coming up with all kinds of suggestions. Her son knew little to nothing about women. "Pamper her, let her feel loved and cherished. Do things that will make her know she's the woman you want to spend the rest of your life with, she's the one that should have your babies, not some wretched gold-digger you've been sleeping with who claims to be carrying your child. How far gone is she anyway?"

"About six weeks..."

"And I'm assuming she doesn't want to abort it, does she?"

"She's bent on raising the child to spit on Lara's face."

"Then you'll spit on hers first. Call Lara, take her for a weekend somewhere and tell her how much you love her and how you would never hurt her. Let her eyes shine with love for you. Then tell her the truth in the most sobering way. Hold her and let her know you'd do anything for her, and that the affair with Aisha was a mistake. Then wait for her to take the next step."

"The next step?" Her son stared at her, bemused. He could be stupid sometimes but she didn't blame him. A beautiful woman like Lara had the ability to manipulate a man's heart.

Abiola smiled. She knew girls like Lara Olakitan didn't like their images tainted. She would give all to make sure her reputation was kept squeaky clean. A baby mama would ruin what she'd built for herself in years. Abiola trusted Lara to do the right thing.

"Yes, the next step." She repeated.

CHAPTER 6

Nimi sighed as she arranged the last couple of files into the drawers. Her new boss Lara Kitan was as disorganized as the word itself. She didn't have the most important files close by and her lawyer was supposed to review some of their clients' documents the next day. Lara mentioned she'd stacked the documents somewhere. Apparently, that somewhere was causing minor disarray in the office as her secretary Nonye and Nimi kept ransacking the drawers.

"Are you sure we're not on a wild goose chase and this woman just wants to punish me?" Nonye asked after searching some cabinet drawers on the left side of the room. "She'll call you soon and I'll be here alone on this endless chase. I'll be done for."

"I could tell her she probably left the files somewhere at home and not in the office."

"*Ahh*, it's like you don't know Madam. Don't let her size deceive you *oh*. There is no way you are going to tell her she made a mistake. If she wants you to do something, you do it and just pray that she finds out her mistake by herself. Didn't you know how her last P.A got fired?"

Nimi shook her head. Just a week in and she was wondering if she'd made the right choice to work here despite what she'd felt in her spirit about the

move. What if Kemi was right after all? Lara had told her a different story, deliberately excluding the part where she'd fired the previous Personal Assistant. She'd heard so many speculations she was tired of hearing more. Gossip was not her forte.

"I don't think I would like to know."

Nonye frowned. "And why?"

"Nothing. I just don't do gossip sorry."

"Oh I forgot. The born-again fellows." Nonye laughed more to herself. "I think I know why she picked you, she needs someone who can cover her dirty tracks whenever she gets one. Don't worry; she'll get tired of you the way she does everybody. She feeds on fresh blood." Nonye sank her teeth into her lips to mimic a vampire face with fangs. "She's a vampire."

Nimi laughed, pleased at the way her colleague could turn a serious situation into a funny one. "I'm sure your blood tastes sweeter than mine, so don't worry." Nimi stood up with another set of files and headed towards her desk by the door. She leaned close to adjust some folders containing documents on her table when they all fell to the floor. Just as she bent to pick and place them back on her desk, someone walked into the office and bumped into her, making all the files fall back to the floor with papers flying all around.

"*Haba*, not today of all days…" She mumbled as she tried to pick the papers. Whoever it was had just ruined her day.

Dear Lord, please strengthen me to be patient.

"I'm sorry about that..." A male voice apologised.

She shook her head raising a hand without looking up. "It's okay."

The intruder stooped down to help pick the papers and she caught a whiff of his rich and intoxicating perfume. She almost stumbled back but he caught her wrist in time.

She looked into his eyes then and when she saw who it was, she quickly took the papers from him and stood up adjusting her glasses.

"Mr... Mr..." She fumbled with the words and she wanted to kick herself. Why was she acting like she hadn't just been in control of the situation?

"I'm sorry sir I didn't get your name the last time we met at your parent's house."

"Just call me Dapo, Hi." He smiled at her, revealing good dentition. "I didn't get your name the last time… Is it Oluwanimi or something..."

"Just call me Nimi." She stifled a smile and looked away, hoping he would leave her soon and find his way into his sister's office.

"Nice to meet you." He extended his hand and though she was surprised by his openness, she received it. "And you too."

"Miss or Mrs?"

"Miss… Miss Adeyemi." She stuttered. He was still holding her hands and she got uncomfortable as Nonye stared at them.

"That other day we didn't have the time to talk, did we?"

Talk about what? She looked into his eyes. She hardly knew him. He was gorgeous and all but that did not equate her falling for his charms.

"Well?"

She blinked realizing she'd been staring at him for too long. Again! Her habit of staring was beginning to get out of hand. "I...uh… I didn't..."

The door to Lara's office flew open and Lara stepped out. She stopped when she saw her brother. Nimi quickly removed her hand from Dapo's grip saving herself from further embarrassment.

"My one and only!" Lara spread her arms to receive Dapo and planted a kiss on his cheek, leaving a lipstick stain."The most important man in my life before Soji."

"Don't let him hear that *o*." He replied hugging her back. "How are you?"

"I'm fine, I was just about to check the appointments I have for the rest of the day with my PA when you called to say you're close by. I've decided to postpone the other appointments I had scheduled for the day. Oh and by the

way, have you met my new P.A, Kemi's friend, Nimi? She's like the best thing that has happened to me since hot spicy shawarma." She chuckled and faced Nimi. "Call my lawyer and ask if he can come tomorrow instead and please remind me to get back to the guy that wanted to do the photo shoot. I don't want him coming around my office. Is there anything else I scheduled for today or did someone call?"

"One of your friends Mabel called and asked to see you for lunch, then the P.A of Senator Aluko called to remind you about your meeting in Abuja this Friday. Your fiancé called and asked that you get back to him ASAP. Those were his exact words."

"Okay, thanks. I'll be going out soon with my brother. Can you help me get my clothes from the dry cleaners? I can ask Saheed to get you there and take you to my house if transport is going to be a problem."

Nimi quickly picked a pen to take down a few notes.

Lara looked at her wrist-watch and frowned. "I'll still need you in the office. Do come back on time so you can help me with some of the files I will be travelling with to Abuja this weekend. That's if I can make it. I don't know if something else might come up for me asides the wedding Habibat invited me to."

Lara looked up at her brother, winking at him. "Let me get my purse and we'll be out of here in a jiffy."

"Sure."

Nimi glanced up to see her *admirer* had turned his attention to his phone and heaved a sigh of relief. The moment Dapo and Lara left the office, Nonye pounced on her just as she'd expected.

Nimi was able to stop her before she went any further. "Don't even think about it. He was just being formal and polite that's all." She placed the pile of folders in her hands on the table and grinned mischievously. "You've got a lot of work to do girlfriend. I would advise you to start now while I run my errands."

Nonye shook her head and smiled pointing a pen at her. "Feeling smart huh?"

"I'm not feeling smart, I'm smart. What's a girl gotta do?" Picking her bag, she planted the iPad her new boss gave her inside. Waving goodbye, she hurried off.



"I like this place, I would like to come here often." Dapo commented half-way into his meal.

"With *bae*?"

He rolled his eyes at his sister. "You're my *bae* now, don't you know?"

Lara punched him playfully and smiled. "We haven't been together like this in a long while. I'm so glad you were able to find time for me Bro Dapo." She reached to touch his arm and smiled into his eyes. "I really wish things could be the way it was when we were younger. We used to hang out like we had no care in the world. Do you remember your first four-by-four? All the girls went crazy for you D.K. Now look at you being all shy and quiet around women."

Dapo smiled shaking his head. He was already familiar with his sister's match-making skills. It had gotten him into trouble in the past and he wasn't going to allow such repeat itself.

Without warning, his past briefly flashed before his eyes.

"But Dapo I love you..." The young girl choked in-between sobs when he reached to hug her. She clung to him desperately like her life depended on his to survive.

"I love you too baby and that's why we have to do this, for me, for us."

"I'm scared D.K, what if... what if..."

"No ifs baby. You'll come out fine, I promise."

"Did one of your girlfriends put you up to this?" He asked bluntly.

She nudged him again. "C'mon! It's Maxine and she thinks you're awesome. I think you two should give it a try, who knows… you two might hit it off. That babe finished from LSE, runs her own company and is independent. Her father was part of the sponsors for last year's fund-raising program organized by our company."

He was bored already.

"Look if it's about your past, you two are adults and nothing is going to happen."

"Stop it Lara." He scolded and immediately regretted his actions as his sister recoiled at his reproach. She wouldn't know how it felt because she wasn't a Christian. His current stand in Christ made him wonder why and how he could do something horrible in his past. He looked into his sister's eyes and hoped she wasn't capable of such.

He would do all he could to make sure Lara didn't fall into the same trap he'd fallen into. Growing up as a Kitan had come with so many privileges, and he'd taken advantage of others in the past.

"Hey..."

She rolled her eyes at him angrily snatching her hands away when he tried to hold her.

"C'mon sweetheart, I'm sorry I yelled at you. I was just upset that you would bring up something so delicate at lunch."

"It's been fifteen years Dapo, get a grip and move on. And if it's this faith of yours that's making it look like we're all going to hell, better drop it like the garbage it is, because no one is perfect."

Dapo was hurt that his sister would talk to him like that but for Christ sake he swallowed his pride and apologised once again. The ten years between them was no joke, but anything for love.

For Christ.

"I'm sorry Lara, don't be upset."

She dabbed her lip with a napkin and stood. "Let's go upstairs and talk. The ambience on the rooftop is much better than this. Money speaks for people like us." She smiled as if nothing had happened and reached for her phone to attend to something. Dropping it back into her bag, she reached for his hands, ignoring the fact that he hadn't finished his meal and they headed upstairs together.

"So, I'm not going to bring up your past since that seems to be a no-go area for you at the moment. But I love you, it’s the reason why I'm concerned about you getting a wife and starting a home. Mum isn't getting younger you know and her talk about getting grandkids can wake up a dead man." She laughed to herself and looked serious when her brother didn’t reciprocate.

"At the right time." was all he could say.

"So, you said you wanted to talk to me about something important..."

He thought about the way Lara had taken his scolding earlier and hesitated. "I don't think I have anything to say that you'd like to hear."

She watched him intently and shook her head in regret. She placed her arm on his shoulder. "I'm sorry Dapo. I didn't mean to talk about your faith that way or bring up your past. Forgive me please, pretty please, I love you please…" She tried to tickle him and smeared his cheeks with sloppy kisses till he surrendered.

"Okay...okay *o*, I've heard." Laughing, he placed a hand on her shoulder to steady her when she almost tripped. She wrapped her arms around him to pull him close to herself and they stayed that way for a while.

"I’m sorry. It's just my mood, it takes advantage of me sometimes."

He stroked her hair. "Something is on your mind."

She shook her head stubbornly. "Nothing."

"Tell me, you know I'm the only one you can tell all your precious secrets to." He caressed her cheeks affectionately staring into her eyes. Something was definitely wrong with her, even if no one could see it, he could.

She could pretend to the whole world that she was happy but he knew she wasn't. The way she sensed him pulling back after her outburst was the same way he could sense how she felt.

Though they believed in two different things, they still had one thing in common and the bond between them was still strong.

"Soji cheated on me Dapo." She inhaled deeply as if she'd revealed something that could shatter her for life. "I don't know how long he and Aisha have been doing it behind me, but I know it's long enough to get people speculating that the wedding might not happen."

"Aisha Waziri? The same Aisha? Your best friend?"

"The same."

He shook his head. "Wow, I don't know what to say. You two have been best friends for years. Did you have a fight or something? It's ridiculous, why would she do that to you?"

She shrugged. "I don't know. Jealousy, anger… hatred, I don't know what I ever did to her to deserve this." Her eyes pooled and she reached for a tissue in her bag.

"Hey, hey, don't do this, don't cry. C'mon this guy is so full of crap to have done this to you." He hugged her and she clung tightly to him.

"I don't know what to do Dapo, I honestly don't." She sobbed.

"It's okay, don't worry, everything will be fine." He consoled.

"But I love Soji. Everything I have, I gave him. I shared all my life with Aisha too and they did this to me. What did I do wrong? Where did I go wrong?"

"They're full of shit. Both of them."

Lara looked up amidst her conflicted emotions and laughed. "Did you just say shit?"

He shrugged. "I think I can break some rules for my kid sister."

And she hugged him again. "I love you. Why can't you be some guy who wasn't my brother? I'd marry you ASAP."

Though hurt, Dapo laughed and she joined him. If only Lara could understand that it wasn't just about getting married. It was the reason why she felt getting married to Soji was her all, a do or die affair that made her hurt this way. She deserved someone better, much better than the scumbag who didn't fear God and could go as far as cheat on his sister with her best friend. If he could do that while they were engaged, what would he do when they got married? Sleep with the whole town? Would he take all she had and elope with it, hurting her more?

"You know you don't have to marry this guy Lara." He decided to drop the bombshell. He knew she might resist and even hate him for suggesting such when Soji was her life.

She looked up into his eyes then. "And am I supposed to allow Aisha marry him?"

"What if she does? Do you lose anything? To me it is good riddance to bad rubbish."

"Oh D.K, you don't know how much I love Soji. Aisha is just trying to come between us."

"You and I know you're only lying to yourself because you don’t want to let go of Soji. Is this about your pride? If Soji sees you as an option, I see no reason why you should stick with him when all you'll be doing is hurting yourself in the process."

She pulled away and wrapped her arms around herself staring into space. Dapo knew his words had hurt her. Though she tried to show the world she was strong, he knew she hurt easily. He was the only one that could see through her.

The only one she still let in and he was scared she would get to a stage where she didn't let him in anymore.

That could happen if she ended up marrying Soji. He would finally loose her. He could sense it already. He was already losing her and he knew he would have to keep praying for her.

He reached for her hands. "Let's go somewhere far away, we can go for a vacation this weekend, stay away from work, your love life and everything else, just the two of us. The bill's on me."

"And where would we go?"

"Shanghai maybe..." He grinned. "Look on the bright side; you get to eat your favourite Chinese food. By the way, it’s been a long time I ate Kung Pao chicken."

She smiled softly. Her smile was sincere this time. “I was thinking Qatar."

"Anything you wish milady." He pulled her closer to himself praying to God she would give in to his suggestion or even tell him she would think about it.

Just then her phone rang and she got distracted. He was tempted to ask her to ignore it but, in a few seconds, she had planted it close to her ears. She raised a finger to explain she needed one minute away from him and excused herself. He could guess who it was, but he wasn't going to jump into conclusions.



"Hey..." Lara said into the phone as she walked away from her brother.

"Hey baby... I've been trying to reach you in all ways possible, but you haven’t been picking my calls or responding to my texts. I told your P.A it was urgent as well."

"I got busy."

"You're still not mad at me are you?"

"Of course not." She managed. She was still hurting but she tried not to let it spill through her voice.

"Where are you now? I need to see you. There's something important I have to tell you. I've been through hell these few days we've been apart. Right now, I can't stop thinking of how much I want to touch you and love you."

Her heart fluttered. It was always hard to resist him when he came on to her like that. Thoughts of how she wanted to spend a weekend away from him and every other person vanished.

She suddenly wanted to be with him and him alone. She wanted him to love her the way he used to. She felt so vulnerable, he was like her drug, her oxygen, the one she needed to survive.

"I've missed you too baby." She replied throwing caution to the wind once more. "It's been so unbearable without you."

"Look, I got us two tickets to Dubai. We're flying first class in Emirates baby; this weekend and I'm not taking no for an answer. Just the two of us. If you say no I'm coming to your office to kidnap you."

She bobbed her head, acting like a teenager in love and giggling at his statement of kidnapping her. She knew him, he could do it. She remembered the last time he came to whisk her from her office and carried her out like his princess. Everybody had watched the duo, some clapping and some giggling.

Soji had the key to her heart and only he could turn it wherever he wanted.

"Is that a yes?"

She sniffed, smiling. "You know with you it’s always a yes."

"Are you okay baby? You're not crying are you? Is something wrong, is someone hurting you?"

"No Soji, I'm just happy that's all, happy that you're coming back to me."

"Oh baby, I never left. Where are you? Let me come pick you so you can spend the night at my place."

"I'm with my brother but I'll be leaving soon. We just had lunch and got talking."

"Okay baby. When you're done, buzz me alright? Let your mum know you'll be spending the night at your boo's place. Some of your things are still here but I'd love to see you snuggle up in my shirt like you always do."

She smiled again, memories of their relationship coming back and breaking her walls of resistance further.

What's life without Soji?

"Can you come to my office by five? I should be done by then."

"Okay baby, later. Give your boo a kiss."

She made a noisy kiss and giggled telling him she loved him before hanging up.

Dapo watched his sister as she walked towards him grinning from ear to ear and knew he had lost her. Her answer to his offer to travel out would definitely be a no. Soji had scored goals in her heart once again and anything he said at this time wouldn't make sense to her.

"I've got to go; it's getting late by the way." Lara mumbled. He could tell she was trying not to reveal much. He'd heard her side of the phone conversation phone and it broke his heart how she kept holding on to a guy like Soji.

Dapo knew his kind. Soji was one of the top Lagos boys, eligible bachelor number one. He had nice words for the ladies, and he could only see his sister dying of heartbreak in her marriage if they finally tied the knot.

He could suddenly see the kind of man he was years ago reflected in Soji and the guilt came back to taunt him and demand what rights he had to judge his sister's fiancé. He'd been the Kitan's only son and there'd been many girls in his years of foolishness. Although he had received a stricter discipline than his sister, he still found his way around things.

His terrible deeds had been covered up by his parents but that didn’t stop the memories from clinging to him, flashing before his face whenever he looked at Lara. He didn't believe in Nemesis, but a part of him still wondered if nature was trying to pay him back for what he'd done with his girlfriend years ago.

You're in Christ Dapo, all things are new.

He sighed and reached for his sister's hands trying one more time. "You know you don't have to spend the night at Soji's place Lara. Don't you need time to think about all of this? My apartment is always open to you, you know that right?"

She smiled, her vulnerability suddenly gone and the Lara Kitan the world knew threw on her mask once more. "When you finally meet the one you belong to, you'll understand." She squeezed his hands gently and pulled him closer. "C'mon let's go back, I don't want to be late."

CHAPTER 7

Lara stared at Soji as he knelt before her, her hands locked in his because he refused to let go. He'd just told her Aisha was carrying his baby. She didn't know whether to laugh or cry. She hoped it was some joke he'd planned as an addition to their trip to Dubai. He'd bought her everything she asked for and showered her with love reminding her of the reason she'd fallen in love with him. Their intimate moments had brought more memories of their love to the surface and she thought she would drown in it.

But this news was nowhere close to sending sparks through her. He'd stabbed her leaving her to bleed without remedy. He'd hurt her that much. She suddenly wished it was a bad dream she would wake up from, see him beside her holding her and telling her he would never do such a thing. He would kiss her and make love to her till she went back to sleep.

She felt time pause and her world seemed to spin as everything around her went still. Maybe she'd passed out and her mind was playing tricks on her.

"Lara… baby..." Soji jolted her back to reality. He had tears in his eyes as he stared into hers.

She blinked and looked away trying to unclasp her hand from his but he wouldn't let her.

"Baby please, don't do this to me... this is killing me already..."

She snapped, her eyes brimming with tears. She was losing control again, and she hated losing control. "And what about me Soji? What were you thinking when you were sleeping with my best friend. Oh, let me not call her that anymore." Angry expletives flew in the air as she screamed her irritation about what he'd done with Aisha.

"It was a mistake... I swear baby… Aisha was just trying to ruin what we have, what if it's not my baby..."

"Oh shove your swearing lies into your mouth Soji!" She rubbed her throbbing temples and stood up pacing the room. She looked like a woman wrestling with a rage Soji couldn't fathom. He silently wondered why he'd listened to his mother about telling her the truth.

"Can you swear on your life that Aisha is not carrying your baby? Are you willing to go to the doctor and do a DNA test?"

He hung his head in shame.

Her hand cracked across his face again and again till she broke into tears and he held her begging her once more.

"How could you do this to me Soji? How could you! After all I've done for you, after all we've been through together. How could you even think of betraying me this way?"

"I was wrong and I'm sorry baby. Please forgive me."

She shook her head wanting to break free from his grip. "Just leave me alone. I don't know if I'll be able to go on like this."

He went on his knees again. "Look baby, I'm willing to fight for us. I won't let anything come between us. I would never lie to you, I won't let anyone or anything come between us. Aisha and her baby can go to hell for all I care. You're the one I belong to, you're the one I want to have my kids with, the one I want sleeping and waking beside me every morning. I was wrong, I did you wrong and I'll never forgive myself for hurting you so much. But right now

baby, I need you to forgive me so I can live with myself. I need you to tell me you still love me."

She shook her head. "You don't love me Soji..."

"Who am I here with baby? Is it Aisha? Who am I getting married to in some months' time, you or Aisha?" He reached for her face, wiping her tears away as he noticed she was beginning to soften towards him. He leaned close to kiss her and though she resisted him and tried to push him away, he succeeded in kissing her till she wrapped her hands around him.

He drew back and cupped her face in his hands. "I'll do anything for you baby."

Lara looked into his eyes and smiled softly, kissing him again. She found hope in his words and she allowed him relish the thought of being with her before she broke free from his kiss and asked him.

"Are you really willing to do anything for me, to fight for us?"

He nodded wanting to kiss her again but she placed a finger on his lips. She'd been waiting for this moment; the moment to pay her arch enemy back for what she'd done to her.

"People will talk about Aisha and her baby Soji..."

He reached for her, planting kisses on her neck and she allowed him, pretending to be carried away.

"Uh-uh..."

"We can't let that happen."

He stopped to look at her. "I've told her to abort it but she wouldn't listen to me."

Lara smiled again. Her fiancé must be very stupid to think Aisha would listen to him and voluntarily abort his child, their child, the evidence of their love affair. Even the thought of them together almost made her puke but she swallowed the pain. If there was anything Aisha wanted to do, it was to drag her name in the mud and media.

But she wasn't going to let that happen. No one soiled the Kitans name that way, especially her reputation.

"People are willing to listen to news when a woman has proof of what she's talking about." She stroked his chin playfully. "Remove every form of evidence she has and all we have is an attention starved woman who will do anything to get in the news."

Soji narrowed his eyes. "What are you talking about?"

"It's your seed Soji, find a way to get rid of it."

"But I just told you..."

"Oh I'm not stupid and stop acting like you don't understand what I mean." She rolled her eyes and pushed him away. Strolling to the dressing table, she settled down comfortably pretending to pay close attention to a spot on her face while she surreptitiously glanced at him. She knew she was fighting for composure and if she showed any sign of vulnerability, he would jump on it but she wasn't going to allow him see how shaken she was underneath it all.

Her conscience screamed at her aware of her devilish thoughts, hoping to bring sanity into her, reminding her of her brother whom she loved so much. He was the only light in her life at the moment.

Lara, what are you thinking? Don't do this... Dapo will hate you for this!

Well, he had his own share of fun. I'll have mine and I bet he'll understand.

She ignored her conscience and continued. "You have a choice Soji. You can marry Aisha and you two live happily ever after with your baby or whatever it is that comes out of her. But I'm not marrying a man who isn't brave enough to clean up his dirty business. I've been a good woman, accepting you back into my life even when I know how much you've betrayed me, but you have to play your part."

He sighed and ran a hand on his head. "Lara, are you suggesting I find a way to terminate the pregnancy?"

She shrugged. "Aisha won't come to see me or any of my friends. The only person she supposedly trusts is you whom she wants to keep having an affair with. There are ways you can make it easy on her. If she isn't far gone as you have told me… except you lied and she's like three months pregnant already."

"God forbid." His eyes stared back at her in horror. "I would never do that to you. I told you whatever happened between me and Aisha was a fling and nothing else."

She smiled because she'd gotten the response she wanted. Those words alone should be enough to make him prove that he wasn't lying to her.

She cast a furtive glance at the mirror and saw him lost in his thoughts. She was tempted to pump her fists in the air with satisfaction that she was getting through to him. She was going to do everything within her power to get him to do her wish. Let the Aisha slut suffer for all the things she had made her go through, all the pain she caused her, all the nights she spent in her fiancé's arms.

It was time for Aisha to feel the pain too. This time, she was going to make it visible. There would be blood, and the blood would be that of Aisha Waziri and her child.

She got up from the dressing table and sauntered towards him. He stared at her for a long time and she knew he was still battling with his thoughts. She faked concern at his predicament.

"I could leave your life. I'll just tell my parents it didn't work out between us." She sighed and was about to walk away when he stopped her and swung her into his arms.

"I told you I was going to fight for us." He leaned closer to her, his smile matching hers. "And I meant every word."

"I love you." She managed to mumble before he kissed her again.



Soji decided to call Aisha like every other day, except this time he didn't want to think of the consequences of what he was about to do. He wasn't going to tell his mother anything about it, neither was he ready to think twice about it. He'd promised Lara that he would do the right thing and the right thing was fighting for them and gaining back her trust.

He wasn't ready to go back to his former life, neither was he ready to stick with Aisha. The girl had nothing to offer him and she might be more of a liability than an asset to him. When it came to their affair, it had only been lust, nothing else. Lara had been with him all through and he was ready to prove that he loved her and wanted her in his life.

It was just an abortion and since she wasn't far gone, hopefully, no harm would be done. He tried to remember how long they'd been having an affair. She'd been on the pill as often as possible but the *witch* had decided to put him into trouble by staying off it. She'd only delivered the news to him last week confirming she was pregnant.

She couldn't be far gone.

He sighed heavily. Lara couldn't know they'd been together for more than six months and hopefully Aisha wasn't more than six weeks pregnant.

Oh god please let things go smoothly.

He assured himself once again that whatever it was, he was going to go through with the plan. There was no big deal about it. He wasn't having kids with any other woman asides Lara and that was it.

Aisha didn't pick on the first ring and his heart skipped a beat. What if she had started talking to her friends about it? What if it had gotten on Twitter or

Facebook or some other social media sites already? What if she had already told her parents about it? He'd called the doctor Lara referred him to and made arrangements. It would take about an hour or two, they would tidy up the mess and he would take her back to her house.

No, he couldn't have her tell anyone about her pregnancy. He had to do it fast. He called again and this time she picked, her voice sounding distant.

"Aisha? Are you alright?" He asked, genuinely worried about her.

"Soji? Is that you?"

"Yea… it's me. Where are you?"

"Oh I was starting to think you would never call me again." She chuckled and he was suddenly irritated at how relaxed she was while he was agitated and almost dying from tension.

"Where are you?"

"I went to Jos to see some of my cousins as I wanted to get away from the drama going on in Lagos. Do you want to see me?"

"Yes I would love to see you. When are you due back?"

"I was thinking of taking the first flight out tomorrow morning. My leave is almost over and I need to resume before I tell them about my maternity leave."

Maternity Leave? What on earth was she talking about? She wasn't even far gone. There had been no noticeable bump the last time he saw her, so she couldn't be far gone. Why the rush? The woman must be really crazy. He just hoped she hadn't told the truth to anyone else yet.

"That would be great then. I've missed you and I'm really sorry about the other time I yelled at you. Everything was happening so fast, I didn't know what else to do."

He could hear her smile over the phone. "It's okay Soji. You know I will always love you irrespective of what happens between us and what Lara feels. Now that you mentioned it, I feel like taking the next flight already."

"Don't worry dear, tomorrow is fine and don't stress the little one."

"I won't."

"So later dear. I'll buzz you tomorrow and we can meet at your place say seven p.m.?"

"Seven p.m. is fine baby."

"Okay then. Bye."

"Bye. Kisses."

When he hung up, he closed his eyes and sighed heavily hoping everything would go as planned.

CHAPTER 8

Nimi stared at her wristwatch and sighed. It was a few minutes after six and she was still running errands. She hadn't been able to study in the first two weeks she'd been working as Lara's PA. Time was barely on her side these days. Maybe if she'd known how stressful and demanding the job would be, she would have said no in the first place.

But God wanted her to be here. She'd sensed the go-ahead in her spirit, though she was yet to discover the purpose. She'd even spoken to her spiritual parents about it and they seemed to agree with the nudge she'd felt then.

It'd been two weeks and she trusted that God will clarify things further with time. She was beginning to learn that God didn't work the way she would have loved him to. Sometimes she just wanted to know how her life would turn out to be but he was only going to show her a step per time.

What if the next step was beyond her ability? What if it was something that was too great to handle? How would she cope? She lacked faith in herself sometimes and she wished she was one of those women in the bible whose faith moved mountains.

But she was just an ordinary girl with an ordinary family who loved God more than life itself.

Do you?

She blinked at the question. Her mind immediately flashed to when Jesus asked Peter if he loved him and her heart wondered.

Did she really love God above all else? Could she stand and declare boldly without a doubt in her heart? Would God search her heart and see the truth she often proclaimed and professed through her songs and prayers?

“I love God, I know I do.” She mumbled as she got out of the Uber. Paying the driver, she strolled towards the Kitan's electronic gate, pressed the bell and a young man in uniform appeared to confirm her presence before entering the codes to the gate which granted her access inside.

"Good evening." She greeted as usual.

He waved back politely and she ambled off to the main house hoping to leave on time.

She was still trying to finger comb her hair when the maid opened the door.

"Good evening ma."

"Hello, good evening, is Miss Lara Olakitan home?"

"She'll be home anytime from now." Mrs Olakitan interrupted as she appeared from the living room and dismissed the maid. The older woman managed a smile. Nimi suddenly wished she’d sprayed more perfume or combed her hair till it looked sleek and shiny like it did in the morning.

This was the second time she would be seeing Mrs Olakitan. The first time was when she visited with Kemi, but now, she felt alone and squeamish under the woman's gaze. The other days Lara had sent her to the house, she just delivered the items Lara asked her to and left without seeing the woman.

Perhaps her hair and her inexpensive dress was the reason the woman was assessing her like she'd crawled out from a hole.

"I might just come back and see Dad tomorrow. I have tons of work sitting on my desk at home and if I don't round up today, I’ll have a backlog." She

heard a male voice filter into the living room and swallowed when she saw him appear beside his mother.

He glanced at her briefly and waved. "Hi."

And that was it. He didn't wait for her to respond to his greeting. She felt worse and was desperate to run out of the house.

Nimi watched him lean close to kiss his mother and quickly spoke up. "I just wanted to drop this for my boss and be on my way. I hope this is not a bad time."

"Just drop it on the centre table." The older woman responded, irritation spilling through her voice. Nimi suddenly felt like she had interrupted something important.

She did as she was told and ensured the files were well secured within the folder before dropping it on the table. She hurriedly left the house and sighed when she stepped out.

Though she'd received a colder welcome compared to the last time, she told herself she wouldn't let it disturb her. She had more important things to think about other than mother and son acting like she was an insect buzzing noisily in their ears.



Nimi tried not to feel miserable that she had been standing at the bus stop close to thirty minutes unable to get a good and affordable bus to take her home. This was the problem with leaving Lagos Island at this time. The teeming crowd kept gathering at the bus-stop overwhelmed her. It wasn’t unusual that transport fares got pricey with the building traffic on Lagos roads at night. It was either people were rushing and pushing each other, or the buses hiked up their rates. The money Lara had given her was for the cab and nothing else. Nimi had gotten

this job so she could save up, not lavish it on bus drivers who rapaciously exploited passengers.

Her stomach growled from hunger reminding her that she only had toast and tea that morning. She'd skipped lunch and only managed the roasted plantain and groundnuts she bought from the roadside which didn't suffice.

Her mum had called her earlier but she texted that she would be home soon. She couldn't even afford to stand in the BRT bus all the way to Ketu because she was certain she would pass out from hunger and stress.

"Oh dear God, please just make a way for me, you know how I need this."

For a while, she kept standing hoping for a bus with a good price that would stop in front of her and she would rush in when a 2016 Honda Civic Sedan slowed down beside her.

She shifted believing the ride was for someone in the crowd until the driver wound down and she saw a familiar face smiling at her. Blinking back, it took her brain five seconds to process the stranger's face.

"Need a ride home?"

Her first instinct was to hurriedly step into the car and settle in. Heaving a sigh of relief, she sank into the car seat and tried to fix in her seat belt. Only a few seconds later did she realised what she'd done as he drove off. "Oh my goodness..."

He glanced at her. "What?"

"I didn't even ask where you're heading." She burst into laughter at her impulsiveness.

He joined her. "Or if I was even going to kidnap you in the first place."

"I just flew in like a bird being chased."

They both laughed again. "You don't know how happy I am about this. I see it as a provision from God because I was about to collapse on that pavement….Okay sorry I'm talking too much."

“It’s okay.” He consoled. “God sees our hearts I guess. Sorry you had to wait so long. Lagos traffic can be terrible."

She smiled and remained quiet for a while. "You can just drop me at the next bus stop since we are not going in the same direction. I'm sure the crowd should be less there."

"If you believe it's God who sent me, please allow me take you home then, that's if home's not far..."

She stared at him. 'Uh, home is far and I'm not going to let you stress yourself over me."

"Where is home madam?"

She laughed, shaking her head. "Ketu. Happy now?"

"Then we're going to Ketu. I thought you were sharing rooms with Kemi at the private hostel around Akoka."

"Yea, we're on a little break and I just thought I should go home today. Today of all days. I already promised my mum so yea..."

"Have you had anything to eat?"

She shook her head dumbly.

"Me neither. I couldn't wait for dinner at the house. We can stop at Cactus and get something. Chat a little maybe till the traffic dies down. If that’s alright with you…”

Answered prayer! Her heart sang. She felt her inner self dancing disco or whatever it was it could dance. She couldn't do *shakara* with this one.

Thou stomach, food is coming.

"Fine by me."

He glanced at her again, smiling softly and she felt her heart skip a beat. It was a strange and unfamiliar feeling and something within told her their friendship wouldn't end at dinner.



Aisha's face brightened the moment she set eyes on Soji. He took her in his arms and carried her inside. She held on to him and for a while they were lost in each other.

"I've missed you."

"I've missed you too. I always knew you would come back to me." Her eyes pooled and she shook her head. "I think it's the baby that makes me cry every single time. These days I find myself picking a tissue every time I see a movie."

"It's okay, you'll be fine."

She nodded believing him.

"I made your favourite dish for dinner. I hope you're not in a hurry?"

"Not really, it's just that I don't intend spending the night here since I have to leave town tomorrow for a meeting, I just wanted to see you first."

She looked disappointed. "Oh okay."

"C'mon baby, I'll be back sooner than you know it. Secondly, I have plans of breaking up with Lara, but I don't want her to find out this way."

"Really? She still hasn't given up on you, has she?"

He sighed.

"I hope she realises soon enough that she can't always have what she wants or handle people the way she handles her father's money. Humans are different from toys."

"Have you heard from her?" Soji asked.

"I wouldn't risk my life or that of my baby. What do I even need to hear from her? That she was trying to commit suicide because of you? Don't forget we've been friends for more than ten years and I'm aware of her childish pranks. Lara won't kill herself for anybody, no pun intended. All she wants is attention from people who can feed it to her the way you feed *Cerelac* to a baby."

"She really scared me the last time. I feel like I've come between you two."

"Well the relationship between me and Lara was bound to end one way or the other. It's sad it had to happen this way but..." She shrugged. "I don't think talking about Lara is what I would like to do at the moment." She reached for his hands and placed them on her abdomen. "I want to talk about us and our baby. I have a feeling he's going to look like you if it's a boy."

"I've always wanted a boy." He grinned and leaned close to kiss her.

Soji pulled back and mumbled. "Why don't we have dinner and then we can continue where we left off."

Aisha chuckled mischievously. "I'm sorry, I've missed you so much that's why I'm acting so..." winking at him, she stood up and he joined her. "Let me help out." He said, placing his arms around her as they headed into the kitchen. "I would advise you to take advantage of my skills now because of the baby."

She laughed and headed towards the cupboard to bring out cutlery while he opened the fridge bringing out a juice pack.

"Oh I almost forgot, I brought something to celebrate with. It's wine but non-alcoholic. Are you up for it or would you rather settle with juice?"

"I think I'd love to have a glass of wine since its non-alcoholic."

"Great then, hold on a minute while I get to the car."

"Alright Mr Romantic."

Soji stepped out of the house. Heading for his car he hoped he hadn't given himself away and tried to work with the little time on his hands. He had only a few minutes left to carry out his plan. Reaching for the bottle of wine he bought on his way, he hurried back to the house thinking of his next line of action. Aisha had already brought out glasses for him to fill up. He filled the glasses and raised his for a toast.

"To us and our beautiful life together."

"To us." Aisha clinked her glass against his and sipped from hers.

"Have you seen my phone?" He asked touching his pockets while looking around. "I was going to show you a nice piece of jewellery I want you to wear on Valentine's Day."

She beamed dropping her glass still filled with wine. "Is it not with you? I know you always carry your phone with you."

"Maybe I left it in the living room, can you help me check while I look around here? Or better still go get your phone and buzz mine so I can hear it ring."

"Oh sure babe." She left the kitchen and immediately he reached for the drug bottle in his pocket and spilled the contents into her drink. Stirring it to remove any evidence of precipitate, he set it back to where it was and pretended to keep searching for his phone which he'd purposely left beneath the couch.

"Have you found it?" He called out.

"I'm trying to call it." She responded. "I think I can hear it ring, It's probably somewhere inside my couch."

"Oh great."

She returned and handed him the phone. "I'm sure it must have fallen off your pocket somehow..."

"Yea, thanks babe." He unlocked it while she reached for her glass of wine and sipped a little. She grimaced at first and shrugged draining the glass. They talked for a while as she tried to make dinner.

"Here's what I wanted to show you." He moved close to her and flashed a picture of an expensive looking neckpiece.

She gasped, excited. "It's beautiful. Oh Soji, you would buy this for me?"

"Of course, I would. The mother of my child deserves the most beautiful things money can buy. Do you like it?" He asked.

She nodded feeling dizzy.

"Are you alright?"

"I just feel weird..." She looked up at him and he could tell the drug was already taking effect on her. She reached for him, sinking into his arms. Moments later, he dialled a number.

"It's done. You can come in now."

Two bulky men walked into the apartment. One of them carried her on his shoulders like a sack of potatoes while Soji emptied the glass of wine and tried to erase every form of evidence else that might implicate him and closed the door behind him.

Two more hours and everything would be like it never happened. He heaved a sigh of relief as he drove off.

CHAPTER 9

The first thing Aisha felt when she woke up was a sharp pain coursing through her as she tried to rise from the bed. Her head felt too heavy to lift and she almost collapsed back into bed as vertigo enveloped her.

Maybe it was just a dream. But why could she still feel the pain if it was only a dream? The whole dizziness made her feel wobbly and unbalanced and she'd never experienced such before. She groaned when she tried lifting her legs. She felt a throbbing pain emanating from her abdominal region.

The first thing she thought of was her baby.

She looked to see if there were any traces of blood on the bed but there was none. She tried to remember what had happened the night before and how she'd landed in bed without any recollection of telling Soji goodnight.

She did not remember going to bed.

Her dream came back to torment her. She suddenly remembered how she'd dreamed of someone stabbing her abdomen. She'd tried to scream into reality but felt caged while the torment persisted. That was the most horrible dream she'd ever had in her life.

What happened last night?

She remembered Soji showing her something on his phone as she sipped the wine. She couldn't remember anything after that except… She remembered feeling dizzy after drinking the wine Soji had poured for her and she felt the bile rising in her throat.

Did Soji drug me?

She tried piecing it all together. The truth of what might have happened stared at her in the face. She struggled to get up from the bed and managed to find her way to the bathroom. Taking off her underwear, she saw blood stains. She knew it wasn't a miscarriage.

Someone had done something cruel and ruthless to her. She reached to touch her abdomen and closed her eyes in terror. Her child was gone, replaced by pain in that delicate part of her body. She felt the hollowness replace the life that had been inside her hours ago. She screamed, sinking to the floor and swearing to take vengeance on the soul who had taken her unborn child from her.



Nimi noticed her boss looked happier than usual that morning. Ever since she started working for Lara, Nimi had never seen her so giddy, like she'd just won a jackpot. But there was something unsettling about her happiness. Nimi couldn't place it but she sensed there was something dark and foreboding about it. It was more like a triumphant achievement than a free-spirited happiness.

She tried to shake off the thought and focus on something else instead. Her mind drifted towards Dapo and she smiled.

He'd driven her home last night and walked her to the front door, explaining to her mum her reason for being late, taking on the blame. She'd stared at him like he was out of his mind, but he winked at her instead and gave her a heart melting smile. No one had noticed it except her sister Tolani. Nimi's

sister was an undergraduate student who spent most of her time on gossip sites and she was ecstatic to find out how her sister had ‘collided’ with Dapo Olakitan, son of one of the richest men in Nigeria.

Her brother, Akin had gone to bed. He was in High school, currently preparing for his upcoming GCE exams.

Their father had passed three years ago.

Tolani the mischievous one had taken it upon herself to assess the gentleman that brought her home. When he left, her mother had a questioning look on her face and Tolani was asked to excuse them though she grumbled all the way to her room.

"Is he related to the Kitans?" Her mum said as she adjusted her reading glasses, pretending to assess the mark sheets in her hands.

She shrugged. “He’s my boss' brother."

"Older or younger?"

"Older. The Kitans have only two children."

"He’'s also an Olakitan?" She emphasized the surname clearly understanding what it meant to their middle-class family.

She nodded. "Yes ma."

"So you're not only working for the Olakitans now, you are planning to get married to one."

Nimi sighed. Her mother often jumped to conclusions. Perhaps she should have stopped Dapo when he insisted on walking her to the door.

"He only brought me home mummy.” She replied. “I had been standing at the bus stop for over thirty minutes. He was just being kind. And just because he brought me home doesn't mean we're dating or anything like that."

"He said he was the one responsible for keeping you out late."

"My boss was the one responsible. He was just trying to be nice." Besides she wasn’t a child that had to be questioned this way

Her mother kept quiet and focused on her papers. "I just want you to be careful that's all. A family like theirs don't mingle with ours. Sometimes it's good to just let sleeping dogs lie. And the things I hear about them are not nice things at all. Hanging around with them can tarnish your reputation in finding a good husband."

"I'll be fine. God's got me." She leaned close, kissing her mother on the cheeks.

"Have you eaten?"

"Yea, we grabbed something on the way." She stepped away. "Goodnight mummy."

"Goodnight dear."

When she got into the room she shared with her sister, she was presented with another round of questions.

"*Gbogbo bigz geh*!" Tolani hailed and chuckled mischievously. "I hail *o. ahnahn…*, you just went for the chairman. *Na wa oh*, show us the way *nau*."

"My *friend!* Behave yourself!" Nimi snapped trying to keep a straight face but she burst into laughter instead. Tolani reminded her that their mum was in the next room and could be eavesdropping. She got up to shut the door and ran back to the bed.

"So, gist me. *Kai*, God please give me a handsome man like my sister *o*."

"You are not okay. You better go to bed and stop disturbing my life."

"*Haba*, and miss out on all the sweet gist of Dapo Kitan and Nimi Adeyemi? *Lai lai*. Before your engagement goes on *Bella Naija*, I will be the first to talk about it."

"See your life. You don't know more than *Bella Naija* and wedding. So, a man can't be my friend again *abi*?"

"With the way he winked and smiled at you?! *Tah!* That one has *passed* friendship *o*, that one has turned to, 'baby you know how we roll'." Tolani mimicked a kiss to demonstrate what she meant and Nimi pulled at her lips.

"Your mouth and your mind need deliverance. *Yeye* girl." She took off her blouse shaking her head. "I will just report you to your mother so she can discipline you well. Someone who sees you outside will think you're one holy sister not knowing that your mouth has diarrhoea."

They both laughed and Tolani helped her sister remove her hair clips.

"But seriously Sis, he looks like he just stepped out of a chocolate bath. Idris Elba's look-alike."

Nimi slapped her hand.

"I'm just being honest."

"At the detriment of your soul."

"So you want to start preaching to me now *abi* or do you want me to pretend to be someone I'm not?"

She shook her head. "I forgot the kind of sister I have. Next time I'll just tell him not to drop me at home because someone in my house is going to gobble him up thinking he's chocolate."

Tolani giggled. "I was just joking *jor*. He seems like a really nice guy too."

"Yes, he is." Nimi smiled to herself remembering how he talked less of himself and wanted to hear her talk about herself. She got to know he was ten years older than her and although it was quite intimidating at first, it didn't feel so anymore.

She didn't want to crush on him with the way her heart was already doing flaps around him. She wanted to pray about it first and if it didn't work out, then nothing was lost. If it was a crush and not God's will, thoughts of him wouldn't take long to fade away. She never attached her soul to anything or anybody. God had been teaching her not to for a while now and she was making progress.

Her mind came back to the present and she saw her boss standing in front of her with a slight dip in her brow. "Were you just daydreaming while I was talking to you?"

Nimi shook her head slightly embarrassed. "No ma, I'm sorry, I just wasn't listening to..."

Lara smiled knowingly. "It's a man isn't it?"

"Not really..." Nimi fumbled with the folders on the table trying to get her thoughts in order.

"Be living in denial. That's what a man does when he gets a girl's heart hooked." Lara chuckled and she continued rather bluntly. "You have a good figure; I hope you know how to use it well to your advantage." She winked and for weird reasons that wink reminded her of Dapo's wink last night and she shivered.

Could her mum be right? Even though Dapo had told her he was a Christian, he still had Kitan blood flowing through his veins. Was he just after her body and nothing else? Were brother and sister alike? What if he saw how much she liked him and took advantage of her? What if she wasn't strong enough to resist him?

"I wouldn't do that." Nimi swallowed.

Lara looked surprised. "So it's not a man after all..."

"No, it's not that, it's just... I don't believe in doing that. That's a cruel and selfish thing to do, and it's not love."

Where did that boldness come from?

Nimi was sure with the way her boss stared at her, she was going to tell her to shut up or leave her office but she kept looking at her like she was a strange person that had just walked into her office and not her PA.

"So what is love according to your definition Miss Adeyemi?" She asked.

"Love looks out for the other person and isn't selfish. Just like when God sent down His Son. He wasn't thinking about himself but he thought about me through it all and expects me to do the same for others."

"And you think that's possible?" Lara stared at Nimi, challenging her.

"With God all things are possible."

"So if your boyfriend wants to have sex with you, you don't see it as him wanting to love you?"

"No ma'am, sex isn't love. It's only obvious he doesn't love me because he's thinking about himself and not me. What if I don't want to have sex? What if I want to wait till we get married and he says no and leaves? Is that love? Love isn't dependent on how I feel or what I want someone else to do for me. It's unconditional and loves me for me, not because of what I can deliver."

Lara settled back into her chair as if she was trying to let the words sink in.

Nimi wasn't expecting the next question. "So, you've never had a boyfriend in your life? Is that what you're saying?"

"No ma'am."

"And so you're a virgin?"

She nodded.

Nimi couldn't tell how long Lara's gaze lingered on her with a certain curiosity. Her celibacy was not something she readily disclosed, but in situations like this, she couldn't withhold the truth.

"I'm really finding it hard to believe that." Lara scoffed. "Not that you look the opposite of what you portray but I'm wondering how you survive. You don't want to grow up an old maid do you?"

Nimi didn't respond.

"I mean guys want sex. They love sex. I doubt there's any relationship that survives without it. You telling me your boyfriend or whoever you intend marrying in future that you want to wait till you get married is just selfish and not what you think love is."

Nimi could only smile. "I guess you haven't met men who honour God with their bodies. If there are ladies out there like me, then there are guys out there like me too. And our love won't be based on if either of us is good in bed

or not because we won’t base our foundation on sex but on true love, Jesus Christ."

Lara's phone rang and Nimi took the opportunity to excuse herself. She didn’t realise she’d been holding her breath until she stepped out of Lara’s office. She silently wondered if her boss would fire her, but deep within, she was glad she had told her the truth. It might not get across immediately, but she was sowing a seed. She trusted God to draw Lara to himself if that was what he'd sent her here for.

Her phone rang and she picked it wondering who it was.

"Hey...”

She recognised Dapo’s voice immediately and her heart flapped wildly like a bird kept in a cage against its will.

"Hi."

"How's your morning going?"

"Just there. Yours? I'm so sorry I forgot to call you yesterday to ask if you had gotten home." She slapped a hand against her forehead just remembering. "Forgive me please. I was going to and then I slept off."

"Aww c'mon. I knew you would be tired. I mean I was tired as well. I fell straight on the bed as soon as I stepped out of the shower with my bible dangling over my head. Thank God I didn't drool on it. I was that drained."

She smiled. "Thank you once again for yesterday. I really don't know how to express my gratitude."

"Uh talking about thank you notes, I was thinking we could grab coffee this weekend or ice-cream as you ladies prefer. Is that okay by you or would you prefer something else?"

"Coffee sounds nice if it's coming with a nice slice of cake."

His laughed huskily. "I won't disappoint. What's your favourite? You're not working that day are you?"

Nimi had been thinking of reading on Saturday but she told herself she would do so on Sunday instead.

"I don't really have favourites, you can pick for me and no, my weekends are off on your sister's list."

"Great, I love picking cakes for my friends and I never miss. Lara used to be my partner in crime as a kid. I remember painting her face with icing whenever we had a cake party."

Nimi laughed. He must have been really cute as a child. She suddenly imagined him feeding her a piece of cake and she shook the silly thoughts away. Her thoughts were beginning to grow wings. Something it never did before Dapo came into the picture.

"I'll try to make sure you don't plaster it all over my face then."

"No, I'll be aiming for your mouth Miss Adeyemi."

His innocent statement felt so much more to her and she swallowed. She wasn't sure if his abrupt end to the call was a sign that he knew he had slipped in his words, but she was glad he ended the call on time, or she'd be thinking back to what Tolani said about him being dipped in chocolate.

"God, the crazy things my flesh does without the guidance of your Spirit is beyond me." She mumbled as she went back to her table to continue her work for the day.

CHAPTER 10

Dapo hung up and stared at his cell phone tempted to slap some sense into himself.

What on earth was I thinking?

He'd noticed her sudden silence the moment he uttered those words. He hadn't thought much of it till he realised he must have passed the wrong message across.

Dropping the phone on his table, he tried to shake the thoughts from his head hoping she wouldn't think beyond his intentions. He didn't want her thinking he wanted to get physical with her rather than know her as a person.

His past was really ruining things for him and he hated it. He hated the way the guilt gnawed at him anytime he wanted to be grateful for the answer God had provided him. Nimi hadn't been in his thoughts until the day he'd bumped into her in his sister's office. The first day he'd seen her, curiosity had drawn him close.

The way it draws you close whenever you feel you're in charge?

No, he knew the way he went after relationships in the past was different from this. Besides Nimi was different from the women he'd dated in the past. His heart had leaped the moment he set eyes on her. *This is crazy*, He'd thought.

Maybe it was the fact that he hadn't been in any relationship for years. It was probably the reason for his sudden curiosity about her and so he told God about it, praying that he would forget her if she wasn't the one for him.

And there she stood at the bus stop that day right after he thought he would never see her again. He immediately knew within his spirit that she was the one and he wanted more. He knew he had to go after her. There was something that drew him to her and it wasn't his flesh. She wasn't even his type to begin with because he knew the kind of women he dated in the past, he knew what his flesh craved. But this was different, pure in a way. Words were not enough to define it, but it was there alright.

"Father whatever this is, I pray you make it clear. All I want to do is your will, nothing less than your will. If it isn't in line with your will, then I'd rather let go now."

He felt the Spirit reassuring him. He was glad the discernment wasn't based on his soul's desire but God's desire.

"Lord lead me aright and let me not make a fool of myself. Let me not do anything that will dishonour you and let her know too if you want us to be together to bring you glory."

A few moments later, his phone rang and he picked it on seeing a familiar number.

"I.K! *How far na*? Long time."

"D.K! Where you at?"

"*I dey work*. Why? *You dey Lagos*?"

His friend laughed. "Yea, I just arrived this morning. I'm at a friend's place right now."

"Really? Ah *when you commot PH and you no tell me?*"

"My man, *abeg no vex*. *Na impromptu. In fact the way the thing happen eh, we go talk when we meet. When we fit see?*"

"I have a board meeting in about thirty minutes and those meetings usually last hours. Our external auditors are coming in today and they'll be going through our taxes and financial documents in the company."

"What about weekend? I understand the weekdays are usually not smiling in Lagos."

"In Nigeria as a whole." Dapo laughed commenting. "Oh I forgot, you work for House of Assembly so traffic *no dey affect una*."

Ikenna laughed out loud. "You haven't changed. So how far, is Saturday good?"

"Uh, I have plans for Saturday so I won't be able to make it. What about Sunday after service? I can drive down to meet you, or do you want to crash at my place on Saturday night so we can just stay indoors?"

"That sounds cool. Thanks for the offer bro."

"What are friends for?"

Dapo's phone vibrated, signalling a waiting call. "So just text me *abeg make I no forget*." Dapo said. "I've got to go, someone's trying to reach me."

"Okay no *wahala*. We *go see*."

"Yea, later."

He hung up and picked the other call from one of the insurance house his consulting company had affiliations with. He was about to hang up when his secretary walked in. She was draped in a vintage top and a wrap skirt, coupled with her natural hair bun and her cat-eye glasses made gave her a seventy's look. They'd been working together for about five years now. Bibi Omasan was his Secretary and Personal Assistant and he'd grown to trust her as their professional relationship bloomed.

"Bibi..." He raised an eyebrow. She usually called on the intercom before she came in except on rare occasions.

"Mrs Akudo is here to see you sir, privately before the meeting."

He swallowed as the feeling of trepidation crawled up his spine. They both knew what that meant and she passed him a sympathising smile, understanding his predicament.

Bibi stepped out of his office and a woman in her mid-fifties who looked like she just stepped out of the cover of a fashion magazine walked in. She had make-up in all the right places and her provocative dress was enough to send a carnal man drooling.

"Hello Dapo." She greeted with a coy smile sauntering towards him as he stood up to pay her respect.

"Mrs Akudo..."

"You still stick to formalities." She chuckled and it sounded like grating iron in his ears. If there was anyone he wished God would erase from his memory asides the guilt he was currently dealing with, it was this divorcee. She'd returned from the States after her husband left her, and he became her next target.

She was one of his past flings in America during his undergraduate studies. Like his nemesis, she showed up almost everywhere, relentless in her pursuit of him. Even after several refusals from him. He could now see her for what she was, a miserable woman looking for love in all the wrong places. She'd told him she knew one or two investors that could help his company stand out as one of the top blooming companies Nigeria had to look out for. As a top woman in Lagos, she felt she could intimidate him with worldly standards.

Whatever she was affiliated with, he couldn't say and he didn't care.

Humans didn't dictate his success in life. God did. He blew her proposal away as what it was; a bone to a hungry dog.

Except he wasn't a dog anymore, neither was he hungry or greedy. He was content and was going at his pace.

"Sara, you can't just barge into my office whenever you like. I try my best to respect you and but you aren't respecting yourself."

She ignored him and reached for his arm but he retreated, gently pushing her away. Placing his hands in his pockets, he asked bluntly. "What do you want?"

"I want you..."

"No, you don't. Stop doing this to yourself. Stop trying to look for love in the wrong place and stop barging into my life. It's wrong and rude, and you don't respect me when you do this. Do you even know how this makes you look?"

"How can you say that to me?" She looked hurt but he wasn't having it this time. She'd been doing this for a while and it no longer looked normal. It felt more like an obsession. He was beginning to feel stalked.

He sighed. "I don't want to call security on you Sara, but you have to leave my office now."

"I have nothing to lose. No husband, nothing. I'll have my way with you and there's nothing you can do about it." She looked him in the eye. "You'll come begging me to love you Dapo, no other girl will have you and I'll make sure of that."

Dapo raised eyebrow, not moved by her threats. "Good luck with that."

She retreated, anger flashing in her eyes. She threw on her shades and stormed out of his office ignoring Bibi who was shaking her head in disgust.

"Is there anything you'd like me to do for you sir? I've checked the conference room for lights, projector, necessary equipment and everything else." She smiled.

"If you can get rid of that woman, and make her stay out of my life for good, then that would be something."

"She'll get tired."

"That's what I thought but it's been over a year now. If she's not coming to the office, she's looking for the next place I'll be. The sad part is, I told the police about it and they were scared to take it up because she's a *big woma*n and

her money can get her out of anything. It's just ridiculous; the way this woman stalks me." He ran a hand on his head.

"I wish I could really help you here but something tells me it’s not my role." She smiled with a knowing grin.

He blinked and looked into her eyes then. He could see the mischievous glint there.

"What do you mean?"

"Nothing..."

"You better talk or risk getting your Christmas bonus this year."

She shot daggers at him but he ignored her.

"It’s your choice."

She laughed. "Okay, it's just... I don't know, there was something about you this morning when you walked in. You looked like you just won the lottery. It was all over you. The aura of ‘loooove’" Bibi drawled, chuckling.

He laughed loudly. "Bibi the love Seer"

She made a mock bow. "At your humble service my lord."

"So, am I right... is there a special someone, who's the lucky lady? Tell me." She pressed further.

"You need to mind your business young woman."

"Well, sorry to break it to you but since the day you stood up for me against Kola, I have stopped minding my business when it comes to you. If not for my values as a Christian and my inability to lie freely, I would have told Madam Akudo that I was your girlfriend and she had better keep her hands off you if she wasn’t ready to be haunted by my heavenly bodyguards. But I think the time has come for the real madam to take her position and put her where she belongs. Maybe that will calm her busy body down."

Dapo smiled softly remembering how Bibi had been in an abusive relationship about three years ago. He’d seen her ex-boyfriend yelling at her at

the office car park. It'd taken a couple of stubborn intervention on his part to help Bibi end the relationship.

The incident was still very vivid in his memory. Bibi had reminded him of Lara; Petite, beautiful oval face with doe eyes. This had driven him to intervene with his money and time. As a victim of a bad relationship, Bibi held on to Kola believing he could provide her with what all she wanted. Dapo had only done what he would do for Lara, if only his sister could only give him a chance. But Soji was Lara's god and she worshipped at his temple every day. If he tried to intervene, he would become her enemy.

"So is there anything you would like me to do for you?" Bibi asked, smiling at him.

"Just pray for me, I would appreciate that very much."

She nodded with determination in her eyes. "Of course. I pray for you every day."

"Thank you, Bibi." He turned to face his work and looked up as she strolled out. "You look nice by the way."

He could see her blushing.

"Your girlfriend whoever she is, is one lucky and blessed woman." She said before leaving.

Dapo sighed when she stepped out. Thinking back to his past and what had happened in his office some minutes ago, he doubted his future girlfriend, if it would be Nimi Adeyemi would share the same views about it.

"I do hope she sees it that way."



Aisha sat at the table in the cafeteria constantly checking her watch while scrolling through her phone absent-mindedly. Every minute the cafteteria door swung open, she glanced up impatiently and cursed silently when it wasn't the

person she was expecting. The man she'd spoken with earlier had promised to arrive on time and it was annoying that Nigerians casually disregarded time like it was in abundance. To her, every minute counted. Her mind flashed to Lara and she adjusted her shades, ready to take on anything and anyone. The revenge was brewing in her and she would serve it back just as Lara had served it to her.

Cold and bloody.

Lara did not know who she was messing with. Aisha knew she wasn't as popular as Lara and her reputation wasn't at stake. If there was anyone who could die to keep her reputation, it was Lara Olakitan.

Aisha's anger burned at the thought of Lara and Soji, so much that it consumed her and drove her to do all she was doing. Lara had played with fire and she was going to get burnt.

Lara had hurt her and taken what was precious to her. As if rubbing her father's wealth in her friends' faces wasn't enough, she had to take the man she loved away from her just because she felt she could. Lara felt she could make puppets out of people because of her wealth.

But she was wrong.

Aisha had endured everything she did in all the years of their friendship, years when she'd been the foolish friend and babysitter, the one that helped her get whatever she wanted and ran her silly errands. She'd kept her dirty little secret. She knew everything about Lara Olakitan and had remained loyal to her.

Aisha felt Soji deserved better, but the idiot still held on to Lara because of the Kitan's money. The money that would be his ruin. He had no idea what he was getting himself into. She was trying to save him, but he saw her as the enemy.

She stared at her phone and smiled to herself. She had stayed up all night to dig up messages Lara had sent to her years ago. The confessions Lara had shared about the Kitan's darkest secrets, the one that would reveal to the world that daddy's little girl was still *'Daddy's little girl*' after all.

Her guest strolled into the cafe and she smiled recognizing him. He had told her he would be wearing blue denim and a chequered shirt.

"Hi..."

"Hey, Halima's sister right?"

"Yea, you can call me Aisha. What took you so long?"

"Lagos traffic. Nice to meet you by the way." He smiled settling into a chair opposite her. He went straight to business. "Your sister told me you needed my services."

She nodded. "I'm sure you already know what I want."

"I have the best girl for things like that. I need your guy's usual hangout spot though a club would be preferable if you want things done fast and neat. All I just need to do is plant her in the right place, making it look like a coincidence. I'll be on ground ready with my camera. It might cost you more because I'm putting one of my girls on the line here and she must be willing to improvise in case something unplanned comes up."

Aisha gave him the necessary details and an envelope filled with cash. "That's half of your payment. I'll pay you the rest when the job is done."

"On second thought." She broke in as he was about to stand up and leave. "Can I see this girl? I need to know what I'm paying for."

He smirked and reached for his phone to show Aisha the girl's picture, exuding an arrogance that irritated Aisha. The woman in the picture was more voluptuous than any woman she'd ever seen. She had the looks that could get any man feeding out of her palms. She was probably an escort to some top politicians in the country. Even Lara would be intimidated by this girl.

"Thank you."

"You're welcome. I'll send you the pictures and the video when it's done."

She watched him leave. She relaxed on her seat with a wicked grin on her face. Revenge was so sweet when served cold.

"Oh Lara, you'll be regretting the moment you aborted my baby by the time I'm done with you." She mumbled. Draining her glass of juice, she left the cafeteria and headed home.

She had to start plotting for the grand finale as it would unravel before the world, because this was going to play like a movie. The only difference was that the ball would be in her court. She would be the one running the show, and she'll be laughing last as everything unfolded before her eyes.

CHAPTER 11

"Hi." Nimi greeted shyly with a wave when Dapo stood before her looking speechless. Her sister on the other hand had a smug smile on her face as if to say, *“I told you the make-up would do the job.”*

"You look..." He swallowed. Nimi smiled and gave Tolani a warning look when she coughed.

"You look great, I'm sorry, I forgot myself there for a second." He laughed and turned to look at Tolani. “And you must be Tolani, right?"

She waved, excited that he remembered her name. "Hi."

He extended his hands. "Nice to see you again."

"Pleased to make your acquaintance." Tolani responded as she took his hand in a shake.

Nimi quirked her eyebrow at her sister as if to say, "*And when did you start speaking Jane Austen?"*

"Make sure my sister has a good time. She won't stop talking about--" Tolani said.

"I think it's time we leave." Nimi interrupted quickly turning to Dapo. She looked back at her sister and raised her hands to her neck, describing how she

would ‘kill’ her if she did not stop running her mouth. "Take care of the house, and let mummy know I've gone when she returns."

"Bring something back for me *oh*." Tolani called out after her as they headed toward Dapo’s car.

"Don't mind my sister. She acts like a lunatic sometimes." She saw him smiling to himself and wondered what was on his mind.

Oh God, I don’t want him to think I can't wait to fall into his arms or that I'm really into him.

"Why are you smiling?" She asked as he opened the door to the car for her to step in.

"Am I?"

Her brows dipped. "Yes you are, and you’re smiling like you know something I don't know."

"I'm just happy." He slid into the driver's seat.

"And you don't want to share?" She persisted.

"Why should I when the reason is sitting right next to me." He leaned close to turn on the air conditioner and she caught a whiff of his cologne. He smelled good. Nimi blushed as a tingling sensation crawled up her arms.

"Something tells me we're going to have a great time together." He glanced at her again and she couldn’t help but return his smile.



"So tell me, how long have you been in a relationship with Jesus?" Dapo asked as he placed his warm cup of coffee on the table and cut a slice of cake with his fork.

Nimi shrugged. "I was raised in a Christian home but I think it all began to make sense when my father passed. On the outside, it looked like I knew enough but deep down I felt there was more to God. There were so many

questions and things I didn't understand. I think intimacy with God for me started the day my dad passed. I got tired of pretending that everything was alright. With my dad gone, nothing would be alright. He was always there for me, even with the African mentality that portrays father figures like Hitler y'know, but my dad was just different. He read me bible stories as a child, he never stopped telling me how much Jesus loved me and how there were so amazing things God had in store for me."

Dapo smiled and she joined him.

"He was quite open with answering my questions when I struggled with believing some things he told me about God. He treated my mum right and was content with what he had. He taught me what to expect from any man I would end up getting married to. And then he passed and I felt my dad had been lying about this 'God'. Doubt and bitterness crawled in slowly till it almost consumed me. I guess I had some knowledge about God but never got to really know Him." Her mouth curved in a smile. "I know it feels somehow saying this, but right here, right now, I'm grateful for those times because with his passing I've been made stronger. It could be that God was trying to get my attention by letting my dad pass away because I figured out so many things after his passing although I'm still learning every day."

He reached for her hands across the table. "I'm sorry about your dad."

She smiled. "It's okay. It's been three years and I'm learning to live with it. Imagine me getting the newsflash on judgement day that Jesus never knew me and somewhere in my head I'd assumed all along."

Dapo nodded his understanding and smiled at her. She looked down at his hands on hers and lifted her head with a bemused look on her face.

"I want to be able to hold your hands this way as often as I can." Dapo said staring into her eyes.

She dipped her head shyly.

"Nimi look at me."

She looked into his eyes then and saw how genuine his intentions were.

"I'm not the kind of guy who plays games and neither do I like wasting people's time or stringing them along when I don't have plans to be with them. You've stirred my heart and I believe it's for a reason. I've prayed to God about it and I know what draws me close to you is beyond an attraction. There's something about you that my heart agrees with and it won't rest till it gets an answer. But I'm not going to rush you because I really want you to be sure God is leading you as well. If you need to take some days or weeks or months to think about it..."

"Or years..." Nimi teased and broke into gales of laughter when she saw the look in his eyes. "I was only joking." She saw him relax and inhaled deeply. "Thank you for sharing this with me Dapo and thank you for encouraging me to take my time. I would really love to spend time praying about it and also tell my spiritual parents about it too, y'know… so they can join me in prayers, and so I can be sure about us."

"I would love that too."

She was relieved. "Thank you for not putting any pressure on me. I…"

"C'mon Nimi. I can wait years when I know what God has told me, when he's assured my heart about you. Although I had doubts at a point that perhaps I might be too old for you."

She smacked his hand playfully.

He chuckled. "Serious."

"You're not old. And if God is saying yes, then you're perfect for whoever he desires you to marry."

"Thank you dear."

"Do you come here often?" Nimi asked glancing around, wanting to change the topic. "I like this place."

"Well, not really. I hardly hang out at places like this except I need to meet with someone or handle some business deals without the whole official

approach to things. Lara and I have been here before, but she didn't really like it. Not her taste."

"Oh sorry about that."

Dapo frowned. "What are you apologising for? People have different tastes. Besides since you and I seem to speak the same language, we can hang out here often. You said you like this place so that's a point for me."

"Thank you. So enough about me. How about you? When did you get born again? It's a sensation when someone from a family like yours gets to know Jesus. Just thinking out loud."

He laughed. "You're not the first Nimi, so I understand where you're coming from. Let's just say Jesus was merciful to save a dead soul like mine. I might have died sooner or later without even experiencing Life. I thought I was living the life before I got born again." He smiled sadly shaking his head. "The Holy-Spirit made me see differently. It all started about ten years ago. I was clocking twenty-five, I felt I was being ushered into the prime of my life and I was ready to paint the town whatever colour works for them. I'd just been given a Chevrolet corvette convertible as a present from my parents. I went partying with my friends and we got drunk that night. I remember getting into my new sports car with my friends and we drove around town drunk, laughing and shouting at the top of our voices. We didn't see the trailer coming in front of us, and by just a split second, we missed it but swerved into the bush and crashed into a tree. I sustained some minor bruises as I had my seatbelt on. Some of my friends weren't so lucky, they still have their scars and injuries till date."

Nimi sat still listening to Dapo. With pain etched on his face, he continued. "Lying on the hospital bed, I could see the terror and disappointment on my parents' face, my mum especially. I had recurrent nightmares of the accident and didn't know what to do. There was just this anxiety lingering at the back of my mind that I would die soon. I felt although I'd escaped, death still hung around me, waiting to claim me when it got the chance. I couldn't explain

the fear. It affected my life and hindered me from functioning properly. A month later, I just had the inkling to call one of my old friends about the whole God thing. His name is Ikenna. We grew up in the neighbourhood and hung out a few times as kids before he moved away. We still kept in touch and I believe God orchestrated it that way unknown to me. The funny thing is, he was one of those friends I used to make fun of in the past and he didn't gloat or push me away.

He was kind enough to answer all my questions and we spent hours talking over the phone. I listened to him talk about God, heaven and hell and one question kept churning in my mind. If I died today, where would I go? If it was true that my days were numbered, what's out there in the darkness? Would I go to rest like my parents believed and some religions taught, or I would sink into oblivion? Some believed I would reincarnate and take another life. But the Christians had a different explanation. There was a heaven and a hell, and I had a choice to make on earth while living, not after I die. That was my lifeline. I don't know how I came to believe because the Dapo before that night didn't do or believe religion. I felt they were fallacies people dug up somewhere. But it's been real for me ever since and my peace has been restored. I now have a different kind of peace, one I never had when I was living for myself. I haven't relented in my pursuit of God, and my church family who witnessed my new birth have been very helpful with my spiritual growth and all. Ikenna has been my best friend ever since. So that's my story of how Jesus turned a sinner into a saint."

Nimi sat staring at him for a while with tears in her eyes. She blinked and reached up to wipe her face with her hands. "Wow, that's so touching and beautiful. God is just so good."

"He is. With everything I've done, how can he just take me in as his own? It's the reason why I pray for Lara every day. I know no man can come to God

except the Spirit wills it. I desire she comes into this life too and leave her old life behind."

"And she will by God's grace. I'll be praying for her and also reach out to her however I can in the office, I'll keep praying for entrance and utterance. We are just the vessels God uses. He's the doer of the work in the hearts of men, not us."

"Thank you Nimi. I believe God brought you into her life for a purpose as well. She's grown too familiar with me, so she disregards whatever I say. She believes my near-death experience is responsible for my 'hallucination' as she often calls it. But you… I sense you will be the one God uses. Just stay sensitive to the Spirit, and don't relent. Okay?"

Nimi watched him, fascinated by how much he loved his sister. "I won't. God loves her more than we do, and he even wills she comes to him more than we can imagine. That's something that keeps me encouraged when it feels like I'm not getting through to some people with the gospel."

"Yea, me too, although sometimes I forget." He laughed and she joined his mirth. She realised she enjoyed spending time with him. There was just this beautiful aura he exuded. She felt her spirit agree with his, but she didn't want her emotions to get in the way, knowing they were tricky indicators. Yes, she had peace, but the guy was good-looking and had money, so her peace could stem from the security and prestige he could provide for her.

But the wisdom that comes from heaven is first of all pure; then peace-loving, considerate, submissive, full of mercy and good fruit, impartial and sincere.

The verse from the book of James put her in check. Peace wasn't the first thing she was looking out for. She wanted her motive pure and easy to yield just in case God said no. Peace came second. Dapo Olakitan was more than what she'd expected or ever dreamed of, but she had to work hard to guard her heart.

She would speak with God tonight and she would move with whatever answer he gave her. Then, she would submit it to the spiritual authority over her and whatever the verdict, she would heartily accept it.

CHAPTER 12

Nimi stayed behind to clean up after worker's meeting. She worked alongside her spiritual sisters in church picking the used disposable plates and throwing them into the garbage. As she worked, she tried to push away the thoughts of Dapo Olakitan that had been occupying her mind lately. It'd been three weeks after his proposal to court her and she hadn't given him an answer.

But God had. Her spiritual parents had given her a go-ahead too after praying with her. Her mother, despite her initial reservations had concluded that her spirit was agreeing with it.

But why was she holding back?

This would be the first relationship she would be stepping into and it scared and fascinated her. The last thing she wanted to do was get carried away. Dapo Olakitan wasn't just any guy, he stemmed from a popular Royal family. His father was a Chief and had affiliations with the Governors and Senators in Nigeria and she was working for his sister as her Personal Assistant. She wondered how Lara Olakitan would handle the fact that her brother was dating someone like her from an 'anonymous' background. She didn't want to be tagged as a gold digger. Their wealth hadn't moved her in the past and it wouldn't push her to decide now.

"Sister Nimi, we're done with this section, do you need help with that side?" Tamuno, one of the young ladies in church asked. They were in the same church department and Nimi enjoyed her company. But even sharing this with Tamuno was not enough to give her rest. She'd thought when God gave her a go-ahead, she would gladly jump into it, but the thought of Dapo's past life and his family made her hesitate.

"I can handle this on my own. Thanks Tam."

"Okay sis. Are you okay though?"

She tried to smile. "I'm fine babe. How's Osato and the prep for wedding? Hope everything is going well?"

She shrugged. "Everything is fine sis. But you know you can't change the topic. If there's something on your mind, I'm here for you and if you need a higher calling, in case a small girl like me can't get it, Pastor Arike is there for you."

Nimi rolled her eyes. "You can fool others, but you can't fool me. You small girl, *abi* big spiritual giant? All the tongues you interpreted today were on point."

"*Oya* let me start going *biko*, before you put me into trouble with your *yeye* praises. *Shey* you succeeded in chasing me away *abi*. You know how to change the topic and make me run. Don't worry, I know what to do, and when I'll do my own *eh."*

Picking her bag, Tamuno waved and headed out of the room making Nimi chuckle. She knew *hailing* the girl would chase her away. Tamuno wasn't one who loved to 'shine' but hide, and she loved hiding well. Tyler was the guy who usually interpreted tongues for the church, but he'd travelled out of town for one of the church's missionary trips. Tamuno would never step out except it was necessary or perhaps Tyler was absent. Nimi loved the girl's meek heart and wondered if she would have been able to handle such a gift if God bestowed her with such.

Nimi doubted her heart could handle it at the moment. Besides the Holy Spirit gave the gifts to those whom he deemed fit. The goal wasn't the gift but how it was helping her become more Christ-like every day. And she could see the fruits Tamuno was bearing. It was beautiful. Her fiancé Osato was one lucky guy, spiritually blessed with prophetic gifts too, pleasant and humble, always refusing to take credit for anything and he was a member of the sanitation unit in church.

This was her home. The people, the love, the doctrine and the ambience in this place. She loved being here. Dapo worshipped somewhere else. That was something else she had to think about. How would she cope with that? She knew God was present in both places and it wasn't a problem to worship somewhere else, but there were traces of doubt lingering in her heart.

Why couldn't her husband be some brother in this church, why did God have to take her from East to West when he could have just picked someone here?

Give him a chance.

"Sisi, are you alright?" A familiar voice interrupted her thought. She looked up to see her Pastor's wife.

She bent slightly. "Good evening Mama."

"Good evening darling. How are you doing?"

"Fine ma." When the woman embraced her, she went in easily. "How are you doing ma?"

"Great. Tamie was worried about you, said you had one or two things to discuss with me."

Nimi bit her lip. *Well done Tamuno!*

"It's nothing, don't mind Tamuno *o*. She was just trying to play funny."

"Okay. But I also sense in my spirit you're anxious about many things. Things you shouldn't even be worried about. Is it Dapo? Has he withdrawn his proposal?"

She inhaled deeply. Shaking her head, she said, “No he hasn’t. I haven’t even heard from him in a while. I believe he’s just trying to give me space y’know. So he doesn’t cloud my judgement or pressure me into anything.”

“Wow, the young man is even more spiritually matured than I thought. I could also sense that when his spiritual authority contacted us weeks ago and gave us a good report about him. But deep within, I know your being together is going to turn out for good. So what’s the problem? Are you having doubts?”

“Not really…”

“So when do you want to give him a verdict?”

“I don’t really know ma. I’m still trying to figure out many things.”

“Why are you trying to figure out many things? Are you the savior of the world?”

Nimi laughed.

“I need to understand hence my asking. Your own is just to obey what God has told you. Like Abraham, you walk by faith. Since God is the one leading you, you’re safe. That doesn’t mean you’ll be free of challenges, but you know you’re safe and whatever comes up, God is with you and for you. And he is saving and refining you in the process. With time things will get clearer. But you haven’t even stepped into the relationship and you’re already trying to figure out many things with that brain of yours.”

“Don’t mind me.”

“I’m not *kuku* minding you.” Leaning close to embrace her, she said, “You’ll be fine darling. What you need now is trust. If you keep using flesh to think about it, you’ll offend the spirit within you. But just let God run things, and you’ll be glad you did. For us, it’s not just about relationships like those who don’t know God, but a purpose. To obey our Father, and to become like Christ in the end. There’s no point marrying brother *Lagbaja* from here who isn’t God’s will for you when God is saying something else. If God says you’ll marry from here, perfect. But since he’s saying your husband is one of His

sheep from another fold, he knows the relationship will bear the fruit he so desires. Your Christ-like formation, that's his end goal. So, don't be discouraged okay? Don't worry, you'll come back and gist me about how the love is beginning to feel 'sweet' to you."

Nimi found herself nodding and laughing. She suddenly felt at peace with Pastor Arike's admonition. If God wanted her to take a leap of faith, then what was she waiting for?



A week after Nimi said yes to Dapo's proposal to court her, they couldn't stop calling and texting each other. Sometimes she would wake up so late because she'd been on the phone with Dapo late into the night, only to start rushing to make up for her morning devotion and head out to work. Pastor Arike was right. Just one week and she was beginning to feel 'giddy with love'.

He requested to take her out that weekend, but she explained her church was holding a program on Saturday. That didn't stop him. He asked for the time the programme was starting and since he was familiar with the address, he came over and stayed till the end.

On their way out, Pastor Arike winked at Nimi and she found herself blushing. Nimi introduced him to Tamuno and some of her other friends and they kept winking and nudging her while praising her good qualities before Dapo.

It was only a week into the relationship, and everyone was clustering around her like she was getting married. Holding hands, they stepped out together and Dapo couldn't stop smiling to himself.

"Wow, you guys have so much love in your church. I could feel it. I felt so welcome and loved. I can see why you initially hesitated to let me in."

Nimi glanced at him while putting her seatbelt in place. “What do you mean?”

“Marrying you implies I might be taking you away from this place. It’s like home to you.”

Wow, is he a mind reader? Nimi stared at him surprised.

“Am I wrong?”

She shook her head. “I trust that when we get to that bridge, we will cross it.”

He nodded. “That’s the spirit. Besides I might pop in once or twice. Today’s message about God’s word dividing our souls and spirits accurately was enlightening. I enjoyed myself. I felt like I was in the right place at the right time.”

Nimi could only smile. She just kept falling in love with this man over and over again. God was flooding her soul with so much love for him she was beginning to feel like she was drunk with it.

On their way home, Dapo decided to stop over at ShopRite because Nimi explained she had to get some groceries. He also had to do the same as he was expecting his friend that evening. He was hoping to make a quick dinner tonight. His leftovers were finished.

"Oh, so you cook?"

"I try." He smiled.

"Is that a smug smile I see?"

"Over the years you women have taunted us guys with how well you can cook. Well, I'd like to give you a good whooping in the kitchen when it comes to cooking."

Nimi laughed. "Oh yeah?"

"When I lived alone in the States, I was forced to cook my meals most times so yea, I had to learn. It wasn't pretty but I think it was worth it. All those years of burning scrambled eggs and setting off the fire-alarm."

Nimi laughed and his heart skipped a beat hearing her laugh so effortlessly. She had no idea what she did to him whenever she flashed him a smile or laughed at his jokes.

"I'll make you a nice bowl of soup and you'll fall in love with it so much you'll think I *jazzed* it." She boasted.

"How can I think you've charmed it when you are capable of doing that just by standing close to me?"

"Hmmn... I'll take that as a compliment." He held her hands as they found their way through the mall. "But seriously, my mum, Tolani and Akin started complaining of one invisible whitlow ever since I started cooking soup in that house. I've told Tolani that the day I'll leave the house for her is just around the corner."

He laughed. "Hopefully soon."

She was unable to dwell much on that statement as they bumped into a lady who looked familiar.

"Dapo... Hi". The young woman gave him a quick hug with her arms lingering around his waist before stepping back.

"Hey... Maxine right?"

"Yeah, we met at your parent's house the other day." She smiled, tugging at a loose braid and completely ignoring Nimi.

"Nice to meet you again."

"And you too. You look good by the way." Maxine praised.

"Thanks, and you too. Uh, this is my girlfriend Nimi. Nimi, Maxine, one of Lara's friends."

"Yea, we've met… at Lara's office. You're the new girl she hired as her PA right?" Maxine said with a derisive smile tugging at her lips. The girl's eyes clearly passed an unfriendly message across.

"Hi, nice to meet you." Nimi waved, suddenly embarrassed and scared to be caught holding hands with her boss' brother.

The anxious feeling returned eroding the confidence she'd gained when she'd been chatting with Dapo a few seconds ago. She politely excused herself to pick more groceries leaving Dapo to speak with the young lady alone.

Her boyfriend joined her a few minutes later.

"What was that about?" He asked.

"What?" She feigned ignorance.

He turned her to face him. "You leaving like that, like you were afraid to be seen with me."

"Of course not."

"Then why did it look like you were running away? One moment we're laughing and holding hands, and the next you're trying to slide past me."

She immediately felt bad. The last thing she wanted to do was lie to him when their relationship had barely begun.

"I'm sorry. It's just that I didn't expect you to call me your girlfriend so soon."

His brows dipped. "What should I have called you? A friend?"

"She's Lara's friend. I don't want her telling Lara that we're together just yet. It's going to look like I came after you."

He sighed. "Look, I know my sister acts scary sometimes, but her bark is worse than her bite. She only wants the best for me and if you would like me to tell her, I would. I don't want you being afraid when you're around me in public."

She smiled softly wishing she could kiss him but quickly shook off the thought.

"And even if you did come after me..." He reached over tucking strands of hair behind her ear. "Who cares, I'm loving every minute of it."

"Don't mind me, I just want it to be official, that's all."

"By the way I'm coming to Lara's office on Monday."

"Really? An excuse to see me?"

He laughed. "Shhh, don't tell, that's one reason but I have a surprise for her. Remember I told you about my friend who's staying over at my place this weekend? It's Ikenna, the guy who introduced me to Christ."

"Oh my! That's awesome Dapo."

"I know right? They've known each other since primary school before he moved away and I remember how they used to tease each other. I'm sure she'll be excited to see him."

"Aww nice."

"But how's work at her place, do you enjoy working there? Do you have any clue when you might stop working for her?"

"I'm just trying to work till I can save enough to get a new laptop. I had to give mine to my younger sister. She borrowed it for a while because of school. My part time program will be ending in about three months' time so maybe then *sha*, but everything is solely dependent on the Spirit's leading."

"Any job prospects in mind?"

"Still praying about it, as God leads."

He nodded in agreement. "Just let me know early enough if you need anything. I have a few friends I can send your CV to, except you would like to work as my PA."

She laughed. "Like you have space for a PA."

"I can create one."

"The last thing I need in my life is the temptation that comes with seeing you every day."

He grinned. "So you think I'm a temptation. I didn't even know I stood a chance."

She smiled to herself and picked some pasta, canned sweet corn and green peas. They got all they needed and left the mall. As Dapo drove home, Nimi wished things would remain the way they were without any unexpected

occurrences. She would be forever grateful to God for how he was making her life beautiful. But something told her this was only the beginning.

She needed to brace herself for what was ahead.

CHAPTER 13

"So Lara is still going to marry that Soji guy?" Ikenna asked. They were settled on the couch with the bucket of chicken they bought from KFC. The first half of the football match had just ended and the commercials were airing.

Dapo glanced at him and shrugged. "I can only pray that she sees him for who he is. If I try to tell her how bad he is for her she's going to see me as the enemy. Whoever tries to come between them is like Darth Vader to her. If I was the superstitious kind, I'd think the guy charmed her. They keep going back and forth. One minute, they're acting like a crazy couple and the next, they're acting like all is perfect in their world."

"Wow..." Ikenna shook his head, eyes fixed on the TV. Dapo could tell his friend had more to say but was holding back. He knew IK had a soft spot for Lara when they were younger, even with all their bickering but with so many years gone, whatever soft spot he had might be gone and if it was still there, it would be nothing but a sisterly affection. He was aware Ikenna had been in a serious relationship, but something had happened that cut him deep, so much he hardly talked about it. All he knew was that the girl Ikenna had planned to marry broke it off after a year of courtship. Dapo knew his friend had moved on and was currently not in a relationship.

Ikenna was in Lagos for a job interview and would be staying for a while. Although Dapo was five years older, the age difference didn't affect their friendship. Even with Ikenna living in Port Harcourt, they'd kept in touch maintaining the brotherly affection between them. Dapo had been to Port Harcourt to see Ikenna several times, especially the first year after his Newbirth experience.

He thought about Nimi. He wasn't sure how she would act around his friends when their relationship grew but a part of him was certain she would do fine. He was getting to know her and still had a lot to learn. She was pretty honest about her feelings and her body language easily gave her away. In the past he would have readily taken advantage of that. Thank God he was no longer being led by his flesh and hormones.

Just holding her hands yesterday made him remember what it felt like to hold a woman in his arms. He silently chided himself.

Dapo glanced at Ikenna. "I'm sure Lara would be pleased to see you. At least you can't be in Lagos and not say hi to her. She needs a friendly face aside the spies around her."

Ikenna laughed. "Spies?"

"Her friends...that's if she has any real ones."

"Hmmn, I doubt she'll be as excited as you think. I mean, has she ever asked about me?"

"We hardly talk with all that's been going on around her. I'm sure she would be happy to see you." Dapo said, hoping he sounded convincing enough.

Ikenna shrugged. "I guess there's no harm in saying Hi then."

Dapo smiled. "Like they say, absence makes the heart grow fonder"

"So, wanna talk about your girl?" Ikenna asked with a grin on his face.

Dapo laughed. "She's amazing. She's a breath of fresh air."

"Wow, she must be something."

"She is, but I really want to take things one step at a time. I mean I've hinted one or two things about the future but I don't want to run ahead of God. We've both prayed, so we'll just let the boat sail while the master leads."

"I'm happy for you. Imagine me being here when all this excitement is going on. It makes me feel like I'm going to be a part of your lives."

"Of course, you'll be part of it, in a big way I hope." The second half of the football match came on and Dapo turned his attention back to the TV, clapping his hands in support of his team while Ikenna adjusted on the couch, focusing on the rest of the match ahead.



When Nimi received an alert on her phone from the bank on Monday morning, she was surprised and thought her boss had made some kind of mistake. Making a mental note to report it to the HR department, she continued working on organizing the appointments her boss had lined up for the day.

Nimi hoped her work wouldn’t get intense as the weeks rolled out. Lara had her booking an appointment for her cake, her dresses and her bridesmaid dresses. Her fiancé had also stopped by the week before and for the first time Nimi saw the man Lara was getting married to in flesh. The aura of pride around him was so thick Nimi could cut through it. He had the charm to attract women. He was definitely a ladies’ man but there was just something about him that repulsed her. Nimi couldn't place it, but she was in no way attracted to him no matter how much Nonye went on and on about how ladies were crazy about him.

Her mind suddenly went to Dapo and the past life he mentioned. Could he have been this way too, taking whatever he wanted and who he wanted because they couldn't resist him? She was glad he'd told her about it before they went further because it gave her the opportunity to ask God to help her deal with the

ways he had fallen short. She remembered Maxine and the way the woman had lazily draped her hands around Dapo as if it was the most natural thing to do.

What if she met women he'd dated in the past and they gave her the same look Maxine had given her? Reminding her she had no right hanging around the Kitans?

You're the new girl she hired as her PA right?

Nimi reminded herself she was working as Lara's P.A only because God wanted her to. When it was time to leave, she would gladly walk away. She wasn't after the Kitans wealth, she was no gold digger. She was going to grow to love Dapo one step at a time with God's grace and strength, no matter what.

A few moments later, she received news from the Human Resources department that there was no mistake in her salary. Slightly disturbed, Nimi stood up and headed for Lara's office. She knocked and went in. Lara was seated behind her desk, giggling away on the phone. Nimi dropped the file she was holding on the table and gave her boss a quick glance. Lara held a finger up, signaling for her to wait.

"Baby, my PA is here, I've got to go. I love you." Lara cooed into the phone ending the call almost immediately. "Hey you!" She greeted excitedly as she turned to Nimi. "How are you?"

Nimi’s heart raced. Did Lara know about her and Dapo already? She was acting all nice and giggly.

"Just before you think I'm drunk, I'm not. That was my fiancé on the phone. I spent the night at his place, and he didn't want me to leave this morning but I had to be at work. He’s been going on and on about how he loves me and how I’m his world over the phone. He makes me so happy.” Lara said with a smile on her face. "We’ve been through so much together and I can’t imagine life without him."

"Oh..." Nimi forced a smile uncertain about how to respond to the revelation. She wondered why her boss thought it ethical to share something that personal with her PA.

"Uh, I've booked your appointments for the week and I wanted to ask if there is anything you want to take out because it's looking crowded. On Wednesday you have a meeting at Abeokuta, something about your mum wanting you to visit a relative to tell her about the wedding but it's clashing with the one you have with your dad's lawyer."

Lara shook her head. "Move the Abeokuta thing to next month. I'll just have to explain to my mum that it can't work out during the week. I'd rather see my dentist than go all the way to see some old lady." She laughed at her twisted joke and when she noticed Nimi didn't join her, she changed the subject.

"Anything else?"

"Oh… yes, I wanted to ask about my salary." She began. "I saw twice the amount of what we agreed on and I thought I should confirm if it was a mistake."

"How much did we agree on again?"

"Seventy thousand Naira monthly."

"And you got?"

"A hundred and fifty thousand."

"Yea, consider it an appreciation." Lara said, with a sweet smile on her face and for a split second, Nimi was almost convinced Lara was an angel. Her beauty was captivating. "I mean you are running a part-time master's program yet you still give your best on the job. You put things in place for me and always have me in mind. I'd date you if you were a guy." Lara said grinning. "You make my life easier."

Nimi's brows furrowed at her boss' mention of dating her but she smiled. "I'm glad I can be a blessing to you."

Lara stood up. "And as from now on, I want you to see me as your friend okay? So just share whatever is on your mind with me. I would love to help. I'm a very open-minded person. I'm sure you could see how I talked to you about my fiancé. That's how I am. I don't hide my feelings from my friends."

Nimi nodded.

Were they friends? "Okay."

"So, how's the guy that makes you forget everything else?"

"Uh, he's fine I believe. We haven't talked today and we're taking it one step at a time." Nimi replied.

"Oh, I forgot, no sex until your wedding night."

"For both of us." Nimi confirmed.

"But have you ever wondered if he can wait. I mean what if he wants you just once and you're bent on waiting. Have you ever thought of the torture he might be going through?"

"We'll figure something out." Nimi desperately wanted to change the subject or run out of the room. She felt like she was suffocating. Was the devil using Lara to get to her? What was all the sex talk about?

"I'm sorry." Lara apologised as if she could read Nimi's mind. Reaching for her hand, she patted her gently. "I don't mean to make you feel out of place. I'm just curious. I mean ever since you talked about love not involving sex, I've been... I don't know, it just sounded strange to me and I was hoping you could shed more light on it."

Nimi relaxed. She was probably overthinking it. Lara was only being curious. "It's a beautiful thing when it's between two people God wants together. When it's done outside marriage, it only brings hurt, brokenness and degrades what God had in mind when he created it."

"And your boyfriend understands and sees it this way too?"

"I believe he does."

"What if he chooses to sleep with someone else since you're withholding sex from him?"

"He won't. If a man does that, he probably never loved me in the first place. I mean if he can't be faithful before marriage, what gives me the assurance that he'll be faithful afterwards? Sooner or later, he'll start having all sorts of excuses to commit adultery."

Something flashed in Lara's eyes, but it was gone immediately. Lara tried to smile but Nimi could tell it wasn't genuine. She remembered Dapo's words about Soji and how the man wasn't good for his sister. Perhaps the guy had cheated on her.

"That's one way to look at it." Lara managed to mumble.

Am I reaching her dear God?

Bring me in.

"But you can't do this without God, you know that right?" Nimi reached to touch Lara's arm when she noticed she was lost in thought.

Lara looked at Nimi's arms on hers and smiled. "You sound like my brother. He talks about God like he's obsessed. He believes God has all the solutions to all my problems, like I have any."

"Everybody has problems, maybe you've just refused to acknowledge it. Sometimes we tend to live in denial. I did when my Dad passed. The first stage was denial. I didn't want to believe it. I just felt my Dad hadn't gone and it was all a dream that I would wake up. And then came the shock and anger but I ran to the only one who could soothe my pains and make me whole again. My father may be long gone, but I have hope that I'll see my Dad again in the next life."

"Next life *huh*?" Lara raised a brow like she didn't buy any of those things.

"Because of Christ, I have eternal life in my Spirit. There's hope for mankind after all. All we need to do is just reach for it."

"What makes you so sure that there's a next life?"

"Because there's just so much going on in this world to think and say it all ends here and the bible that predicts all says there's hope, there's life somewhere asides this. My spirit confirms it because I have the Spirit of God dwelling inside of me. I'd be crazy if I chose this world over eternity. I couldn't choose my parents or the life I had growing up, but I can choose where I'll spend forever and whom I'd like to spend it with. Even if I lose all in this life, it's nothing compared to what I have in Jesus."

Lara stared at her for a long while before turning away to settle on her chair. "That would be all for now."

Nimi was sad and at that moment, God made her see what was happening to Lara. She was at a crossroad and she was being tugged towards an end she could not see. Nimi suddenly felt a greater need to pray for her. She'd been praying so much for Lara in the past few weeks, but she would intensify it. Lara had extended a hand of friendship, maybe God was going to use the utterance he'd given Nimi to work on Lara's heart.

She excused herself politely before closing the door behind her. When she stepped out, she saw a text message.

Missing you already. xo!

She smiled on seeing Dapo's message and she quickly typed a reply.

Miss you more.

"Madam." Nonye broke into her thoughts. "This one that you're smiling, I hope it's the same person making you smile that sent you this bouquet of flowers or I'd be jealous big time."

She looked up and froze when she saw the roses on her table. Her eyes widened in surprise. "When did this come in? Who brought them in?"

"One guy from the florist shop came looking for you but I signed on your behalf."

She giggled and picked the card to plant a kiss on it and placed it on her chest.

"*Nawa o. Na so your love take reach*? Who's the boo?" Nonye asked leaning close to sniff the flowers and trying to get a peek into the card her colleague was hiding.

"Just somebody special."

"The flowers look expensive *sha*."

Nimi shook her head. "It's the thought that counts not the money."

"Speak for yourself. Like you don't know how much things like this cost. It's someone who has too much money that can buy flowers this expensive."

She ignored whatever hidden malice was laced behind her colleague's comment and kept admiring the flowers. Dapo sure knew how to win her heart. She'd never gotten flowers before, didn't even think she would get any, but getting this on a Monday morning was sure to brighten her day.

"Hello Miss Adeyemi." His voice interrupted her thoughts and she looked up thinking she was beginning to hallucinate. Dapo stood right before her as real as the word itself, acting so professional like they hadn't shared a conversation and gone shopping days before.

He was wearing a blue crisp linen shirt and a nice pair of black pants. He looked like another version of the guy she'd hung out with on Saturday. He had cleaned up real good with a nice shave and he looked a lot younger.

"Hi… uh Hello Mr Kitan, nice to see you."

"Lovely flowers I must say." He glanced at it and smiled. She could tell he was definitely enjoying this.

"Miss Adeyemi has a secret admirer." Nonye chipped in.

"Oh, lovely." He turned his attention to Nonye and asked. "Is Lara available? Could you check that for me?"

"Oh sure." Nonye got up and headed for Lara's office.

Nimi noticed the other guy that had come in with Dapo. He'd been on his phone but he looked up right then and stood beside Dapo. Fair in complexion with dark matted beard and hazel eyes, he looked good too.

"Hi...” He greeted with a smile on his face.

"I know this is not really a good place to introduce you both." Dapo said, taking Nimi's hand in his. "This is the great Ikenna. My brother, my friend."

"Oh..." Nimi lit up. Ikenna extended his hand and she gladly received it. "It's so nice to meet you. I've heard great things about you. Thank you so much for everything you've done for Dapo. May God reward you abundantly."

Ikenna shook hers gracefully. "Please ignore Dapo's teasing about greatness. He's the great one. I'm a mere human *abeg*."

Nimi laughed.

"It's really good to see you in flesh ma'am. I've heard the most amazing things about you too."

She blushed glancing at Dapo and smiling. "How was your journey to Lagos, I hope it wasn't too stressful."

He laughed. "It was fine. Thank God."

"I'm sure Dapo here has been taking good care of you." Nimi said placing a hand on her beau's arm. Nonye returned to the office and saw them all chatting and laughing together.

"Miss Kitan will see you now." She said stiffly and Nimi knew her colleague had witnessed the little show of affection.

When they were gone, Nimi chose not to say anything except Nonye asked. Nonye spoke up after Nimi picked up the flowers and smelled them again, enchanted by the beauty and thoughtfulness of the gift.

"*Nawa for you o*. Instead of you to tell me that you and o*ga'*s brother have started sharing things, *you just dey chop alone*."

"I'm not *chopping* anything Nonye. Stop talking like that."

"So he sent you the flowers. I should have known." Nonye shook her head speaking more to herself than to her colleague. "The silent codes you two were sending with your eyes, I just knew there had to be something more."

Nimi slapped a hand against her forehead. "Was it that obvious?"

"Well, he did well hiding his feelings, you couldn't." She giggled, suddenly looking like the Nonye Nimi knew.

She heaved a sigh of relief. "Please, don't tell madam yet *abeg*. Dapo said he wants to be the one to tell her first and I really don't want things getting out of hand."

"*Haba*, what do you take me for? I may like gist but I'm not a tell-tale." She rolled her eyes. "But come, how about the fair *bobo* that came with oga's brother. The guy fine *no be small o*. Hook us up *na*."

"But how's that possible?"

"*Ahnahn, shey* you're going out with Mr Kitan. Help a sister find a good-looking Igbo brother in her life. I'm not asking you to show him my CV, just pop in my name once or twice so he gets the gist. I'm sure I've been nothing but good to you."

Nimi sighed. She already knew Nonye was stylishly giving her a conditional offer to keep her relationship between herself and Dapo a secret pending the time he was ready to spill.

Scratch my back and I'll scratch yours.

"I'll see what I can do."

"Thanks girlfriend, I know I can count on you."

Nimi forced a smile. She just hoped Dapo would tell Lara before she found out from any other source.

Lara stared in shock at the man standing in front of her. She couldn't believe her eyes. She heard Dapo asking her if she remembered him but she was lost for words. Seeing him brought back nostalgic memories. She remembered when he'd been the only boy who understood her just before her world came crashing down.

No one must know. She'd wanted him to know but he'd gone away. Without warning, her mind took her down memory lane.

He'd come to the house earlier than usual that Saturday morning. Hours after she'd stopped crying. She sat alone in the garden brooding and trying not to think of the dull throbbing ache coursing through her body. Ikenna sat beside her and poked her, unaware of her inner turmoil.

"Stop it." She slapped his hand away.

He didn't relent and tugged at her hair. "What's wrong with you?"

"Nothing." She snapped feeling irritated. There was nothing wrong with her. She was perfectly fine no matter how much she was dying inside.

"Well, if you're going to brood all day, at least give me a chance to tell you that my parents are finally moving to Port Harcourt. I have to go with them except I'm willing to stay with my aunt and uncle here in Lagos to complete SS2."

They were classes apart but that was no barrier to their childhood friendship. She desperately wanted to hold him and tell him to save her, from the unbearable pain that kept clawing and tearing her to pieces.

First came the shock, then the fear. Her heart sank.

Please don't leave me!

She braced herself for it and managed to speak. "So, y-you're leaving?"

He shrugged. "Do you want me here? All we do is fight. Maybe if I leave you'll start missing me." He laughed expecting her to join in his mirth.

She didn't and looked away, blinking back the tears hoping they wouldn't betray her.

He frowned. "Lara, are you alright?"

"You can go if you want." She waved him away but that was before she saw the hurt in his eyes.

"Good luck then." He replied, masking his feeling.

"Whatever."

That night she held her pillow close to her chest and sobbed into it. She was angry at herself, angry at the pride and shame that had held her back from telling her best friend the truth.

She decided to tell him in school on Monday. She'd promised not to tell anyone, but for Ikenna, the rules could be broken. He said he was leaving, but he might show up for a final goodbye. He would know the reason she'd told him off and he would understand. Ikenna loved her and would do everything to protect her. If possible, help her in whatever way he could. They could both live with his Uncle and Aunt. He was strong enough to keep her from her reality.

Maybe the nights spent enduring the pain would end.

She'd resumed school on Monday only to find out Ikenna had gone.

And each passing day became a nightmare she was never going to recover from.

"Lara, are you alright?" Dapo asked jolting her back to the present.

"I-ken."

Ikenna laughed. "I'll take that as a yes, you still remember me."

"Why wouldn't I?" She walked up to him and embraced him.

"I've missed you." He mumbled when she lingered in his arms.

"I have… I've missed you too." She blinked back the tears threatening to fall. She couldn't let them see she was hurting. She was learning to live in the present and not the past. They were called memories for a reason because they were meant to be forgotten. The past she desperately didn't want to remember. That life belonged to some other girl. Not her.

He released her, held her hands and stared into her eyes, almost as if he could probe into depths no one else could go.

"Wow, you look great." He praised, assessing her. "If someone told me Lara would one day look like Miss Universe, I would have sworn with my life they were crazy."

Lara punched him playfully. "And if someone had told me you were going to be looking like a cow instead of the handsome man standing here today, I'd bet on it."

"I see you two haven't changed." Dapo grinned. "I can leave if you want. Ikenna can always find his way back."

They both looked at each other, smiling. Ikenna spoke up. “I think we can take it from here. Thanks D.K."

"Fine with me." Lara shrugged in agreement, still holding Ikenna hands while her eyes never left his.

CHAPTER 14

Lara scrolled through her phone as the driver pulled out of the house before merging with the steady traffic on Lekki bridge. She'd thought of driving herself earlier but changed her mind. Saturday wasn't a day to stress over Lagos traffic when there was a driver at her beck and call. Besides it gave her enough time to continue chatting with Ikenna on the phone. They'd been exchanging messages for hours and she couldn't get enough of his teasing. It felt good to have him around. He was just what she needed in her life right now, as the excitement surrounding her wedding was beginning to weigh her down.

She was beginning to crave Ikenna's attention, forgetting important appointments scheduled around her upcoming wedding. She'd also been avoiding Soji's place of recent, but she tried not to pinpoint it to Ikenna's presence in her life. Soji had complained of her absence the week before and she had to come up with the excuse that she had so much to do.

But it was true, she told herself. She had so much going on right now.

Everything was in place; her father had made sure of it. He always made sure she got everything she wanted. He was doing all he could to make sure she had the best honeymoon experience with Soji. He'd surprised them by booking a reservation for them; an apartment suite in Fiji. They were going to get their

five-star treatments inclusive of exotic cuisines, rejuvenating spa treatments and romantic candlelight dinners. And these things were just the tip of the iceberg.

If there was anyone blessed to be in her life, it was Soji.

Her mind immediately flashed to Aisha and she shook her out of her thoughts. Lara hadn't heard anything from the witch since the day at Soji's office. Not that she was expecting anything, but her guts told her she needed to be prepared just in case Aisha tried to play dirty. She made a mental note to personally send Aisha a picture of the wedding when the whole celebration was over.

It might not even be necessary, given the fact that it was going to make the headlines.

She could picture the reaction on Aisha's face and she relished the thought. She had a feeling Aisha would do something crazy although she couldn't figure out what exactly. She could tell Chief that she felt threatened by Aisha but he would ask for reasons.

He couldn't know Soji cheated on her… not with the whole baby mess.

Not that her father was a saint, but he would scold her for taking matters into her hands when he could have done a clean job, and no one would be able to trace it.

Her father always knew how to fix things. He'd been fixing things ever since she was a child. But she wanted to prove she was all grown up now and could clean up her own mess.

Soji was her mess and she loved him still.

Ikenna's face suddenly overshadowed her thought of Soji. They'd been spending time together of recent. It felt like she couldn't get enough of all the things they had to talk about. He'd been offered the job he came to interview for and though she felt he could do better career-wise, he didn't seem to mind.

She'd teased him lightly about it and he had responded laughing. She liked the fact that she could tease him the way she couldn't tease Soji. Soji had a

bloated ego and she couldn't rub things like his job and his status in the society in his face. He always took offence when it came to his reputation.

But Ikenna didn't seem to mind or care.

She remembered the conversation that had caused a quibble between them. They'd been hanging out at the galleria after seeing a movie and sharing icecream together.

"And what are you going to do with that kind of offer, with the cost of living in this Lagos, food and everything else?"

"Ah, you know people like you are next to Dangote. You can afford to travel to Dubai every weekend. I won't cross my boundaries. I won't spend more than I ought. I'd rather save any extra money I have. I may also venture into business as God leads me. And when I get married, my wife and I can take a trip around Africa, somewhere within my pocket range."

She laughed out loud. "You're so funny."

He shrugged.

"Are you actually serious?"

"Of course, I'm serious."

She shook her head. "Good luck to that girl whoever she is."

"Okay, so what do you want me to do with your sarcastic response?"

She rolled her eyes. "Well… to be honest I can't speak for every woman but I know what I'd like to have as a woman. I know what I'd like my husband to be able to afford."

"Okay so if I can afford all of that and can't afford love, don't you think the girl is going to be miserable?"

"Have you heard the words, 'Buy my love?"

"Not in my lifetime."

"Well, sometimes you just love someone and can't help it. You two have flaws because you're human. But as a woman, whoever you're getting married to has to be ready to 'buy what you're selling'."

"*Ehen*… Interesting." He said, a funny look on his face, almost as if she was spewing nonsense.

She shrugged.

"Uh and love has turned into a business transaction?"

"I don't mean it that way *jor*."

He looked straight into her eyes. "Is that why you're getting married to Soji?"

She got defensive. "What do you mean?"

"I don't know. I mean your definition of love to me is pretty messed up. It's not beautiful but dark and disturbing. I really don't know how you can call something so dark, love."

She raised an eyebrow.

"So you feel you can define love to me now? Let me ask you, are you in a relationship? Are you even married?" She pointed at his finger. "I guess not. My dear Mr Amadi, if I need your advice, I'll ask for it."

"Suit yourself. I was just trying to be a friend."

"Your friendship expired over fifteen years ago." She spat angrily.

"Really Lara? You're actually using that tone on me, bringing up something that I had no control over given how young I was. I had no choice. What was I supposed to do? Tell my parents I wanted to stay because I'd found a girl I liked when I was only fifteen?"

"You left Ikenna. You told me to my face that you were going to leave. I actually thought you were joking. But guess what! You weren't and I learned to take care of myself. Now you come back into my life, acting like the perfect friend and you think I'm just going to throw all away and listen to you."

The confused look on Ikenna's face stopped her from spilling out more. She'd thought what happened was long gone but seeing him only brought back long buried memories.

They had only been kids who knew nothing about love and life. They'd grown up in the same neighbourhood and their friendship had bloomed despite the age difference between them. He was five years older but that didn't stop them from being close though they'd fought almost every day in the past. He had left because his parents were moving to Port Harcourt.

Why did you leave when I needed you so much Ikenna?

"I don't even know why I'm listening to you right now." She picked up her bag and walked away.

The next Sunday, she was back at her brother's house with a duffel bag. As expected, Dapo readily allowed her in his home like it belonged to them both. It felt like old times again. She had seen Dapo watching them curiously, but she knew he was glad. She hadn't slept over at her brother's place in years and soon she was teasing and laughing with Ikenna again.

She felt different around Ikenna and though a part of her wanted him to know his presence in her life brought sanity to her world, she thought against it. The less he knew, the better. She couldn't let anyone convince her she was making a wrong decision marrying Soji. She wasn't going to let anything pull her away from the man she loved who had been through thick and thin with her.

But in the five weeks she'd been catching up with her childhood friend, Ikenna was the one occupying her mind and her head.

Not Soji.

She called Ikenna and hung out with him often. Ikenna had a smile that could make her just stare and imagine all the 'what-ifs'. He was the only one who didn't ogle her like a piece of meat or made her feel like a sexual object. Soji hadn't been able to keep his hands off her from their first week of dating. But Ikenna wouldn't even touch her. She was growing fond of him and couldn't stop her heart from doing so, even when she knew her wedding to her future husband was only a couple of weeks ahead.

She knew the feeling was mutual. She'd caught him staring at her when she made breakfast at her brother's house. She'd donned one of her shirtdresses, intentionally exposing her legs. When their eyes locked, he looked away immediately, and muttered a quick greeting before heading back into the living room.

The urge to tempt him grew. She suddenly imagined how it would feel to pay back Soji for cheating on her with Aisha. If only Ikenna was a willing partner. She'd given him hints but he just kept resisting her. He always brought up that topic Nimi and her brother won't stop talking about.

God!

She didn't know if they were getting paid to do what they did, but they were so good at it. She just wasn't interested in what they were selling to her.

She arrived at the restaurant and strolled in. Taking off her sunglasses, she settled into the booth that had been reserved earlier for herself and her friends and threw her bag on the seat beside her.

"Are you alright babes?" Angel asked.

She nodded curbing her smile. She wasn't ready to spill details about Ikenna to her friends. Besides he was her special secret and she wanted him for herself. "Yea."

"What lipstick do you have on? Is that the one you got on your last trip with Soji?" Clara asked.

She shook her head. "Yves Saint Laurent. I've had it in my collection for a while now." She raised her hand, signalling the waiter. She ordered iced tea and told her friends to order whatever they wanted.

"You look great, as always." Maxine praised.

She smiled acknowledging the fact that she couldn't be any less. "I already ordered for your dresses and they'll be on their way next week. Hopefully none of you puts on weight before the wedding." Lara chuckled and her friends joined her.

"You need to see how I've taken my work-out routine seriously. No one wants to miss out on potential suitors at a wedding like yours." Angel confessed.

"Like! Hubby has been getting excited of recent. He knows I'm working out for the dress but he's like, 'babe, if getting a new dress is going to keep you working out to shed of all the baby fat away, then I'll be getting you dresses every month." Clara who'd recently had a baby chiped in, laughing.

Lara grinned raising her hand for a high five. "Way to go girlfriend!"

"Lara has nothing to worry about since her shape is always on *fleek*. I have no doubt it wouldn't be only Soji's eyes that will be ogling you on that day in your scandalous wedding dress." Angel chipped in.

She shrugged. "What can I say, you only live once, enjoy your life and flaunt what you've got."

"What about the vlog you told us about?" Clara said.

"What vlog?" Lara smiled. "Oh, the ones my fans on Instagram and Twitter won't stop harassing me about, I'll get to it maybe next month if it fits into my schedule. If it doesn't, then they can enjoy the show on Snapchat for now." Smiling, she lifted the straw to her lips sipping slowly. She liked the attention and she wanted to take her time making videos of herself.

"Have you heard anything from Aisha?" Mabel asked.

"That snake." Maxine hissed. "Please keep her name out of our circle *abeg*. One needs to be scared of friends like that. If she could go all the way to entice her friend's man into her bed, then she could as well shoot any of us without thinking twice."

Lara smiled. That was one reason she loved Max. She knew Maxine was trying to take Aisha's place and would do anything to get close to her. Maxine had tried to prove her loyalty in different ways. Lara wasn't sure anyone could replace Aisha but Maxine was a good fit.

What about Nimi?

She frowned at the thought of the name intruding into her thoughts. Nimi was her PA and nothing close to these people in her life. Although Lara had encouraged a friendship pact between them, but she lost interest after the whole virginity nonsense Nimi spewed. She had expected Nimi would spill the juice of her relationship with her boyfriend and Lara being the expert in relationship advice would probably counsel Nimi on sex.

Apparently, the girl was just a goody two shoes. She doubted they could have a long conversation without her mentioning Jesus or God or how she'd made up her mind to 'wait' till her wedding night to be.

Her boyfriend must be some guy living under a rock. *Like attracted like*. Lara couldn't even imagine how Nimi's boyfriend looked. It would be someone like her, plain, dull looking and just unattractive. Nothing exciting or exotic in the way they looked or dressed.

'Babes, you didn't tell me your brother had a girlfriend already." Maxine broke into her thoughts.

Lara almost spilled her drink. "What?"

Maxine acted surprised. "Are you not aware your brother has a girlfriend now?"

Lara shook her head unable to hide her shock this time. "Dapo doesn't have a girlfriend. He would have told me if he had one."

"That's funny. I thought you two were close?"

"Of course, we are, that's why I'm surprised you said girlfriend. Are you sure you know what you're talking about?"

Maxine shook her head. "Sometimes even our enemies are right under our noses, it makes me remember Aisha. They come into our lives for what they want and leave us with a scar."

"*Abeg* stop talking in parables and tell us who the girl is." Mabel rolled her eyes.

"None other than Lara's PA. What's her name *sef*, I've even forgotten. She has some dull looking features so it's hard for me to even put a name to the face."

"Who's that?" Clara asked

"One girl Lara hired to work for her that hasn't spent up to a year around Lara. Few weeks after becoming Lara's P.A and she has already clawed her way into Dapo's life. I saw them together a few weeks ago. They were smiling and holding hands."

"Wait." Lara snapped angrily. "This has to be some kind of joke. Did you see them together and Dapo opened his mouth to say that she's his girlfriend?"

"Do I look like I'm joking? Was I not asking you to put in a word for me the last time we spoke? Only for me to see them holding hands and acting all chummy. I can't say how long they've been together. Maybe it's just a fling for Dapo, never can tell."

"*Nawa o*. I've always imagined Dapo to be with someone of his calibre. I guess opposites attract after all." Maxine drove the nail further when Lara refused to say anything.

"It could be booty call. Maybe if I see the girl *sha*. Because you just wonder what some guys see in some girls. Dig deep into the matter and you'll see there's one hidden agenda." Mabel chipped in.

Lara was quiet all through, seething with rage. Her brother did not think to tell her he was seeing someone and Nimi had probably chosen to work for her because of Dapo.

No wonder Nimi had that dreamy look of recent. She had surmised a guy was responsible for it. Only in this case, the guy was her brother.

Nimi had hidden underneath that innocent look of hers and her talk of God to cover up her treacherous ways. If Dapo could call her his girlfriend, then it meant they were really together and who knows, sleeping with each other like Mabel had insinuated. Dapo had not called anyone his girlfriend in seven years.

He had not been in a relationship for a long time and she knew his past, knew what he was like with women.

And Nimi had the right to tell her she was still a virgin.

Virgin my foot.

She'd been fooled again. She had gotten carried away by Nimi's supposed kindness and humility, but Lara was glad she found out early, or she would have been betrayed again.

This was the same girl she'd tried to befriend, the one she'd been open with. She'd talked to her about Soji, hoping Nimi would also confide in her about her current relationship. Nimi must have been laughing at her as she planned to crawl into the Kitan family.

What if she isn't lying to you?

I don't care. She doesn't deserve my brother. Either way, I'm going to make her pay for what she's done.

"Are you going to confront her?" Maxine asked.

Lara knew that was what her friends wanted but she had something better in mind.

"I'll just make her wish she'd picked a different family to mess with." She winked at her friend and smiled. Her friends were going to come in handy for the showdown.

CHAPTER 15

Nimi wasn't expecting the reaction on Kemi's face when she told her about her relationship with Dapo. She felt it was best to tell her friend herself. The last thing she wanted was Kemi hearing from an outside source or even Dapo when she could have told her. She was only trying to be careful but since the relationship was already growing, her friend had to know. After all, it all started the day she followed Kemi to Kitan's mansion.

"You can't be serious…" Kemi laughed.

Nimi was slightly hurt that her friend thought it was laughable.

"But I am. We've been seeing each other for a while now and I believe it's going to end up in marriage."

Kemi's laughter died down. Looking straight into her eyes, she realised Nimi was serious.

"Oh my goodness, you and Dapo are in a relationship, like a serious, 'marriage-centric' relationship?!"

"That's what I just said."

"But you can't be... I mean do you know what you're getting yourself into? Does Lara know about this? What about his family? Have they seen you two together? Are you ready for this?"

"Is there something I should know?"

Kemi shook her head. "I'm just surprised that's all."

"That a girl like me is going out with your famous cousin, Dapo Kitan. Yeah, people like him should be seen with people of class… I get it." Nimi threw on her glasses and forced a smile. "I think we should focus on what we came to do initially."

"C'mon Nimi, I'm sorry, I didn't mean it that way. I was just surprised that's all." Kemi tried to hold her hand but Nimi withdrew slightly.

"You're not the first person to give me that look so I get it. Dare also thinks I'm now a slut and a gold digger just because he was around when Dapo came to pick me from school the other day. I didn't want you to hear the truth from gossips, that's why I told you."

"*Haba*, I'm not Dare and I would never think of you that way. To be honest, I was just jealous…" She confessed, feeling ashamed about it.

Nimi was surprised. Weren't they cousins? "What do you mean?"

"I mean, I was just teasing you about your love for Jesus weeks ago and you not ending up as an old maid and then this news hits me like wow! Are you for real? I know you're not a slut or a gold digger, so Dare is just talking like the jealous man that he is. You know me I always tell you how I feel."

Nimi tried to smile.

"I'm sorry, please forgive me, I'm just baffled. I mean Dapo is an amazing guy. He's so amazing I've always known he would end up with someone just like him. Someone loving, caring, kind and a Jesus freak. He takes his faith really serious and sees life through this Jesus you two love so much. He even centres his life on him. So yea, you two suit each other well."

Nimi laughed out loud this time.

"So *baybay*…" Kemi shifted closer. "Gist me. Gist me so I can *yab* him well. How did he *toast* you? Did he say come and meet me under the mango tree?"

“Kemi, you’re not normal.” Nimi chuckled.

“Are you just realizing that after all these years?” She rolled her eyes playfully. “*Oya,* give me gist *na*. How did he woo you? Hopefully, he didn’t use his charm on you *o*.”

“What charm?" Nimi asked, wondering what her friend meant. "I wasn’t aware he had any *o*.”

“The charm all those fine boys use *na*.” Kemi tried to quickly redeem herself before she spilled what she wasn't supposed to. “Have you two kissed?”

Nimi shook her head aware that her friend was trying to change the topic. “We are saving it for our wedding day.”

Kemi grimaced. “Really?”

“Uh huh.”

“And Dapo agreed?”

She nodded. “Yup.”

“Dapo agreed to not kiss till marriage?” Kemi's jaw dropped open.

“Are you surprised?” She was tempted to ask Kemi about her cousin’s past but she did not want anything that would pollute her mind against her new found love. She wanted to hear about his new life not his old life. The look on Kemi’s face revealed more than she was willing to admit but Nimi wasn’t going to allow a third party ruin their relationship.

If he’d been notorious with women in the past, then it wasn’t her business. Her business was how he planned to live life with her now and for the rest of their life together, God helping them.

“I’m impressed.” She managed. “I’m just wondering how you two are going to be able to keep that promise. I get your no premarital sex part but kissing… c’mon babe, don’t you think that’s being too harsh?”

“On who exactly?”

“On the both of you. On him because, well…you know he’s a guy, hot chocolate in human form at that, forgive me if I see my cousin that way but

that's what those crazy women call him. And then you, I know you have the strength to carry through, but have you ever wondered what you'll do if you get tempted? I mean what if he gets tempted and he wants to touch you, are you going to allow him? Like y'know give it a try?"

Nimi saw danger ahead as the conversation was leaning towards the thoughts she'd been battling with recently. Thoughts she chose to leave at the feet of Jesus so she could focus more on how they could build each other rather than how they would explore each other's bodies. That was sacred and she wanted it to remain sacred, no matter how much the world or her flesh made it look normal.

Her body was a living sacrifice to God and she couldn't afford to grieve the Holy Spirit. Sex outside God's intention was a bad foundation to lay a relationship on. It would no longer be the beautiful, intimate and sacred act God had taught her it was. Her love for God would not make her give in.

She swallowed. "I trust in God to strengthen us both. Besides, we try not to make room for flesh or do things that could encourage our flesh and we've been fine since then."

Kemi sighed. "That's great then. Maybe I'll take a cue from you guys if I happen to get into a relationship sometime."

Nimi laughed. "You say it like it's so far away."

Kemi shrugged smiling sadly. "What can a girl do when she gets burnt, not once, not twice?"

"Pray and trust."

"Like it's that easy."

"It's not the load that breaks you down. It's the way you carry it."

"Wise woman."

"Not me, those are the words of C.S Lewis. He was a wise man and a former atheist turned Christian too."

Kemi could only smile.



“This is the best meal I’ve had in months or years perhaps.” Dapo praised Mrs Adeyemi after helping himself to a bowl of boiled rice and *efo riro* filled with assorted meat and fish and a side dish of fried plantain. “Thank you ma, for this and the warm welcome. I’m grateful.”

“Ah, we’re glad someone else has come to eat Nimi’s food asides her family members.” Nimi’s mother smiled. “She told me a friend is presently staying with you so she’ll pack some for you to take home, hopefully that can last you two a couple of days. I hope that’s alright by you?”

“Yes ma. It gladdens my heart to be here. Thank you once again.”

“And don’t forget, you’re always welcome to our home anytime. It may be small but it’s ours and we are happy to have you visit as often as you can.”

“A home is where love is, and that’s what I see here.”

She nodded and settled on a chair to face him while Nimi cleared the table and headed for the kitchen. Tolani saw it as her cue to leave Dapo with their mother.

“Are you aware you’re the first man my daughter will ever bring home?”

Dapo nodded. In the two months he’d been with Nimi, he was beginning to learn so much about her and he prayed to God he wouldn’t break her heart. The more he saw how beautiful she was on the inside, the more he got scared of sharing details of his past with her. God had forgiven him but he still felt the past resurface sometimes. He would have to muster up the courage to tell her and he prayed her heart could take it.

Everything in their relationship was going fine. He’d thought of telling Lara about it initially, but he wanted to arrange a dinner with his family and introduce Nimi to them all. Besides, Lara had been so occupied with Ikenna and her wedding plans, so the chance to tell her kept slipping away.

It wasn't something he wanted to do over the phone or when she was in his house arguing with Ikenna. It was something special happening in his life and he wanted to take time out to tell her.

"I'm glad you made your intentions known to her from the start. My daughter doesn't play games with people's hearts either. If there is no way down a path, she doesn't drag people along and I'm happy you two think alike. To be honest I wish her father was alive right now because he's better at handling situations like this. I just have one advice for you, be honest about your feelings with her. I know there's no relationship that doesn't have its challenges but if anything is going to separate you two, do not let it be a third party.

"I've known Nimi to be a strong woman who isn't really moved by what people think of her but deep down, she has a fragile heart. Once she lets people in, the only thing that can take them out of her life is God because she chooses to see the good in people. With all my years on earth, I'm aware that being in a relationship often brings out what's inside, and the two of you might begin to see traits you did not expect, but I pray that no matter what happens, you two will honour God above all."

"Yes ma."

"My daughter is a jewel, please treat her like one okay?"

"She's come to mean so much more to me." Dapo replied.

Mrs Adeyemi blinked back tears that threatened to surface and smiled at him. Dapo was a good man and she could tell he loved God. If God's will for her daughter was to be with this man who spoke wisely and respected her, then she couldn't be happier. She tried not to imagine her grandchildren already, pretty little things running around their house while trying to put them in order. Mrs Adeyemi thought of her daughter. She had a small stature and though Nimi didn't turn a man's head twice, she loved God above all else and had good character. She was beautiful to her, more beautiful than any other girl.

Mrs Adeyemi was worried that due to Nimi's small figure, she may have a hard time housing babies but she shook the worry out of her head. She'd looked the same before meeting Kayode but she gave birth to three hale and hearty children.

Nimi would be fine, she assured herself. Her eyes settled on Dapo once again and she suddenly saw what scared her the first time she set eyes on him. Dapo Olakitan was well built and broad. He had the kind of face she would have warned a girl with morals to flee from but she was surprised and glad when Nimi told her they shared the same beliefs and wanted to honour God till their wedding day.

She always knew her daughter would end up with God's best but she never could have guessed he would come in form of a Kitan. The last thing she wanted was a family that thrived on attention, media and fame. From what she'd heard so far, Dapo seemed not to be involved in the family business and loved to keep his life private.

"Nimi," She called out. "Bring the young man a glass of water…"

"Ah.. Mum, I can help myself with that, thank you very much." He laughed rising from his seat and headed for the kitchen.

"Hmmn, okay *o*. If you say so." She said more to herself as she left for her room.



It was late by the time Dapo was ready to leave. Nimi followed him out to his car and they stood together, leaning against the hood of the car, sharing words and laughter wishing the night would not end. She knew she was growing to love him already and could not contain the funny feeling at the pit of her stomach whenever he looked into her eyes or laughed at something she said. She loved when he held her hands and how his huge hands covered hers.

She slid her hands into his and she rested her head on his shoulder wishing she could do more. All her life she'd always felt she was strong enough to handle anything, but their growing relationship clouded her senses so much sometimes she found it hard to think. Was this what it meant to be in love, to be in a relationship that she was so sure about? She'd never seen herself as the mushy type and she wondered where all the feelings had hidden. She just realised that the desire to be closer to him grew each day and even holding hands meant so much more to her.

She was glad they were both committed to honouring God with their bodies. He only had to look at her and her insides turned to jelly.

"Are you alright?" Dapo asked as if he'd been reading her mind.

She nodded. "I'm fine, my mind just drifted."

He turned to face her and smiled into her eyes. "To be honest, while I was waiting for God to bring you at the right time, I never imagined I wouldn't be kissing my girl senseless."

Nimi felt hot and was glad her complexion couldn't reveal how much she blushed.

"But you came and the first thing you laid out was 'no kissing' and it confirmed what I knew in my heart... You're the one."

"Really?" She gave him a curious smile.

I thought I was unrealistic and strict with the kissing part. Kemi's words came to mind but she shook them off immediately. She wasn't going to back down on their decision.

"Well yeah. It's been seven years since I dated anyone. Shortly after getting born-again, I got into a relationship. I was just getting to know God and I felt I was ready to start a relationship with a good Christian girl. It ended up in shambles because I was clearly still new to all of this, still discovering God and was just looking for a way to ease my sexual tension. The girl I was dating back then wasn't too grounded either. We did so many ungodly things together and

we both felt guilty afterwards. We finally had to back out because we knew we would be displeasing God if we continued. I've been leaning on God ever since."

"Oh I'm sorry about that." Nimi felt she could relate with the girl's predicament. One part of her wondered if she would allow Dapo touch her as the months passed by. She knew it usually didn't stop at kissing as she'd heard from other Christian couples. The more chances you gave; the more it could open the door to other things. As she drew close to God each day, the desire to honour him was what mattered; with her lips and her body and she knew Dapo wanted to do the same.

She had learned so much from him in the short time they'd been together. She saw how passionate he was for Jesus. His eyes sparkled when he talked about Jesus, she knew the feeling. She showed him her bible journal and all the things she'd prayed about and what she talked to God about and it was like he understood her all at once. He didn't see her private notes to God as something pitiful or childish, he saw them as so much more; and he even asked questions about certain things she wrote.

She didn't believe in soul mates, but she felt she would fit into Dapo perfectly the way Eve fitted into Adam. They talked about kids and the future, they talked about church, fellowship and personal devotionals and how they would prefer to share tasks in the home. She'd gotten to know his hobbies and that he often spent time watching football and basketball games although his favourite childhood sport was tennis. She knew his favourite colour was blue and white and that he loved plantain and fish stew or vegetable soup. He loved taking desserts after every meal and she was learning how to make his favourite.

They both knew their soft spots, their beliefs about everything and how each person handled conflicts. She doubted there was nothing they did not know about each other but if there was more, they would learn.

Jesus wasn't just a name to him but so much more, the One who made a way into God's presence and was God himself. She couldn't be happier. God had really given her a man after his heart, and she couldn't thank him enough.

"And then you came into my life after so many years and gave it to me straight up." He grinned at her. "No kissing before marriage. It was like, 'bam! Here we go. Keeping it clean.' And I was like, 'Thank you Jesus for giving me just the girl I need to keep my lips in place."

Nimi laughed at his analysis and shook her head. "You're so funny."

"And you're beautiful."

"Thank you."

He looked into her eyes, a smile playing on his lips. "I was thinking of lunch at my parent's house next week. I'd like to officially introduce you to my nuclear family first of all before the other Kitans hear about it."

She gave a soft laugh.

"So, are you up for it? I don't want to rush you if you don't think you're ready."

She inhaled deeply. "What about Lara, do you think it's okay to tell her together with your parents or would you rather she knows about it first?"

"She's been so busy recently so I felt it would come out nicely if I introduce you at once. It makes it decent and official y'know."

Something tugged at Nimi's heart but she couldn't place it. "It's okay I guess."

"Happy much?" His fingers gently brushed her cheeks, sending sparks flying through her body.

She nodded unable to mouth the words.

"And if you want me to charge into your office on Monday and just demand that I see her because I have something very important to say, I could do that for you. Anything for you, your wish is my command." He reached for her hand and placed it on his heart.

She gulped scared at the way her body eagerly responded to his. She could feel his heartbeat.

It was so strong.

“Feel that right there, without you in my life, it would be beating at the normal pace. That’s what you do to my heart. Do I do that to yours?”

She nodded.

“Good.” He smiled and dropped her hands hugging her briefly before wishing her goodnight.

She watched him drive off before realising she’d been standing there by herself thinking of how much she’d like things to move really fast.

Love is patient

She knew she would have to wait and get tried in the process. She wasn’t sure how she would cope or if she would survive but she trusted God to see her through.

CHAPTER 16

“Good morning…” Nimi greeted the moment Lara stepped into the office. She didn’t notice Lara ignored her greeting as she picked her pen and her notepad to take down notes for her boss’ appointments for the day.

“Why do you smell like cheap perfume?”

Like a slap across Nimi’s face, she was taken aback by her Boss’ outburst. Unable to respond immediately, she stood trying to process what just happened. Lara had never spoken to her like that and not in front of Nonye who was furiously typing away on the desktop though she was sure she heard what Lara had spewed.

“I don’t understand…” She finally found her voice.

“Excuse you? What do you mean you don’t understand? Look, if you’re going to hang around me all day, I don't want you using some perfume that smells like something bought off a charity shop. And is that your shirt revealing sweaty armpits? Soon, you’ll not only choke me with your cheap perfume but your body odour as well.”

Nonye tried to contain her laughter but Lara heard her and turned to face her secretary. “You know what, I think you’ll handle some things in my office

for me today while Nisi or whatever her name is does the running around instead. At least let her get some fresh air into that body of hers."

"Yes ma." Nonye nodded and got up immediately to attend to her boss' needs. Lara sauntered into her office ranting off on the things she needed to do for the day.

Nimi stood frozen, looking bemused and hurt. Lara had just verbally insulted her about her body when she was sure she had cleaned up good and didn't have body odour. She was certain she didn't.

Or did she?

She lifted her arm to smell herself and the 'cheap perfume' Lara had accused her of using. Nimi used a good deodorant, something she could afford. No one had ever said she had body odour. Even her friends often complimented her that she smelled like flowers.

Dapo had told her last night that he loved the way she smelled, and she'd only used a deodorant then. Maybe her boss was just in a bad mood. Nimi wasn't going to let her words get to her even though they threatened to shatter her self-esteem a bit.

And why did she call her Nisi instead of Nimi? Lara knew her name so that action was intentional.

The door to Lara's office opened and Nonye stepped out. Nimi looked at her, wondering what was coming next.

"Madam wants to see you."

Nimi stood up, following closely behind Nonye. Lara raised up her hands as she was about to walk in, signalling her to stop. Nimi obeyed and stood by the door.

"Just stay there and take your notes please." Lara frowned shaking her head as if she couldn't stand her. "I need you to deliver some files to the M.D of one of our banks. On your way back, I want you to stop by KFC to get some food packs for me and a few guests I'll be having over in the office today. I'll

call you to give you specific details of what they want when they arrive because those girls can be picky sometimes."

Was she having a conference? And what girls? Something didn't feel right within Nimi. She shook off the thought and focused on the task ahead. Whatever Lara chose to do in her office was none of her business.

Lara was looking at her like something that crawled out of the trash can. What happened to the friendly woman she thought she was getting along with? What happened to the woman that had been asking her to tell her about her boyfriend and how she wanted to honour God above all? This Lara looked like a stranger had taken over her body.

Nimi left the room immediately to find solace in her errands not even glancing at her phone for once.

If she had taken time to check her phone, she would have seen the text message from Dapo that told her she was one of the best things that had happened to him in a long time and perhaps, that would have brightened the horrible day she was having.



When Nimi returned from her errands, she was beyond exhausted. From sorting out the files needed for the Managing Director at the bank and then hurrying to get food packs for her boss and the visitors she had. She had the files in one hand and in the other packs which she carried all alone. She knew Lara could have told her driver to handle the food packs, but she made her go into the terrible Lagos traffic without a driver, to negotiate with a *keke-napep* that would take her and then leave her to find her way back alone with the package.

She still wanted to believe Lara was having a bad day. With all her heart Nimi wanted to believe the best about her boss and so she tried to prevent her

flesh from taking offense at Lara's attack although she had a feeling more would follow through.

She entered her office sweating like someone who had been underneath the sun for hours. If Lara had complained that her sweat and body scent irritated her, she wondered what her friends would say about her now.

Except those friends were the girlfriends she'd seen at the Kitan's house the first day she had met Dapo.

Nimi shivered and swallowed when all the girls turned to look at her. She noticed Maxine had a smirk on her face.

"Hey, we've met before haven't we?"

Nimi nodded, the one thing she dreaded most was happening right before her eyes. She could feel other eyes boring into her and assessing her but she tried to focus on what she'd been asked to do.

Lara looked at her then and the hatred she harboured for Nimi was evidently clear in her eyes. Something had taken over her, like she was out for some kind of revenge.

"Drop the packs and my files there." Lara waved to the centre table and Nimi obeyed hoping she could run out at soon.

But her boss wasn't ready to let her go.

"Oh, before I forget, I told that daft secretary of mine to help me arrange the files I'll be needing for my dad's lawyers tomorrow, but she didn't even have a clue. Can you do that for me before you leave? It shouldn't take too long and you can go for lunch after."

She wasn't sure what Lara had planned this time, but she obediently headed towards the office drawers and began sorting the files hoping she would find what she was looking for on time.

"Do you guys remember Sola, the girl I gisted you about back then that told me she was a virgin?" Mabel began.

"Why won't I. The babe is a slut *jor*. I don't know if the virgin thing is even something to boast about. Some girls say it so they can just get laid, period." Clara chipped in.

"And some guys actually fall for that?"

"*Ah*, you know that kind of thing turn some people on, especially some bad boys. They take what they want, and they're gone. Some stupid girls believe the guy will stay just because of their 'virginity', but the guy sniffs another girl in skirt and he's gone."

Maxine laughed shaking her head. "Some girls are just desperate and would do anything to get under a man."

"These days, it's not just under *o*." Angel gave more suggestive details and Nimi kept praying she would find the files on time and leave them to discuss their gory sex analogies. She knew the virgin discussion wasn't just a coincidence. They were trying to get to her. She'd only shared that detail about herself with Lara.

The girls laughed as Angel went on to share more lewd jokes. Nimi didn't realise she was trembling till she saw her fingers shaking while she kept digging through the files.

"I heard one old wench is disturbing your brother. Mrs Akudo, Senator Akudo's ex-wife. The thing got to the gossip mongers last week. Who would have known Dapo would become a 'holy brother' with the way he was scandalous with women back then?" Clara snorted.

Lara raised an eyebrow. "Those crazy women. Whoever sold that news to the gossip sites must be in desperate need of attention. I'm sure it'll die down soon. But yea, I won't deny my brother was a bit scandalous when it came to women."

They giggled and Nimi felt her eyes burn with tears though she told herself she wasn't going to let their words get to her.

But they did. Not only had Lara torn down her confidence, she was ridiculing her and her brother and as if that wasn't enough, she was insinuating things with her friends.

How could she be so insensitive? Didn't Lara realise she was also bringing her brother down in front of these women? How would she feel if her fiancé Soji had said the same thing about her to his friends?

"All these ugly girls going after men way beyond their class, it baffles me what the men see in them. They obviously know what they want and when they get it, they throw them out like trash." Maxine said.

"You'll be surprised the woman these same men end up getting married to: Someone as sophisticated as they are and not some filthy looking thing that smells like a toilet cleaner." Angel chipped in.

The girls laughed and stood up to help themselves to the food. Lara turned to Nimi.

"And have you not found the files yet *madam virgin*?"

Nimi bit her lip. Lara sure knew how to drive the nail in. "No, I haven't."

She grimaced. "I thought I told you to spray something better than that cheap perfume you have on before coming into my office. No wonder my friends think something smells nasty and I'm sure it's none of them."

Nimi swallowed not knowing what to say. She inhaled deeply telling herself she wasn't going to cower as Lara wanted her to. Lara was trying to intimidate her.

"People like you don't belong here." Lara went on seeing the inscrutable look on Nimi's face. Her friends turned to watch the scene.

"I'm sorry if I'm inconveniencing you but I remember you hired me."

"Oh so you want to pull that Miss 'goody two shoes' look on me huh? Well I now know who you are, the kind of girl you are. A good for nothing church rat who sees cheese and sticks her fangs into it. This is how you repay me, even after I doubled your pay last month? You come here giving me some

righteous talk about Jesus and how you want to keep yourself till your wedding night but you're with my brother. Who do you think you are?"

Nimi felt the tears sting but she stood her ground.

"Dapo was going to tell you about it…"

"Oh so you even call him by name now."

Nimi kept mute.

"I'm going to tell you something and you better let it sink into your thick skull. We don't hang around low lives and if you think my brother is the next thing on your *to-hook* list, I would advise you to cross it off or you'll get burnt."

A tear escaped, falling across her cheeks but she wiped them off immediately.

"I just want you to know that I would never lie to you. Dapo and I are not together the way you think. We're in a relationship but we are trying to honour God…"

"Oh *puh-leaze*" Maxine interrupted rolling her eyes. "Like he's not a man with blood running in his veins. *Abeg* all these girls that like acting 'holier than thou' *sef*. It's only god that knows what they do behind closed doors."

"See it as a favour." Lara continued. "That I'm giving you the gist ahead of time about the kind of women my brother hangs out with. There's something called class and honey, you're not in that category. Save yourself the heartbreak and go play with your type okay?" Lara reached to touch her cheeks and another tear fell. Nimi could no longer hold back the tears.

"Aww… poor baby, are you crying… who hurt you?" Lara snorted as her friends laughed. Nimi could see the triumphant smile on her face and she felt humiliated. Lara looked back at her friends and winked at them. "I told you she would get burnt."

Nimi broke into tears and fled the room.

CHAPTER 17

Dapo's phone rang and he was pleased when he saw his mother's caller ID. He had thought to call her first but she beat him to it.

"My love." Her voice was pregnant with excitement. There had to be some good news she couldn't wait to spill.

"Good evening mum. I was just about to call you."

"Oh wow, they say a mother's womb never stops reaching out to her children." She chuckled. "How are you my dear?"

"I'm fine, great even. How's your end? Dad and Lara?"

"Your father is fine, Lara isn't back from work so I haven't shared the good news with her."

"Oh, what good news?"

"I was just going to tell you about it. Do you remember Toke Owoyomi? That young beautiful girl you went to the University of California with?"

Oh God no, not my ex.

"You mean my ex?" Why was she asking him about her when he could vividly remember who she was? As family friends, they had hit it straight off in the university. He'd been insanely attracted to her.

But that was it.

"Yea, how many years has it been now? I remember you two were really into each other before the breakup. She just got back from France yesterday and her mum called me to give me the good news. And guess what, she's having dinner with us this weekend." She giggled excitedly.

This isn't happening.

"Uh mum, I plan on bringing my girlfriend for dinner this weekend, and I wouldn't want to have Toke around."

"Your girlfriend?" His mum sounded surprised and slightly upset. "When did you have a girlfriend that you didn't tell me about?"

"Well, that's why I'm telling you now. And I would love you guys to meet her on Saturday."

"Is she someone we know? An acquaintance of ours perhaps?"

He'd been expecting the question.

"No, she's not but I'm sure you'll love her when you get to know her. She's perfection in the flesh."

"Oh wow, hearing you say that makes me believe you must be madly in love with this girl of yours."

He smiled sheepishly thinking of how he'd placed Nimi's hands on his chest last night. Her reaction had been priceless. Her eyes on him were something he wanted for the rest of his life.

"I believe I am."

"Then bring her over. I'll love to meet the woman who has finally captured your heart after all these years. She must be something."

"Thanks mum. So will you get something ready for us?"

"Are you telling me? I'll join the maids in preparing the family's favourite dish on Saturday. I'll let Toke know she would have to come some other time since you have plans already."

"Thanks mum, I love you."

"Love you too my prince. And say Hi to your sweetheart for me."

"I will. See you on Saturday." And he hung up.

He exhaled deeply. It was a good thing his mother was pleased to see his beau. He just prayed his mother would like Nimi and nothing would ruin the get together.



Sumbo Kitan stared at her phone and smiled sadly wondering who the mystery girl was. She was tempted to send out her agents to do a little research, but she thought against it. Dapo was her son and he would be upset if he found out she was sneaking up on him. Besides, she did not want people snooping around her family business. Dapo sounded excited about his beau. She had thought Toke coming back to Nigeria would mean the beginning of something for the both of them but she surmised that wasn't going to happen.

Even Chief had been excited about Toke's return. Toke was really beautiful and intelligent bagging her degrees and accolades from several prestigious universities. Toke's father was an aristocrat and Sumbo had believed their re-union would pave way for her son's business.

Though Dapo insisted he was doing well in his business, it was nothing compared to his father's empire. His stubborn pride and his faith kept him from obtaining so much more than he had. She knew her son had so much potential if only he was willing to share his wealth of wisdom with the crème de la crème of the country. Build his connections, marry within their class, strategise and build a legacy like her husband.

She wanted to look on the bright side. Her son was a man now. She'd always called him her prince because he looked just like one and was a prince in her eyes.

The thought of having a grandchild was swimming in her head when she heard someone come in through the door. She knew it was her daughter Lara announcing her presence with her stilettos.

Didn't she get tired wearing them? Sumbo believed comfort should prevail over fashion.

"Hello Mum."

"Hello my love, how was your day at work?"

"Just there, my girlfriends came over and we had some fun." She smiled. "All work and no play…"

"Oh, speaking of girlfriends, Toke just arrived from France yesterday…."

"Same Toke Owoyomi, Dapo's ex?"

"Long time ex." She laughed. "I always thought they would end up together, but life has a way of happening I guess."

"Like! Those two would have had heads turning if they got married. Cute babies alert." Lara chuckled. "Mum, do you know we can do some match making?"

Sumbo shook her head laughing. "No dear, I just called your brother informing him about dinner with Toke on Saturday all for him to tell me he wants to bring his girlfriend over. So, plans have changed."

"What?!"

"Are you also unaware your brother is dating someone?"

"I don't understand." Lara frowned. "So Toke is not coming?"

"You heard what I said." Sumbo stood up running manicured nails on her dress and headed to the kitchen. "Your brother is bringing his girlfriend for dinner so I will have to call Toke or her mum to cancel."

"Don't call them yet. Let me call Dapo tonight and see if he will change his mind. It's just one dinner date that's all. Imagine Toks coming all the way and then we cancel on her. I think that's pretty unfair to me. His girlfriend can come next time." Lara replied not revealing anything.

"Okay *o*. Do get back to me on whatever your brother decides. You can even call Toke after you've spoken to Dapo. Can you do that for me sweetheart?"

"Of course, Mum. You go and do what needs to be done, I'll sort out the rest."

"Okay love, there's food in the kitchen but you can ask Samira to make you something else if you wish. I need to get some water and rest. I have some places to be tomorrow."

And she was gone.

Lara smiled shaking her head. So Dapo was still insistent on calling Nimi his girlfriend and even wanted to bring her home? Wait till he saw Toke on Saturday. He would remember what he was missing. One glance at them and Nimi would realise she didn't stand a chance.



Nimi sat at the table staring blankly into space, completely oblivious of her surroundings.

"Are you alright?" Tolani's question brought her back to the present.

Nimi turned and forced a smile when she noticed her sister had a worried look on her face. Akin, her younger brother glanced at her when Tolani asked the question. She had lost her appetite since the drama Lara had pulled at the office that morning. Though she told God to help her get through this phase of her life, her flesh couldn't help but bring back memories of how Lara and her friends had verbally assaulted her.

The way she ran out of Lara's office, she was certain some people in the office would have heard of the incident. Nonye had tried to play pretend all day but she could tell the girl knew more than she was willing to admit.

Nimi told herself she did not want to work for Lara anymore. When she got home, she had gone on her knees and told God she did not want to go back. She was ready to drop her resignation letter tomorrow. She wanted to prove she was no gold-digger and she'd been living well and would continue to if she resigned. She wasn't desperate.

It's not about you.

Abba, don't you see how she hurts me so? Don't you care that she dragged me in the mud right in front of her friends? Did you see how she embarrassed me when I've been nothing but good to her?

I died for her too.

Well, I know that, but it's just hard. How can I cope?

You'll cope.

How?

My grace is sufficient for you. I will not give you more than you can bear without a way of escape.

She sighed with tears still in her eyes.

I don't know if I can talk to Dapo right now. I see his texts messages and I'm just tempted to think they're lies. After what I heard about him today, how am I so sure his old life won't resurface?

Whose report shall you believe?

She dug her face into the pillow to hold back more tears. The Holy Spirit tried to comfort her, but she kept struggling with her feelings.

"Stressful day at work." She replied and took a forkful of amala and egusi soup.

"Sorry, I'm sure brother Dapo would soon call you and spoil you with some good loving. At least you're lucky. We that don't have boyfriend, we gotta encourage ourselves in *da* Lord." Tolani chuckled.

If only you knew.

She'd spent extra hours in the shower when she got back. Did she really smell bad?

"Tolani, can I ask you something and please be honest."

"Sure sis."

"Do I have body odour?"

Her sister grimaced. "Of course not, did someone say you have body odour?"

"I'm just asking."

"You can ask your boyfriend because I might just be the wrong person to ask." She winked at her.

Nimi shook her head. "You don't know when someone is serious. Simple question, 'how do I smell?' You're referring me to Dapo like he's a god of some sort. You're my sister and I needed an honest answer." She stood up from the table and pushed the chair back inside.

"Akin, please help with my leftovers. I'm not really hungry."

And she was gone, leaving her sister speechless.

"What did I do?"

Akin shrugged. "Your big mouth perhaps. Maybe she's on her period or something."

Tolani smacked the back of his head. "One more word from you and I'll smack the front of your head this time." She hissed.

"If I do my own you will say I'm unfair now. I'll just be *unlooking*."

Tolani frowned. "And is that English? *Abeg* eat and clear the table before Mum returns from fellowship *jare*."

Nimi glanced at her phone, reluctant to pick the call. It was the fourth time Dapo was calling her and she knew she should have picked to prevent him from worrying but right now, she could care less.

What would he say this time?

Lara's friends had rambled on about the gossip tale of him and a senator's ex-wife. Were there other parts of his life she needed to know? What if she was in danger? What if the woman threatened her? It was one thing for Lara to tell her she wasn't worth a dime, but she couldn't put her life on the line because of a man.

Were there other women out there that she didn't know about? Women that would show up once she got married to Dapo and even tried to lure him into their bed?

A leopard does not change its spots.

The crazy thoughts kept swimming in her head. She was beginning to reconsider their relationship. She doubted she could handle it.

She picked the call when the phone rang the fifth time.

"Hello Nimi."

"Hi." She managed.

"Baby, you had me worried. I've been calling your line but you were not picking, you won't even reply my texts."

She was tempted to yell at him and tell him everything his sister had said to her. She was upset with him and blamed him partly for what had happened. If Dapo had told Lara about their relationship as she'd suggested earlier, it probably wouldn't be this bad. But he had kept stalling, saying he wanted it to be special.

"Today was quite stressful."

"I'm sorry sweetheart, look, if you need sometime away, I can speak with my sister. If it's the money you're thinking about, I can send some into your

account so you can go to a spa and get a massage to help you relax. Go shopping with your sister and get some nice clothes and shoes…"

She closed her eyes. Did he just say he wanted to send her money? So, brother and sister thought money was everything to her?

Did he even think his sister loved him the way he loved her? If he'd heard everything she'd shared with her friends in her office, he'd probably reconsider calling Lara his sister.

"Look on the bright side, it would also make you look good before you meet my parents this weekend."

She rubbed her hands against her throbbing temple, sensing a headache threatning at the mention of Dapo's parents.

"I don't think I'll be able to make it this weekend." She deadpanned.

"Why, is something wrong?"

"I don't feel too well." She wasn't ready to reveal anything to him. She wasn't lying, she really wasn't feeling too well, emotionally and mentally.

"Oh, did you go to the hospital? Why didn't you tell me earlier? Have you taken something?"

He wasn't letting her go easily and he sounded genuinely worried.

What if he isn't?

"Look Dapo I have to go. Today has been really stressful for me and the last thing I need is you querying me. Goodnight."

She hung up and switched off her phone.

Nimi aroused from sleep the moment she felt hands shaking her gently. She rubbed her eyes and frowned on seeing Tolani. What did the annoying girl want right now? If she was taking her space on the bed, the least she could do was push her gently not wake her up.

"What is it?"

"Your boyfriend is around *o*."

Her eyes widened. "What?"

"Brother Dapo, he's here. I told him you were sleeping but he said he's not going anywhere till he takes you to see his doctor." Tolani stretched to touch her sister's head for any sign of fever but frowned when she didn't notice any.

Nimi slapped her hand away irritated that Dapo actually drove all the way because he was convinced she actually wasn't feeling well.

She looked up at the time. It was ten o'clock.

She sighed. What would her mum think?

"*Abi* are you pregnant?" Tolani giggled mischievously.

Nimi rolled her eyes. "*Ehn na*, you're the one that put the baby there *abi*, or it flies upon people, and infects them. Naughty girl."

"*Ah*, me I was just curious *o*, because the way Mum was looking worried, I had to put two and two together after he said you were ill and he'd informed his doctor. Mum lamented that He drove all the way here from Lekki. I can't help but wonder if something has happened between you two." Tolani grinned.

"That your mouth, I'll tell Pastor Muyiwa that it needs special deliverance on Sunday." She stood up from the bed and threw on a maxi gown, glad that he hadn't barged into her room or caught her in her night dress. Snatching the vanilla scented spritz from her dressing table, she sprayed a little on herself. She took a long look at the mirror as Lara's mockery floated to the surface taunting her and making her aware of the spots and blackheads she'd ignored in the past.

You're becoming self-conscious. Her spirit chided. ***You're letting her words get to you.***

She blinked as she applied a cherry lip balm on her dried lips. She ran a hand on her weaves. They looked decent enough.

When she stepped out, Dapo stood up immediately and walked towards her.

She'd told herself she would not be moved by anything he had to say. But the moment she set eyes on him, she grew weak. He touched her head and ran his hands along her arm.

"Are you alright baby? Your family said they're not aware of your illness. What's wrong?"

She shook her head. "Dapo you shouldn't have come."

"Why shouldn't I? If I was in the States and I heard you were ill, trust me, I'll take the next flight to see you."

She looked into his eyes and a tear fell. His eyes revealed what he felt for her. Why had Lara made her doubt? Why did she doubt God wanted her to be with this man? He took her in his arms and she didn't hold back, embracing him in return.

Her mother and Tolani left the living room when they saw it was more of an emotional sickness than physical.

"I'm just scared Dapo and I was so worried and tired…"

He released her and held her at arm's length. "What happened? Did someone threaten you?"

She shook her head making futile attempt to wipe the tears away. She wasn't willing to let him know what his sister had done. It would only make things worse and God wouldn't want that.

"I heard gossip about a woman trying to get to you and I just got angry and upset wondering if…"

"If what?" He brushed her tears away with his thumb and the action made it hard for her to focus.

She shook her head in frustration. "I don't know okay! I know what God has told me, but I doubt because I'm scared that you might get tempted and you just want to use me."

She knew she'd hurt him and his eyes showed it.

"You listen to gossip?"

Well, I was forced to.

"I don't, I overheard it."

"But do you believe them over me? Over what God has told you about me?"

She struggled with her feelings and looked away.

He pulled her chin up so that she could look into his eyes. "I want you to tell me what you believe about me Nimi. I need to be able to know if you can handle all of this. I never told you my life was pure, neither am I proud of what I did in the years I didn't know Jesus. What I promise you is this life after Jesus."

She inhaled deeply, the girls' jeering echoing in her mind.

"Is there something else I need to know?"

Dapo swallowed.

She felt him retreat and placed her hand on his arm. "Dapo, please no more secrets between us. I'd like to know what I'm in for so I can handle it and move on with you."

"Oh God." She heard him sigh and one part of her panicked though she kept leaning into her spirit for strength.

"I think there's something you should know. It's something that has torn me apart for years. I was battling with how to tell you but I guess this is the best time to do so."

Nimi managed a nod, wondering how many attacks she was going to receive tonight. She saw his face and how he battled with his emotions. She had never really seen him like this.

Was it something very terrible?

"I don't know if you're ready for it."

"I am." She responded, trying to put up a bold face.

"Then maybe you should sit down."

She settled on the couch, he sat beside her and reached for her hands. "Promise me you'll not stop loving me when you hear this."

"I need to know what happened first, before I can promise anything."

He sighed. He was going to say it once and for all.

"I killed a girl, she was Lara's friend at the time. A minor, and she was only seventeen years old."

Nimi raised a hand to her mouth unable to say a word as she stared at her boyfriend. She had expected something bad, but not this bad.

Not murder. *Oh God, not murder.* Her heart broke and more tears swam to the surface. Dapo reached for her hands but she recoiled.

"Baby, please hear me out."

She turned away from him. She couldn't bear to look at him. How could he even touch her?

"What do you want to say? That it wasn't intentional? That you're a victim as well?"

You're judging someone I've forgiven.

She raised a hand to her throbbing temple and sighed.

Not now God, please not now.

Dapo remained quiet and when she looked into his eyes, she saw he had tears in them as well.

Her heart couldn't contain it anymore and she broke down into tears covering her face.

"Oh God, what have I done to deserve this, why are you making me hurt this way?" She sobbed.

He went on his knees. "I promised I would never make you cry. I just need you to listen to me and if you feel it's too much for you to bear, I'll understand. I really hope you find it in your heart to forgive me. I did it in my ignorance. I didn't know God, I didn't know his love through Jesus and I didn't even realise

what I was doing was wrong. It was selfish and brutal, I did not care about others, but I'm different now. I care about you Nimi, I care about the people in my life and I would never hurt you. I love you Nimi."

She wiped the tears from her eyes and looked at him. She wanted to believe him. She really wanted to.

"You don't have to kneel, just sit and tell me what happened." She managed to mumble.

"I was young and foolish." He began.

CHAPTER 18

13 years ago

Dapo slammed his hand against the horn wondering why his sister was taking long to step out of the house. She was probably packing her make-up bag to school as usual so she could get to paint her face with Aisha as they often did. He was aware his sister sneaked to parties often but he had rules for her which she had to abide by or he wasn't covering up for her, neither was he going to help her out of any trouble, if she got into one.

There were three things she wasn't allowed to do; looking like a whore, getting drunk and getting pregnant.

He knew he'd tried to prevent her from going overboard, but his parents gave her too much liberty and there was nothing he could do about it. Left to him, no guy would come near his sister. The last guy he'd seen trying to get chummy with her ended up with a broken nose. No guy came to visit her in the house since then.

He had to take her to school today because the driver had called in sick. His father had just given him the newest convertible and it was his greatest treasure. His glistening blue toy was going to see greater times ahead; from beach parties to clubs till he returned to the States. He was done with his

undergraduate studies and he planned to return for his Masters in the coming year, which meant he could have as much fun as he wished before going back.

He frowned when his phone buzzed and he realised who it was, an old girlfriend who wouldn't stop disturbing him. They had only dated and hung out a few times and now she was starting to sound desperate.

He wanted adventure and that was it. Why didn't girls understand this?

The girls he met at the parties were beginning to bore him and had probably been sleeping with half of his friends. He wasn't dealing with leftovers. He wanted 'fresh meat', something he could boast to his friends about.

He turned to his sister who was sliding in beside him. "Next time, just let me know if you're running for a beauty pageant so that Dad can hire a chauffeur for you."

She rolled her eyes, ignoring him as he drove off.

The music blasting from the car was enough to make a person go deaf. Lara had to shout above the noise so that he could hear her.

He turned it down.

"It better be good, whatever you want to say…"

"It's a friend of mine, Melissa. She's in SS3 and I think she likes you."

"I don't date minors sorry."

His sister shrugged. "I told her, but she's my friend and I really want to get in her good books. She's the Labour prefect and I would love to be exempted from the cleaning exercises. She's clocking seventeen in about two weeks' time so I think she's old enough."

"Old enough for what?" He frowned at her.

"Dating or whatever you guys do. She's dated many guys in her lifetime, trust me and she's got brains too."

"Thank her for the offer but I'm not interested."

"Don't say I didn't tell you."

They arrived at her school and Lara got down from the car and waved at him. He waved back watching his sister join the queue. A girl wearing a fitted school uniform and a badge walked up to Lara smiling at her. Lara tiptoed to whisper something into her ear and the girl looked up. Their gaze locked and she blushed.

So this is Melissa.

She was really pretty and sexy with long legs and flawless looking skin. Her fair complexion glowed, and he suddenly saw her as a woman. She kept staring at him and only looked away when more students flocked in through the gate. He got curious. She looked older than her age as well and had enough flesh in the right places. He could teach her a few things.

And for the first time in his life, he thought dating a high school girl would not be a bad idea. After all, he was looking for 'fresh meat' and it came knocking right at his doorstep.



It didn't take up to a week for them to get together. They shared kisses at their rendezvous and did even more. He knew what he was doing was wrong, not only was he years older, she was a minor and their relationship could only breed trouble. He found out she was not from a very wealthy home although she went to a rich private school. Half of her school fees were on scholarship. She had plans of sitting for WAEC and JAMB exams that same year.

At least she had plans because he didn't have any for her. The relationship was meant to be a fling, nothing more. So when she told him she was pregnant three months later, he was shocked. At first he thought it was a joke.

"I didn't think it was serious till I saw the signs." She sat beside him on the bed when they met that afternoon. She'd called him earlier and he thought it had to do with their usual meeting, but he was only irritated with the news she

was sharing. Was it some kind of prank secondary girls played at to get money from guys? Even his old girlfriends never got pregnant.

“But that’s not possible.” He replied. “I used contraceptives and you assured me you were on the pill. Is this some bullshit prank you want to scare me with?”

Her eyes pooled. “I have my life before me Dapo. My parents will kill me if they hear about it, why would you think I want to scare you with something this delicate?”

He dipped his face into his hands. This was too real.

“So what do you want me to do now?” He spat angrily. In all his life he did not see himself being a father, at least not yet and not in many years to come. He still had his life to live and he wasn’t going to sit around babysitting some girl and her baby.

“How are you sure I’m the father? Lara told me you dated other guys.”

She looked at him then. “You know I was a virgin before anything happened between us. I only told Lara those tales because I thought guys loved hearing it.’’

He rubbed his head. He didn’t plan on this happening. It was like his worst nightmare coming true. What about his plans for the future? What about his plan to further his education? His future wasn’t worth sacrificing for anybody.

Not even a stupid young girl who didn’t know how to keep things tidy.

“Look, everything is going to be fine. We just have to figure out how to get rid of this thing.”

Melissa blinked. “I don’t think I want to do an abortion. My parents are Catholic. It’s only going to make it worse for them if I get an abortion. And secondly, I’m just scared. Before coming to meet you, I checked up on it but I don’t have the heart to go through it. I keep seeing horrible things and having bad dreams about abortions, I don’t think it’s an option for me. I feel like God wants me to keep the baby, maybe it’s a punishment for my sin or something.”

The girl had really gone nuts if she was thinking that way. What did God have to do with all of this? Where was God when they were together? She didn't remember that, did she? And what did she expect? That he would suddenly chose to become a father and get married to her?

Not in his lifetime.

"So what do you want to do? Keep the baby? What about your future? What about your exams?"

She shrugged wiping her face. "Hopefully I'll write them after I have the baby."

His parents could not hear about this. All his plans would be dashed. They did not raise him this way and as an act of discipline, they would insist he stay and take care of his mess. If the girl did not agree with abortion, then the other option was to have him father her baby and get a job here in Nigeria.

He decided to take the warmer approach. "Baby look, you have to think of me in all of this. I love you but right now, I don't think I'm ready to father a baby."

She looked away and he turned her to face him. "I love you Melissa. But you need to do this for me if you love me. We can have other babies in the future, but it's just so inconvenient right now. We're not ready for a family, look at us. Do you think we can handle a family? Look at you, you're just seventeen. Your friends are going to laugh at you. What if your parents disown you? What if they choose not to stand by you? I don't know what my parents would say, but what if they chose not to stand by me? You have your whole life ahead of you. I doubt you want to spend it changing diapers when you've still got a beautiful future ahead of you."

She relaxed and he easily took advantage of the situation.

"I assure you it's not going to hurt okay. You'll be fine. I know someone who can help us and it will be like it never happened. He's a friend of the family."

She looked into his eyes trusting him. “I’m scared Dapo…”

He wrapped his hands around her and she hugged him like her life depended on it. “What if something happens to me?”

“Nothing is going to happen baby. I’ll be there, I promise.”

“I love you Dapo, I’ve always loved you.”

“I love you too baby.”



Hours had gone by before the doctor stepped out to see him and Dapo grew worried. What was going on in the room? The doctor had told him it was going to go smoothly, and he had nothing to worry about.

But right now, his nerves stood taut.

“Is she alright? What’s going on? I thought this was going to be easy as you said.” He queried when he finally came face to face with the doctor.

The Doctor sighed shaking his head. “It’s a rare case young man. Remember I told you about this the last time you brought her for assessment. Her cervix is quite narrow and this is creating complications for us, though it shouldn’t. She’s been bleeding and we’re doing all we can to keep her alive even if she’s at great risk of infection and cervical injury.”

Dapo was worried. The doctor wasn’t making sense to him.

“What about the baby? Did you succeed?”

The doctor looked at him then, “If I go through with this, there’s an eighty percent chance she might not make it out alive. For your girlfriend’s sake I would suggest…’’

“Whatever you can do, I just want to be sure the abortion is successful.”

The man understood him immediately. “Of course, that’s why you came to me isn’t it?” He managed a stiff smile and returned to the ward.

Dapo narrated his past to Nimi with pain etched on his face as he struggled with a tide of emotions. “If only I’d listened to her. She was apprehensive about it, I ignored her because of what I wanted.” He continued. “Even when the doctor provided an alternative, I didn’t want to hear it because I was scared I wouldn’t lose the baby I desperately wanted to get rid of. I intentionally killed her.”

“So she died…” Nimi wanted to have little hope that the girl had survived someway somehow but Dapo confirmed her worst fears.

“She did, and it was my fault. Believe me, this has haunted me my whole life even after my New birth experience. I know I’ve been forgiven but anytime I see a young girl, I see Melissa, I think of my unborn child and the fear that I might get paid back for what I did grips me. I know I was a horrible person before Christ and there are days I can’t bear to live with myself knowing I had the heart to do that.”

Nimi could only watch him. She wished she could find a way to comfort him and ease the agony he was in. But she really needed comfort herself. She needed to pray again and be sure this was the route God was leading her through. She’d always imagined life with someone who had minimal flaws and a not so offensive past. Hearing this just made it hard.

Too hard. Too hard Father.

For me or for you?

For me, I’m a human being and I have feelings! I’m not some robot who can sit down and take everything the Kitans just dish out. I hurt and I feel pain too. I don’t want to live life wondering if my child would end up in the hands of someone like Dapo. Oh God, what if we don’t even have children?

A carnal mind is enmity with God. You’re allowing flesh run thoughts in your mind. Thoughts that are not of God, when you should walk by faith.

She sighed. The kind of faith God was demanding from her felt too huge.

She knew she should tell him what her spirit wanted him to know. She knew God wanted her to remind Dapo that whatever he did before Christ couldn't change God's love for him.

But she couldn't bring herself to say it.

How could God love someone like this? For other sins maybe but this was just too much.

"I'm sorry I put you through all of this." He brought out his handkerchief and wiped his face forcing a smile. "But thanks for listening. I'll be on my way home. Goodbye Nimi."

She watched him leave without saying a word.

CHAPTER 19

Nimi tried to sleep but couldn't as thoughts of Dapo and Melissa molested her mind. How he'd gotten her killed kept tormenting her through the night. She felt for a girl she had never seen before. Did she even get to live life? Did she get to know about Jesus? Or Dapo took that away from her as well?

She watched her sister sleep peacefully beside her and her heart ached. She couldn't imagine a guy doing that to Tolani. She would hate whoever tried to take her sister's life. Even if Tolani got pregnant today, they wouldn't push her away. Well, her mother would scold her but it was better than having an abortion and taking life.

Two lives had been taken; Melissa and her baby.

What kind of man was Dapo? Were there still things hidden that she was yet to find out if she continued the relationship? What if he demanded things from her that she couldn't give him? All the thoughts that she had been fighting to keep away collided within her head and she couldn't control them anymore.

Dapo was well known for his scandalous ways. What if she disappointed him on their wedding night?

What if she began to have kids and grow fat and he chose to look somewhere else?

What if he didn't want as many kids as she wanted and told her to abort it?

What if he was bent on having his way?

What if he decided to cheat on her?

Little wonder why his sister had been brazen enough to talk about him right before her friends. What was the assurance that he would not tire of her soon?

She sobbed into her pillow wondering why God was making her go through all of this and why He wasn't reaching out to lift her out of her misery. Why couldn't he give her someone that didn't have a terrible past as Dapo? Why did he have to be popular and be attractive to other women, why couldn't he be someone ordinary but special to her because he loved her and her alone?

Her phone rang and her heart leaped. She hoped it was not Dapo. When she glanced at the caller ID, she was grateful it wasn't and she hurriedly picked it.

"Hello dear." An older voice greeted from the other end and it suddenly felt like balm on her raw wounds.

"Pastor Arike." Nimi greeted hoping her voice did not reveal what she was feeling at the moment. She glanced at the time and wondered why her spiritual sister turned pastor and mother was calling her at such a time.

"How are you my love?"

"I'm fine. I'm okay. I hope everything is fine? How's Pastor Femi? I hope he's alright, and the kids?"

"They're all fine, thank you my darling. I should be asking you if everything is alright at your end. I felt slightly burdened in my spirit and I knew God wanted me to call you and pray with you."

She closed her eyes. Just when she felt God had bailed out on her, He was looking out for her as always. "To be honest things are not really going well here." She sniffed as more tears came.

"What happened? Is Dapo alright?"

She shook her head as tears poured down her cheeks. She hadn't been this vulnerable in a while. "I don't know what to do ma. Dapo just told me his past and I don't think I can go on with him anymore. How can I live with a man that intentionally killed someone? I wish I could hold it in but I can't. I just want to let him go and move on to something easier."

"Oh my goodness." She heard Pastor Arike gasp and felt slightly justified about her thoughts. So she wasn't being paranoid after all.

"I know God has forgiven him but what about me? I'm just too scared that I have to deal with all of these things, knowing there are women ready to jump at him if they get the chance. And then his sister just humiliated me today in her office, right in front of her friends. I felt horrible. I don't think I remember feeling so horrible all my life."

"Hmmn."

"Right now, I wish God would just take a chill pill and let me rest. Let me choose my future for once. Let me decide whom I want to love and who I want to associate with. The only thing I'm grateful for right now is that I'm going to school tomorrow and the day after so I don't have to be in Lara's office. But what happens to me on Thursday when I have to go back, when God wants me to return? And what happens when I have to tell Dapo that it can't work between us?"

"Whoaa… calm down young woman. Just relax and take it easy okay. I think your emotions are just all over the place so you can't act on that right now. You need to calm down and allow God's word lead you as always. Take a deep breath and relax."

"But…"

"I said relax."

"Did you hear what I just said?"

"Yes, Dapo killed someone in his past. There's nothing new under the sun. What I would like to know is, was this before or after Jesus?"

"He said it was before Jesus.''

"Oh so it has become 'he said' meaning you don't believe him?"

She wrestled with her feelings. "I don't know what to believe anymore honestly."

"You can't take actions based on the way you're currently feeling sweetheart. You need to sit down and analyse this situation according to God's word. I'm a scientist and I know how evidence is our priority wherever science is concerned. No matter what may happen, if there is evidence that drug A has a certain type of reaction, then we believe it no matter what. The same applies to God's word. Yes, he's had a bad past, well yea, almost everyone I know has had one except you of course."

"I didn't mean it that way…" Nimi suddenly felt guilty remembering how Pastor Arike had shared her past with her before she met Christ.

"Well, that's what you mean, to God, to whoever is going to judge this thing from God's point of view. You obviously don't know what it is to be forgiven. I don't mean to turn the tables on you but that young man has probably been hurting for years because of the shame and he finally has the guts to tell you even when he's uncertain you'll still stay with him. That's a real man Nimi, and I'm scared that you're just going to throw something good away because of your own standards. Not God's standards."

Nimi bit her lip apprehensively.

"Look at me, I wasn't raised in a Christian home. I was raised to live like a wolf. I took things from people and hurt them, I told myself I was bisexual and did what I wanted. I even killed my own baby when I got pregnant and drank myself to stupor on nights when I couldn't take the pain anymore. You know Femi was a former drug addict right? You know all these things and you did not have a problem with it. You love us and fellowship with us. But now, it hits close to home and it's a turn off for you. Jesus did not come for the good people. He came to die for all sinners. I think people like me appreciate him

more because we know what we went through and how he is like a breath of fresh air for us."

Nimi remained quiet.

"I don't mean to get personal here but sometimes we are our own enemies because we decide who should be forgiven and who shouldn't. We love categorizing people, yet we hide our own sins conveniently because we feel they're not as big as the ones that we wouldn't dare to do. But he said for all have sinned and fell short of God's glory; meaning a man who has morals and doesn't identify with Jesus and what he did on that cross is the same as a homo, a drunkard, a fornicator or a murderer. God doesn't classify sin. He has a standard and that standard was and is Jesus. Accept him or not. Dapo has accepted him. The cross has made him flawless. *Shikena.* Please move on and live life. Except you are not sure it was God who told you to be with him. Then maybe you should find yourself some nice *Mr Darcy* who has never done anything wrong in his life and live happily ever after."

Nimi was hurt but she knew this was the truth. The raw and solid truth. God had been gentle and pleading with her but she refused. She probably needed this assertiveness to get her head in place again.

"I'm sorry I had to go all out on you. To be honest I really don't know where those words came from. I know it can be hard but just trust God and let him lead you. This is your own salvation story, your own refining process, your own path that will transform you, ensuring you walk by faith.

"As for his sister, don't worry about that one, the day Jesus will arrest her is coming. She will soon see you as bestie when she realises you're the one who truly loves her amongst her vulgar friends. Just don't let what she says get to your head. I really don't know what she said to you but I don't want to hear it. Because it may contaminate my heart about her, and I want to keep loving her. I know she must have said horrible things to you. But she is only going to win if you allow her come between yourself and Dapo. He loves you, I believe he does

and the thing that really excites me about him is he has this contagious passion for Jesus, it's so beautiful I am tempted to get jealous you're the one getting to hog him. I told Femi that if we weren't married and with kids, I might have run away with Dapo, sorry." Pastor Arike laughed to make things lighter. Nimi tried to laugh but she still felt the impact of Pastor Arike's words in her heart.

"Do you want to come and see me tomorrow? You can even pass the night, I'll make the guest room comfortable for you so you'll feel at home."

"Maybe Sunday." Nimi wanted to be alone. She still had her thoughts to deal with.

"Okay love. I love you but God loves you more. Can I pray with you?"

"Sure."



Nimi stared at the cloudy vision ahead of her groping around for support. She glanced up and across the sky, the dark sun glowed, illuminating the path before her, fleeting colours spilling across the sand. The air was thick with dust and smoke and she wondered what was going on. Coughing, she pulled her scarf to her face hoping to protect her eyes and nose from the choking atmosphere. What was she doing standing in the middle of the desert? She realised she was in a place and time that was different from her present reality and dusk settled in around her.

She turned around as her reason for being there slowly dawned on her. She kept searching hoping she would find him soon. She picked up pace only to be pulled back by the long garment she was wearing. It obstructed her movement and she struggled to gird it about her.

She saw what she'd been looking for right then. The cross stood at a distance and Jesus hung on it. She raced toward it, eager to reach her destination

when she stopped as something caught her eye. Someone was struggling with a young man, preventing them from getting there as well.

A masked man draped in a long garment like hers was battling with a young man and knocked him down, hindering his access to the cross.

She moved forward and realised it was Dapo who had been overpowered. Her eyes widened in fear. She raced toward the masked being, desperate to shove him away from Dapo but the person pushed her hard against the floor instead, soiling her garment.

She charged for the person again and tore off the mask. She gasped when she saw a replica image of herself staring right back at her with a smirk on her face.

"Hello namesake."

Nimi jerked from the bed, sweating profusely. She sighed when she realised it had only been a dream.

A terrible one.

It didn't make any sense.

She glanced at the time, it was three in the morning. Two hours before her quiet time.

She tried to relax, hoping her heart found a steady rhythm before heading to the bathroom. She returned to the room and tried to sleep back but the memories of the dream kept her awake.

Dear Lord, are you trying to tell me something?

Her bible on her bedside table called out to her and she picked it up to read, hoping God would bring illumination as He deemed fit.

And that was when the interpretation of the dream came.

"Therefore, the kingdom of heaven is like a king who wanted to settle accounts with his servants. As he began the settlement, a man who owed him ten thousand bags of gold was brought to him. Since he was not able to

pay, the master ordered that he and his wife and his children and all that he had be sold to repay the debt.

"At this the servant fell on his knees before him. 'Be patient with me,' he begged, 'and I will pay back everything.' The servant's master took pity on him, cancelled the debt and let him go.

"But when that servant went out, he found one of his fellow servants who owed him a hundred silver coins. He grabbed him and began to choke him. 'Pay back what you owe me!' he demanded.

"His fellow servant fell to his knees and begged him, 'Be patient with me, and I will pay it back.'

"But he refused. Instead, he went off and had the man thrown into prison until he could pay the debt. When the other servants saw what had happened, they were outraged and went and told their master everything that had happened.

"Then the master called the servant in. 'You wicked servant,' he said, 'I cancelled all that debt of yours because you begged me to. Shouldn't you have had mercy on your fellow servant just as I had on you?' In anger his master handed him over to the jailers to be tortured, until he should pay back all he owed.

"This is how my heavenly Father will treat each of you unless you forgive your brother or sister from your heart.

"Oh God, my father, I'm so sorry." Understanding flooded her soul and she went on her knees immediately, her heart almost breaking into pieces. Pastor Arike had told her to call Dapo last night but she refused because she felt she needed more time. But that dream had revealed what she was indeed doing.

She'd acted like she had some righteousness of her own and had judged Dapo by her own standards. She did not think he deserved forgiveness whereas the same way God had forgiven and accepted her too was the same way He did for Dapo and whoever could acknowledge His work through His Son Jesus. She

was the wicked servant from the dream and her own kind of goodness was trying to add to what God had already done. Even her 'goodness' was like filthy rags before God.

No wonder she kept tripping over in the dream. Her standards could not get her to the cross. Her standard of righteousness couldn't save her. Jesus was the standard she needed.

She did not go back to sleep but kept praying and pouring out her heart to God about what she felt and how sorry she was.

She prayed that God would help her love Dapo relentlessly. She kept repenting till the early hours of the morning, grateful for how God was restoring her soul in the process.



Nimi heard someone call her name as she prepared to leave the class few minutes after her lecture had ended. She turned to see Dare waving at her. She waved back as he walked towards her.

"Hi" Dare greeted.

"Hi." She smiled wondering if he had also sensed something was wrong with her since he seemed to be a spiritual person too.

This was the second day after the dream but she was still trying to gain the courage to call Dapo. She wasn't even sure of what she was going to say to him. She was scared. How would he look at her? Like someone who couldn't take the challenge when it came? They weren't married and she was already jumping ship when he'd been brave enough to share his past with her.

She hadn't been able to concentrate. Her mind had been on him the whole day.

"Are you okay?"

She nodded. "Yea I'm fine."

"You look lean and worried, and then throughout class you seemed to be somewhere else. Would you like to share?"

She shook her head. Had he been watching her throughout class? She knew he wasn't happy about her relationship with Dapo and suspected he would be glad to realise she wasn't enjoying it as well. He'd assumed she was in for the money or maybe she had backslided and was spending most of her time with Mr Kitan.

"Is it boyfriend trouble?"

"No, it's not, why did you ask?"

"Well, I've done my research on your precious Mr Kitan and I doubt you're going to like what the tabloids say about him."

She was bored already. She knew what the gossips said about him. She could choose to listen to them or ignore them.

"I see." She forced a smile packed her books.

"Look Nimi, I only want the best for you. I know I may not be your drop dead gorgeous dream guy but I'd like you to give me a chance. I've been praying about us and I believe God is leading me to you as the flesh of my flesh and bone of my bone. I won't hurt you like this guy has the tendency to. I may not have his wealth but I'm a decent hustler. I work for my money and after this program, I plan on starting my own business and striving to make it work."

She blinked. He didn't just say that, did he? Maybe he was confused. He'd called her a harlot and a gold-digger when he saw her with Dapo. But now he believed God was leading her to him?

He must be really confused.

She looked at him then and tried to picture life with him. He was decent no doubt and had the charisma of a pastor if he wanted to become one in the future. He sure didn't have a bad past. He was also raised in a Christian home like hers. She might have settled for him if she wasn't certain God was leading

her. He wasn't going to cause her trouble and he wasn't going to make gossip headlines.

But he was ruled by his self-rigteousness.

And she wasn't going to spend time doing wrong religion anymore or try to fit God into some weird box of hers.

"Thank you Dare for your kind words. I just don't believe I'm the right girl for you. I think you would need to pray again and be certain. God is not an author of confusion the last time I checked."

"Your eyes are on secular things Nimi. Girls of nowadays just want a guy that will carry them with limousine and buy flowers and chocolates and then when the guy is tired of buying all of that, they'll have no option but to give him sex. Nimi you're treading on dangerous grounds."

She frowned. Who did this guy think he was to dish out judgements like this? "I don't remember telling you my boyfriend believes in pre-marital sex."

"It's not what you believe. You're too blind to see it. Instead of you to be content with what you have or can handle…"

"Dare! Please don't do this. Don't come and terrorize me, my spiritual life and my love life here okay? If you're looking for wife, then it's not me. If you're looking for someone to support your ministry or your business, it's not me. But I won't have you saying all sorts because I've been polite with you. You're my friend and I respect you as one. But don't ever insinuate anything about me or my boyfriend again, do you understand me?"

He stared at her in shock. She'd had enough.

"If you'll excuse me. I've got a relationship to keep. Good day."

And she walked out of the class.



Nimi knew going all the way to Lekki would mean getting into terrible traffic on her way back home but she was willing to risk it for Dapo. She'd called Bibi his secretary to confirm if he was going to be in the office and how long he would be there for. When Bibi mentioned he was in a meeting that would take a while, she decided to take the leap.

Her mind battled with so many thoughts as she struggled with her feelings. She wasn't going to lie to herself. She'd missed him terribly. She had not felt the same way since that Monday he left. She knew she loved him right where she stood and it scared her senseless. Every part of her had forgiven him and was ready to move on. He hadn't called or sent any text and she respected him for that. Not wanting to manipulate her feelings and wanting her to decide if she could pull through even after he had told her the terrible side of his past.

When she finally got to the office, Bibi was already rounding up for the day. Bibi smiled when she saw her.

"Hi, is he still in?"

"Yea, he's been staying later than usual for about two days now. I suspected it had to do with you." Bibi smiled and touched her shoulder. "You want to give my *Oga* high blood pressure *abi*."

Nimi smiled sadly. "I didn't mean to."

"Whatever it is, you guys should just kiss and make up *jare*. I hate seeing him this way. I might lose my bonus if it goes on like this."

Nimi chuckled.

"Yea I know I'm selfish but seriously, I just knew something was wrong. Okay, let me shut up my big mouth and leave already. Have fun you two." She winked hugging Nimi briefly before heading to her boss' door.

"Someone is here to see you sir."

"At this time?" She heard him ask and she wanted to run into his arms and hug him and tell him how sorry she was.

Bibi shrugged and opened the door wider for him to see Nimi. He was shocked and his face showed it. Standing up immediately, he tried to reach her but she was faster and leapt into his arms burying her face in his neck.

"I'm so sorry Dapo. Forgive me please. I love you."

Bibi giggled and closed the door when she saw the look on her boss' face. They stayed like that for a while till it registered in his head what Nimi had just said and he pulled her closer allowing himself bask in her embrace like his life depended on it.

"You don't know how much I missed you. I was afraid you would leave me…" His voice cracked and she released him to look into his face. He had grown a beard with just two days apart.

"I didn't realise you were hurting Dapo, please forgive me for being selfish and inconsiderate and…"

"There's nothing to forgive. I told you I love you and it hasn't changed."

"And I love you too."

He grinned like a boy that had been handed his favourite candy and she touched his chin that was full of hair. "You don't know how it feels hearing you say those words to me. It's like a dream come true."

He pulled back the hair that had slid to her face away from her eyes and planted a kiss on her forehead. "It's taking me a lot to not to kiss you right now."

She laughed realizing that his hands were still on her waist and she was starting to feel funny. "Yea, me too. But at the right time."

He nodded allowing his hands slide away. He held her hand and led her to his chair.

"Sit."

She grinned settling into his chair. "Why, do you have something for me?"

"It's just the sunset. I do hope you like sunsets or you my Queen would have me looking for something else to add to my list of 'things to impress Nimi."

"Hmmn." She rolled her eyes pretending she didn't think it was going to be anything impressive. "We'll see about that. I can think about it."

They both laughed and he reached for the curtains to pull them away turning off the lights in his office. She knew his place was on the topmost floor but she had never imagined this would give her the most amazing view of the skyline.

It was so beautiful.

Her mind suddenly flashed to what it would be like on their honeymoon, he loving her and planting gentle kisses on her while they watched the sunset together.

He disrupted her thoughts when he leaned close behind her. "Well, what do you think?"

Her heart raced, tickled at the way his breath fanned her cheeks and how they sent dangerous feelings down her spine. "It's…it's beautiful."

"Awesome! That's one thing I'll be sure to add to my list when we plan a getaway."

She smiled and sighed with relief when he stepped away from her. He headed towards the fridge and she watched him while swivelling in his chair like a happy child.

"What would you like?"

A cold slush of you handsome

"Baby…"

"Do you have juice? Orange or Pineapple?" She blinked feeling embarrassed that she had thought that way and he'd caught her staring at him.

"I have orange juice if you don't mind. Simple or ice-cubes?"

Her throat felt dry. "Lots of ice-cubes please."

“At your service your royal highness.”

She smiled at him and when he filled her glass and his, they raised it to each other.

“What shall we toast to?” She asked looking into his eyes that seemed to dance around her face like a man in love.

“To a million more sunsets… together.”

Nimi giggled. “Together.”

CHAPTER 20

Dapo and Nimi had been talking for hours and only grew quiet and conscious of their environment when they realised hours had passed and they were still engrossed in their conversation. Dapo knew he would have to drive her home soon as his office wasn't a place he wanted to be seen with his girlfriend late at night. Besides it was safer when they hung out in public, it helped them avoid any unnecessary fondling. A few other employees still hung around making them at ease around each other.

They had been talking about everything from Jesus to work to school to the plans they were making to see his parents on Saturday. Dapo noticed Nimi had a worried look on her face whenever he brought up the dinner plans on Saturday. He'd hoped she would feel at home with his mom, his father and Lara but the look on her face made him doubt his plan.

"Baby, are you alright?"

"Why do you ask?"

"You don't seem happy about joining my family for dinner this weekend. They're not going to ask you to sleep over y'know."

She smiled knowing he wanted to make her laugh. "I'm alright. Just a bit tired. I've been trying to read but you keep coming to my mind and my head.

The way this master's program is going, I'm scared I might fail and you would be the one responsible."

He grinned, happy to be responsible for how she felt. Although, he didn't want her to fail and if she wanted him to reduce the distraction, he would try. He just wasn't sure how he would survive without seeing or calling her every day. Her texts and lovely emojis always had him smiling.

Nimi made him feel like a teen in love and he was far from it. He'd always felt old, felt he had seen and experienced so much in his lifetime. But Nimi was different from any other girl he'd been with.

"I'm sorry that you're getting addicted to me, I should have come with a label I know." He winked at her.

She smacked him playfully. He stood up laughing, helping her to her feet so she could join him. It took him a lot of strength not to swing her into his arms and kiss her senseless just to express what he was feeling at the moment.

Pushing the thoughts out of his mind, he reached for his phone. "I was thinking you could go shopping. You and Tolani can get yourselves something nice. You look tired and I want you to look dashing on Saturday. What do you say? There's this spa a friend recommended in V.I, since it's not yet legal for me to offer you a massage, I think her recommendation will come in handy."

"Dapo, I don't even have time for spa or shopping. I'm going to work tomorrow and Friday. Don't worry about buying me clothes. I'm sure I'll be fine."

He'd expected that answer.

"Even if I need you to do it for me?" He pleaded with his eyes. "C'mon baby, for once let me give you a treat, let me buy you things."

She shook her head smiling. He loved when she smiled at him this way. "You say it like you don't buy me things already."

If only she knew what he'd bought for his past girlfriends, and she meant more to him.

"Roses and chocolates is child's play. I want to be your prince."

"Jesus is my prince." She laughed out loud and he joined her.

"Okay, so where do I stand?"

She sighed. "I get you. But just this once okay?" She reached for his arm and he smiled into his eyes.

"I wouldn't settle for once if I were you. Card or cheque?"

"And would you give me your PIN if I asked for your card? She teased.

"If I don't give you my PIN, who would I give? Lara?" He smiled heading to his table to check his wallet. "Oh and by the way, I need to call her to let her know you won't be going to work tomorrow since you won't be available."

He saw the tense look on her face again at the mention of Lara. He knew something was definitely wrong. He'd learned to read her facial expressions and what she was feeling per time.



Nimi saw Dapo looking at her with those probing eyes of his and she wasn't sure what she was going to tell him if he asked her anything relating to his sister.

"I don't think you should call her."

"Why? Did something happen between you two?" He wasn't backing down and he kept watching her closely, a frown already forming on his face.

She swallowed. "You mentioned you wanted to tell her about us on Saturday with everybody present. I was thinking you calling her now might ruin it." Oh how she hated sounding like a liar.

He shrugged, the frown disappearing. "Well, plans change, don't they? I can't have you looking stressed. She's my sister. She should understand. Besides, I'll just tell her you need time off because I need you to work on something for me."

That was worse. Lara would think up several things. She'd insinuated things between them before.

She closed her eyes. Maybe she should tell him already.

"She knows about us Dapo. I don't know what happened but she wasn't happy about it. Her friends…" She stopped, remembering Lara's cruel words and she suddenly recoiled.

"What did she say?"

She looked up and saw his eyes had grown cold. She'd never seen this side of him. Shaking her head, she retreated. "I shouldn't have said anything."

He was by her side in an instant, reaching for her arm with one hand and lifting her chin with another hand so she could look into his eyes.

"You're going to tell me whatever my sister said to you Nimi or I'm going to drive down to the house tonight and demand she repeats every word she said to you."

Her heart raced. "She might have slept…"

"I'll pull her out. I don't care if she's in her boyfriend's house or back home. She should know better than to interfere in my life with her good-for-nothing friends."

"Dapo, please I beg you, don't take it hard on her."

He closed his eyes, impatient. "Nimi, tell me what she said to you. I could see the look in your eyes every time I mentioned her name. I suspected it had to do with her but for her to involve her friends…"

"I didn't say her friends said anything…"

"I know my sister, and I know what she's capable of. You mentioned her friends, so I figured she's been up to no good." He released her when she balked. Her eyes brimmed with tears as the memories flooded in.

"You need to hand in your resignation letter to her. You know what, I'll do it on your behalf. I don't want you defending her. I've defended her my

whole life and she keeps growing worse. If she hurts you, then she's hurting me in the process and I am very disappointed she would do that."

"God doesn't want me to leave her yet." She panicked when she saw him raising his phone to his ears. "Dapo please…"

"Hey, are you asleep?" Ignoring Nimi's plea, he placed his phone on the table so that they could both hear Lara. Turning on the speaker, he waited for her response.

"Not really, I was about to go to bed soon anyways. Why are you calling this late? Is something wrong?"

"Uh, nothing really. I was just wondering if you could speak to my girlfriend. She's here and I thought you should say Hi."

"Bro Dapo, are you actually serious? You called me at this time so I could talk to your girlfriend?" Nimi heard Lara's voice drip with sarcasm.

"So you're aware I'm dating someone?"

The line went quiet and Dapo continued.

"Then let me get to the point. Nimi won't be coming to work tomorrow and the day after. Infact let me make it clear, she won't be working for you again. I'll hand in a resignation letter on her behalf if you're really intent on going by protocol."

Lara scoffed. "You can't be serious."

"I would like to make something clear to you Lara. I'll let you know the day I want you to become my mouthpiece. The day I decide to include you in my love life, I'll let you know. What are you trying to do? Put my girlfriend's life at stake? Is it because there's no law against verbal abuse in this country? If there's anyone I've always tried to protect all my life, it's you and this is how you treat me? This is how small I am in your eyes? Let this be a warning, the next time you ever hurt Nimi, forget about me being your brother. Goodnight."

And he hung up.

Nimi could only stare at him as more tears rolled down her eyes. Why was he bent on having his way? Why did he have to talk to his sister that way?

"I'm sorry…" He sighed running a hand on his head. "I know you're trying to walk in love but sometimes love lets people know when they've hurt you. Do you know how I felt? Seeing you cry because of what she must have said to you? Did Kemi ever tell you what she did during their first-year undergrad…" he shook his head. She could tell he was fighting against opening a can of worms.

Nimi still couldn't look at him till he came to touch her and pull her into himself.

"I'm sorry. C'mon don't tell me you now see me as a monster because of what just happened."

She shook her head allowing her hands slide to his sides so she could pull him close.

"I love you. I doubt I can ever stop loving you."

Kemi had told Nimi what Lara did to her during their university days so Lara's behaviour shouldn't have surprised her. She just never imagined Lara doing the same to her, or her boyfriend getting mad at his sister. He stood up for her, and that was what she wanted, someone to stand up for her when she couldn't.

She had no doubt the family dinner was going to be great after all.



Tolani giggled as she put finishing touches on her sister's face "Uncle Dapo is going to go *wawuuuuuuu* when he sees you I'm sure. See me doing make-up on your face as if you're about to get married."

Nimi giggled. "I believe we're heading towards that so…"

"Hmmn, I like your relationship *o*. At least it has 'head and tail'. There's no speculation or beating around the bush. You know why you two are together. It's almost three months now right?"

"Yea, time is so slow. It feels like three years to me." Nimi frowned.

Tolani chuckled mischievously. "Don't worry, you were built to last."

Nimi slapped her playfully.

"Do you ever get tempted to y'know…?" Tolani asked dabbing her face with the brush.

"Of course, plenty times *sef*. Some days when we're holding hands and I feel something funny in my body, I take a chill pill and pull away. On other days, he pulls away first. Sometimes we don't even hug for too long because it tends to arouse funny feelings inside me which I didn't know existed before I met him."

"Oh wow. How long are you two looking at before you get married?"

"We agreed to get to know each other for about eight months to one year thereabout. I think it all depends, till when God gives us a go-ahead on the marriage date. God who orchestrated it all will see us through."

"Don't you just wish you were married already?"

"I know right! The thoughts that go through my mind some days are so crazy I have to constantly rebuke them. But please don't open your big mouth and tell him *o*. I'm sure he is also battling his own."

Tolani chuckled. "How can I do that *na*? You two are my role models so that when boo comes, I can emulate you guys."

Nimi smiled.

"I'm going to thank him for the clothes and the shoes. I don't remember the last time I had the luxury of buying three nice pair of heels and my choice of dress without thinking about the price." Tolani said.

"Better don't get too used to it."

She frowned. “Why not? It’s not like he wants to sleep with you after giving you the money.”

“He begged me to even accept the cheque. I know he’s different, but wisdom is applicable.”

“It is well.”

Nimi rolled her eyes at her sister’s sarcasm and ignored her. Looking into the mirror she smiled, satisfied with her reflection and picked up her earrings and wristwatch. She liked the colour of the lace sheath dress she’d picked. Burgundy was one of Dapo’s favourite colours. She’d fallen in love with the dress the moment she set eyes on it. The store called it ‘Ariella Stella’ and it lived up to its name. The side was trimly embellished which gave her a flattering look. She was pleased with the asymmetric neckline which added a modern finish to the pencil dress stopping just below her knee. She’d loosened her braids days ago and had her permed hair neatly tied into a bun.

Her phone rang and she hurriedly picked it.

“Hey sweetheart.”

“Hey you, are you close?”

“I’m here already. Is mum home so I can say hello before we leave?”

“No, she’s not. I’ll be with you soon.”

Dapo was leaning against his car when she arrived downstairs and he smiled when he saw her. He looked good as always and she couldn’t believe she would soon belong to this man in a few months’ time. Sometimes it felt so far away, but the wait was worth it.

“You just keep blowing my mind every single time baby.”

She beamed. His response was a sign he liked the dress. He couldn’t take his eyes off her and she loved the reaction on his face. It was priceless. The days when she’d dreamed that someone would look at this way…

“I wanted to let you know that you’re not the only one who should come with a label of addiction.” She said.

He laughed and opened the passenger's door for her. Sliding in, she relaxed and mumbled a little prayer willing her racing heart to stay still. She wasn't sure if it was Dapo's smile that got her feeling this way or the dinner they were headed for.

"You okay baby?"

She nodded and threw him her best smile. "Yes, just saying a little prayer before we leave."

"I hope you included my name in it." He winked.

"My prayer without your name isn't complete."

His fingers brushed hers and she shivered. "You're a gem. Sometimes I wonder what I've done to deserve you."

And Nimi could only smile.



When Nimi and Dapo arrived at the Kitan's mansion, Mrs Kitan was waiting for them at the door. She embraced Dapo warmly before turning to Nimi. There was a sudden look of surprise on her face which disappeared almost immediately. Nimi suspected she must have wondered how her daughter's PA had captured her son's heart so soon.

Nimi knelt down to greet her and Mrs Kitan managed a smile. "Welcome dear, and you must be Nimi. My daughter has said so much about you."

She glanced at Dapo who ignored his mother's last comments. "She's Oluwalonimi Adeyemi. She worked for Lara for a while. It was something temporary because she's currently running her master's program."

"Good to know." Sumbo's eyes assessed Nimi's figure and she quirked an eyebrow. A stiff and suggestive smile was plastered on her face. "My son told me you were perfection in flesh. I guess he was right after all."

"Dapo has told me a lot about you ma and how amazing you are."

"I bet he has."

"Hello handsome." Nimi looked up to see a voluptuous and beautifully looking woman with a glass of wine in hand, smiling at Dapo like they had known each other for years. This was definitely not a family member if she could be sending him looks that way.

"Toke… Hi. What a surprise." Dapo gave his mother a questioning look. Mrs Kitan was obviously confused as well.

"It's been a long time." Toke swayed towards him giving him a side hug with little to no inch separating them. She planted a kiss on his cheeks, smearing it with her lipstick. "It's been years. Did you grow taller or what?" She said smiling.

"I doubt that. Uh, Toke, this is Nimi, my girlfriend. Nimi, uh, this is Toke, an old friend."

"Toke Owoyomi, we were close friends back then in Uni." The woman cut in and threw Nimi a playful grin. "Nice to meet you Nimi."

Dapo turned to face Nimi. "Baby, I just need a second with my mother. Can you do me a favour and wait while I sort out some things?"

"Sure." She managed hoping she wouldn't fall apart. With the look on Mrs Kitan's face, Nimi felt uncertain about how the dinner would turn out. This dinner was supposed to be her official welcome into the Kitan's home as Dapo's future wife. It was supposed to be great and now this?

She watched Toke swaying around the house comfortably and her heart broke. Was she one of his exes? She'd felt Dapo tense the moment he set eyes on her. It was enough to make her understand they had something in the past.

She could hear Dapo's voice rising. "I told you I was bringing my girlfriend home all for me to see Toke. I told you mum to cancel… I can't believe this."

"Dapo, I'm so sorry. Believe me, I was surprised as well. She just came here this morning and I couldn't send her away. She said Lara…"

"Lara invited her after you cancelled?"

"I thought your sister would do the needful. I'm sorry but this is as a result of some misunderstanding. I'm sure Lara forgot or mistakenly did this…" Mrs Kitan replied.

"Stop defending her Mum. We've been defending her for years and it only turned her into a spoilt brat. Where's she?"

"Dapo, please keep your voice down… take it easy." Nimi heard Mrs Kitan trying to pacify her son.

"Toke has to leave or I leave. I didn't ask for a crowd. I asked for dinner with my family."

Nimi was uncomfortable with the exchange between mother and son. Lara had done it again. Why did the girl hate her so much?

Just then, the object of her thoughts strolled into the living room and stopped on seeing Nimi. Nimi's heart raced as Lara's eyes bore into hers. She was sure Lara would shoot her if she had a gun. Lara charged towards her. Dapo stepped out at that moment and he grabbed her arm. "Lay one hand on her and I'll remind you of the years between us."

"Let go of me." Lara struggled.

"You and I need to have a word. Now!" When she kept struggling, he warned. "If you want me to air your dirty laundry out here, then fine."

She relaxed and jerked away from him her eyes pooling already. "Do you see what she's doing? Do you see how she's coming between us Brother Dapo? Do you see how she enjoys watching us fight?"

"A word." He repeated, leading her out of the room.

Toke shook her head. "Siblings, it's amazing how they can fight one minute and start laughing the next minute."

Nimi inhaled deeply glad that Dapo had saved her from Lara's hands on her face or whatever she'd planned to do to humiliate her. She just hoped Toke was right. She wanted everything to be right between them.

CHAPTER 21

Time seemed to have frozen as Nimi sat waiting and wondering how Mrs Kitan would look at her now that she seemed to have caused strife between the siblings. She could tell the woman did not like her at first sight and she obviously didn't measure up to her boyfriend's ex.

Nimi kept praying and hoping she wasn't going to get intimidated more than she already was. She was certain Lara would have hit her or done something worse, if not for Dapo's intervention. Nimi watched the door through which both siblings had disappeared praying their differences would be sorted on time. Although she could hear no sound, her heart raced every single time the seconds seemed to drag.

Toke seemed to be watching her too, rather curiously. She really hoped the girl wouldn't strike a conversation with her. Nimi doubted she could handle anything Toke had to say. Toke looked like a competition but she wasn't going to see her as such. She was Dapo's past, he'd made it clear to her and everybody else in the room.

That should be enough for her.

Mrs Kitan seemed to read her mind. "Uh Toke darling, can I talk to you for a minute? I hope you don't mind?"

"Of course not." She threw her a smile and rose gracefully from the couch before walking out with Mrs Kitan.

Soon, Toke returned and reached for her bag. "It was nice meeting you Nimi. I do hope we get to see again, perhaps in a more conducive environment and under better circumstances."

Nimi nodded unable to say anything. Nimi looked up at Mrs Kitan as Toke closed the door behind her. She wondered what the woman had said and pondered if she was going to interrogate her or check on Dapo and Lara.

Mrs Kitan chose the former. Settling beside her, she planted a friendly smile on her face.

Wow, what just happened?

"I apologise on my daughter's behalf. She's the baby of the house so she can be naughty sometimes." She could feel the woman's eyes assessing her. "That is a beautiful dress by the way."

"Thank you ma. And that's a lovely print you have on." She paid the woman an honest compliment.

"Oh this is just one of those old things I throw on once in a while." Mrs Kitan's hands reached for hers and she smiled again. "You look so young, how old are you if you don't mind my asking?"

"I'll be twenty-six in November."

"Oh, wow, that's interesting. You and my daughter are age-mates then. Just months apart."

Nimi managed a smile.

"My husband will be downstairs any minute from now. I would like you to know that you're welcome in my home anytime and please just call me mum instead of the formal Mrs Kitan every other person calls me okay?"

Nimi gulped. Something didn't feel right. Mrs Kitan had suddenly turned friendly in just a few minutes.

"How long have you two been seeing each other?"

"About three months now."

"I see." Mrs Kitan's eyes skipped to her hips and settled there for a while. Nimi felt uncomfortable under the woman's gaze.

"Would you like a glass of wine?"

"No thank you."

The woman looked at her waiting for some form of explanation like she owed her one for rejecting her offer.

"I-I--- I don't drink. Alcohol and I are not friends."

"It's only a harmless glass darling, except you have a good reason for not indulging?" Mrs Kitan said, her eyes moving to Nimi's abdomen.

"I'm a Christian." She hoped it would prevent the woman from asking her awkward questions.

"Oh, I get it now." There was a slight frown on her face which disappeared immediately.

Just then, Lara strolled in sulkily with Dapo behind her.

Nimi was almost relieved until she looked closely at them and she felt her heart sink to the bottom of her stomach. The love between brother and sister seemed fractured and Lara folded her arms across her chest.

"Well?" Dapo said, facing his sister.

"Sorry." Lara balked, rolling her eyes.

"I didn't ask you to rehearse or spit out words. I asked you to apologise to my girlfriend for whatever trash you and your stupid friends spewed at her."

"Dapo… please." Nimi pleaded and she felt Mrs Kitan's gaze on her, probably wondering what kind of power she had over her son.

"I'm waiting madam." Dapo urged not backing down.

"I'm sorry for everything I ever said to you…" Lara apologised, showing no sign of remorse.

"And?" Dapo pressed.

Lara frowned at her brother. Turning to face Nimi, she mumbled. “And I assure you it would never repeat itself.”

Dapo ignored her and went to join Nimi on the couch. “Are you alright baby?”

Nimi nodded unable to look into his eyes. “She won’t hurt you again I promise. As long as I’m here, you’re safe with me and we’re going to have a nice dinner and if you refuse to eat, I’ll feed you till you beg me to stop.”

She smiled and he touched her cheeks tenderly. “Now that’s my girl.”

He reached for her hands and asked his mum. “I hope you two have been getting along well without me?”

“I love her already.” Mrs Kitan said and Dapo smiled at his mum.

Nimi understood what had prompted Mrs Kitan’s sudden change of attitude right then. Mrs Kitan was trying to please her son, even if it meant accepting her as her future daughter-in-law.

Lara rolled her eyes. Fuming, she stormed out of the living room.

Dapo paid her no attention.

“I spoke with Toke and she left some minutes ago.” Mrs Kitan said. “I’m sorry about what happened. I just think Lara was jealous that you have someone new in your life. Do take it easy on your sister for my sake okay?”

Dapo nodded. “Alright Mum, thank you for being so understanding.”

“Why won’t I? You’re my son and your happiness matters to me.” She reached to hold Nimi’s hands again. “I was just telling your sweetheart here that she is welcome to our home anytime. I have so many things I would like to share with her and give her. I’ve always wanted a daughter asides Lara if you know what I mean.”

Dapo laughed and Nimi tried to join in.

“Mum you don’t know Nimi. She’s so shy I doubt she’s going to collect anything from you.”

"Ah *iro o*. We don't do that one here *oh*, especially now that you've been introduced into our family…" Mrs Kitan protested.

"And why is the party happening without me?"

They all looked up to see Chief Lekan Olakitan walking down the stairs like the royalty that he was draped in laced *buba* and *sokoto* and adorned with coral chieftaincy beads on his neck and wrist. He was handsome and it was evident Dapo had taken a few traits from him. Streaks of grey hair adorned his head but he could still turn heads.

Dapo prostrated before his father. "Good evening Dad."

"Good evening young man." His eyes drifted to Nimi and she went on her knees.

"And you must be the woman Lara won't stop talking about." He smiled. "Please stand up and let me look at you." His eyes settled on her and he smiled. "I've never seen a woman that makes my daughter sound like a jealous lover. It makes me wonder if you have something that she doesn't." He teased and they laughed though she sensed a sinister truth in his words.

"I told Dapo the same thing. She will come around. She's just upset that Dapo has finally found someone who can press his *mumu* button asides her." Mrs Kitan said.

The man looked into her eyes then and glanced at his son. "She's beautiful. I have to say that if there's one thing the Kitans are good at, it's picking their women. Come and let's have dinner." He glanced around. "Where's your sister?"

Dapo shrugged. "She's still sulking. When she gets tired, she'll come downstairs."

"Samira!" Chief bellowed.

"Sir..." The maid scurried to Chief Kitan's side.

"Go and tell Lara I want her to join us for dinner. She shouldn't be sulking in her room when we are celebrating. If she refuses, tell her I'll come drag her myself."

"Yes sir."



"So what do plan to do after your master's program Nimi?" Mrs Kitan asked as she helped herself to some dessert after they were done with their meal.

"I was thinking of sending my CV out as God leads."

"Hmmn, so you don't have your eyes anywhere for now?" Chief chipped in.

"No, I don't."

Mrs Kitan spoke up. "My husband usually has openings in his office and I was thinking…"

"Nimi is independent Mum and I'm sure she would be able to figure out a way on her own. Besides, we are in it together and when we get to that bridge, we will cross it. Right baby?" Dapo helped himself to the ginger and treacle cake with ice cream and scooped a spoon to feed her. "I think you should try this, just for once, indulge in guilty pleasures like this."

Not wanting to let him down, she obliged and he smiled.

"This love between you two is envious." Mrs Kitan mumbled watching them and shaking her head. "You make me want to fall in love again."

"It's not too late y'know." Dapo smiled, looking at his father.

"Your mum thinks I'm boring because I don't buy her flowers or take her shopping. She doesn't understand that if I'm not out there making the money, there would be nothing to spend."

Dapo laughed. "Dad, are you serious? After all of this, what other money are you trying to make? This is the time you should enjoy the wife of your

youth. Take a break, take mum out and have fun. You two should go to the Bahamas or something. Life is short. Spend it with those you love. If you don't take mum for a treat, who will?"

He knew there was a strain in their marriage but there was room for second chances.

His mother laughed. "Don't worry, your father will come and get tips from you. I'll make sure he does."

"Your mother is a very special woman and she's the reason I worked for all of this. She's my pinnacle of strength and I can't even imagine life without her." He reached for her hands fondly. "She keeps me going."

Mrs Kitan looked at him then and patted his shoulder. "Maybe someday we will go on a vacation with these two and have fun."

"Lara can come with Soji as well." Dapo decided to finally include his sister in their conversation. She'd been quietly picking at her food.

Lara raised an eyebrow and frowned. "Like I care about your measly get together."

"Lara!" Mrs Kitan scolded.

"If you know you're going to be a nuisance on the table, then eat your food and find your way back to your room. Stop acting like we forced you to join us." Dapo snorted.

"I'm here because Dad threatened to break down my door if I didn't join you." She spat.

"Lara!" Chief was the one cautioning her this time. "What has gotten into you? Is this how you want to keep misbehaving before our guest?

Lara stared at her father with bloodshot eyes. She blinked back the tears and hissed before bounding up the stairs.

Nimi could only stare after her dumbfounded. Chief exchanged looks with his wife and Mrs Kitan managed a stiff smile.

"I'm sorry about my daughter's actions my dear." Chief faced Nimi, worry etched on his face. "I'm convinced she must be going through a lot of stress and she's just taking it out on everyone. Please pardon her."

Nimi nodded. "Of course."



Lara buried her face into her pillow, her body racking with sobs. Nimi had made everyone hate her, inclusive of her father who loved her and would even go miles for her.

Her father had been cold to her.

Daddy was never cold to her. He loved her, he'd shown her the way of love since she was a child. Even when she didn't know what love meant.

But now they all forgot her because of Nimi.

Even her brother.

Nobody loved her anymore.

She was beginning to miss Soji. She hadn't even heard from him, she knew she was the one who didn't have time for him the way she used to. Ever since she took a selfie with Ikenna and posted it on Instagram, he'd gotten jealous and accused her of spending time with some other guy weeks to their wedding. She'd retorted that he was just insecure.

It had been two days and Soji hadn't called her. She picked her phone and dialled his number. His phone was switched off. She tried Ikenna's number and it rang. He didn't pick. She hoped her brother or Nimi had not poisoned his mind too.

She sent him a text asking him to call her when he was free.

Ikenna called her some minutes later. She was glad she found someone who was willing to talk to her and pay attention to her.



Soji was sitting at the bar drowning himself in a bottle of wine when he noticed the girl in the skimpy red dress glancing at him from the other end of the counter. She'd stare at him only to look away when their gaze locked.

He found her intriguing, but he wasn't in the mood to have fun tonight.

He thought of Aisha and he wondered what must have happened to her. She had not called him since the last incident at the house and he knew for sure she was aware he'd betrayed her. Although he'd been initially apprehensive about it, the fear had subsided with time. Besides, she had no evidence to nail him.

Aisha had lost the battle just like Lara predicted.

Lara had hurt him too, he was sure she was cheating on him. The last time he had seen her was about two weeks ago. She hadn't been sleeping at his place. She'd been acting weird lately and she chose to humiliate him by posting a selfie with another man on her Instagram page tagging him as her best friend.

When did Lara have a best friend that he didn't know about? And when did that best friend translate into a rugged looking hunk?

How could she even do such a thing? And to call him insecure when he asked her? Was this how she would keep springing up little surprises on him when they got married? Push him around and act like she owned him because she was rich?

He'd always known she was the domineering type but thinking about it now, he wondered if he would have to keep up with it for the rest of his life.

In the past, her fierce attitude had turned him on but he was getting weary of it. He was beginning to feel like he had little or no say in their relationship. If she thought she could leave him high and dry, not caring about his needs and giving it to some other guy, then she didn't know who she was dealing with.

He took a gulp of his drink and headed towards the girl that had been passing him sultry glances. He had rights too didn't he? He had the right to do whatever he wanted if Lara chose to do the same. Besides, the girl sitting across him was not a familiar face. He was only going to flirt and that was it. He needed to boost his ego once more.

He slid in beside her and lost all sense of reasoning as his eyes beheld the temptation before him. She was even more voluptuous than he'd thought and her body in that dress screamed at him.

"Can I buy you a drink?" He asked.

She glanced at him and smiled shyly. "I don't want to get drunk."

"C'mon baby, Do I look like a guy planning to get you drunk?"

She chuckled. *Mehn!* Even her laughter turned him on.

"Well, it's not written on the face y'know."

"Okay, I promise to just buy you one drink and I do hope you tell me your name. I'm Soji by the way."

He ordered a drink and she told him her name. Keisha. Her name was beautiful too, like her curves. Soon one glass turned to two and three till they were laughing and talking like long-lost friends. She pulled him to the dance floor so they could dance together. They both got lost in the rhythm and a few seconds after, she was touching him, doing amazing things to his body, and weakening his resolve to hold back.

When she kissed him, he forgot everything else.



Lara resumed work on Monday after a hellish weekend save for Ikenna who had tried to cheer her up. Soji had still not called and she wondered if he was alright as it was unusual for him to just stay away. Even if she had to apologise first,

she would. She missed him already and she needed to spend time with him and let him love her.

They'd had a little misunderstanding and she wondered why he had to take it that far and keep mute for days. He was the one she was getting married to so why was he acting so immature just because of Ikenna's presence?

She'd cried during the weekend. He didn't have to add to it.

Ikenna had opted to take her out on Sunday and though she was tempted to tell him everything from the scratch, she thought against it. What if Dapo found out, would he hate her more?

She thought of Nimi and she realised she missed her. She quickly shook the thought away from her head.

She couldn't miss her enemy. How could she miss the girl that wanted to take her family from her? The same girl responsible for her father yelling at her when he hardly ever did.

Someone knocked on her door disrupting her thoughts.

"Yea, come in…"

"This package arrived this morning for you." Nonye announced. "It has urgent on it."

Lara frowned. "I don't remember making an order. Drop it on the table."

The girl obeyed and stepped out. Lara reached for the brown box and searched for a note but found none.

Tearing it open, she gasped in shock taking in the explicit pictures of her fiancé and some girl in bed.

She screamed.

Her secretary ran in worried. "Is everything alright?"

"Who delivered this?" She yelled at her, tempted to hit her.

"I don't know ma, the package just got here this morning."

“Get out!” She yelled angrily. “Get out of my office now!” The last thing she wanted her secretary to see were pictures of her fiancé having sex with some other woman.

The girl ran out terrified. Lara trembled not knowing what to do.

This was a nightmare. She couldn’t believe it. How many copies did they have? Was this even recent?

How could Soji have done this to her?

Her phone rang and she ignored it. She picked up each picture and threw it back into the box. There were some she couldn’t even look at afraid she might vomit.

Her phone rang again. If it was Soji calling to apologise she was going to hang up. This was the straw that broke the camel’s back. She was calling off the wedding. She’d had enough!

She snatched the phone from the table trying to calm her breathing. It was an unknown number.

“Hello…”

“Hello bestie. It’s been a while hasn’t it?” a female voice greeted sweetly from the other end.

“Aisha…” She seethed. She should have known the witch would be the one to do such to her.

“Who else would be calling you on a beautiful Monday morning boo? Soji? Nah.. I think he’s still trying to cover up his tracks the way you two tried to after what you did to my baby.” Aisha chuckled with satisfaction. “Oh and by the way those pictures are recent. Saturday evening to be precise. I have them in soft copies and a short video of your fiancé sleeping with another woman just in case you’re wondering. And don’t try to play smart because it’s too late to do that now.”

“You’re dead Aisha. You’re a dead woman!”

She laughed louder. “Not if I kill you first.”

"You think you have the upper hand in this?"

"Of course, I do sweetheart. Do you think it took me a day to execute all of this? Your much-cherished reputation is going down the drain today and I'll just watch you cry, the way you made me cry. Someone has to show you that you can't always eat your cake and have it, Daddy's girl."

"Is this about Soji?"

"Oh please, you can keep the trash if you want him. After all, you killed my child because of him and your stupid reputation. This is payback time and I won't stop till you bleed like I did. I'm sure the internet and the gossip trolls are hungry for something like this. Oh, and guess what is going to be the icing on the cake?"

Lara was quiet, her heart racing. She didn't know if it was out of anger or fear. What other sinister plans did Aisha have up her sleeve?

"Do you remember all those dirty little secrets you told me when we shared jammies?"

Lara swallowed closing her eyes.

"Aww, Daddy's girl. You thought I forgot, didn't you? All those mails you sent me about your Daddy coming into the room and touching you when you were a child? You told me it's been years, but you can't suppress the thought sometimes. You said he did it because he loved you right? He kept molesting you for months and you kept deluding yourself it was love. He did it and made you promise not to tell anyone. He promised he would give you everything you needed. He was messing with you and you allowed him because you felt it was love. You allowed him hurt you while you pushed your face into the pillow wishing it was over."

Lara kept mute, panic and horror seizing her.

"Well sorry love, that's incest! No wonder you're a deranged girl who would do anything to get what she wants. You're so messed up I doubt a psychiatrist can handle your case." She snickered. "How can you even believe

that was love? Every sane person knows it's sexual abuse but not you Lara, you keep living in denial. And you know what? I used to feel for you. You sent me those mails and I thought 'aww… this girl needs to be loved; she needs a friend.' But with everything I did for you, you chose to rip me apart to the point of taking my child's life. It's my turn to rip you apart, starting from everything you hold dear. Let people see Lara Kitan for who she really is. Oh, and I'm just trying to imagine Soji's face in all of this. He would wish he picked me. Have fun shedding tears Daddy's girl."

The line went dead.

Lara stood up struggling to gain composure. The blood drained from her head and her vision grew blurry. The shock was too much to take in as the darkness crawled in. Her legs felt wobbly and gave way. It wasn't long before she found herself on the floor sinking into unconsciousness.

She blacked out.

CHAPTER 22

Aisha walked home with her laptop bag in hand and she couldn't help but smile. After the call to Lara, she'd sent the pictures to the gossip trolls for the money they promised her. Like a pack of hungry wolves, they had readily uploaded the screenshots of the mails she had exchanged with Lara years back. She wanted to scream with glee. Nothing satisfied her more at the moment. Revenge felt sweet, too sweet it made her giddy with excitement.

She already had plans to leave the country as soon as possible. She knew the Kitans and how they had spies around. If she wanted to be alive to witness the further downfall of Lara, then she would have to do that outside the country.

Her mind drifted to Soji and she fantasised about him coming to beg her. His ego wouldn't let him for sure, but she couldn't help but imagine how he would feel with everything happening now. He was a fool, a big fool to allow Lara manipulate him, to coax him into killing a child that she would have gladly carried for him. Well, Lara did well in manipulating people so she wasn't surprised.

She wasn't going to be the first or last *baby mama* to a man but Lara had taken it personal and gone too far, just because she didn't want her name and that of her fiancé to be soiled.

Talk about starting a fire! Lara should have just allowed her carry Soji's baby, but she'd decided to play dirty. Well, she knew how to give it back, in double measure.

Aisha stopped in her tracks when she noticed her sister sitting on the chair holding her phone and tapping her legs.

Halimat looked up when she shut the door.

"You did it, didn't you… even after I told you there were other ways we could go about this thing?"

Aisha ignored her sister. She dropped her laptop bag and headed for her room but Halimat pulled her back.

"Don't walk out on me when I'm talking to you! What did I tell you about all of these? Do you know what you've just done? I get the part of her fiancé, he deserved what he got but you went too far exposing her past with her father. You don't know who you're dealing with."

"That girl killed my baby. I can't even believe you're here defending her."

Halimat grimaced. "You've lost your mind if you think I'll ever defend Lara Kitan. Was I not the one who introduced you to the guy that framed up Soji? You told me about Lara's past, and I told you things like that shouldn't be leaked. We can use it to blackmail her, not tell the whole world."

"Blackmail her for what? Who needs her stupid money? Blackmail is for the weak. This is what she deserves."

"You slept with her fiancé Aisha and the girl went crazy. Your payback should have stopped with her fiancé. That was the only thing causing this strife between you two, but you chose to take it far."

"And you think I care?" She hissed. "I stopped caring the moment I realised the kind of girl she is; someone undeserving of mercy. She should have thought of those filthy secrets she shared with me when she killed my baby. You don't bite the hands that fed you, you nurture it properly. Next time, she would choose her battles wisely."

“But it was Soji who deceived you. If I remember clearly, he was the one who drugged you and aborted your baby.”

A sinister smile crawled up Aisha’s face. “Then you don’t know Lara like I do. I know what she’s capable of. We were friends for more than ten years. She has the heart of a viper and would go the extreme to get anything she wants as the queen of manipulation that she is. I can swear on my life she manipulated Soji to do what he did.”

Halimat shook her head, wondering how her sister had turned to a mad woman overnight. Letting her go, she shrugged. “We better get ready to leave before they find our dead bodies here. Our flight leaves by four and we haven’t cleaned up.”

Aisha nodded.

Her sister looked into her eyes then. “But are you alright with all of this? Does this give you the closure you want, what you really seek from all of this? There’s no point if you don’t have peace within yourself after everything.”

She forced a smile. “I’ve never been better.”

“Good, I’m happy as long as you’re happy.” Halimat pulled her sister close. “We should leave this house by twelve so please tidy up and try to look unrecognizable as much as you can.”

“Sure.”

Aisha watched her sister leave and closed her eyes inhaling deeply. She’d initially felt so elated and satisfied when she dropped the bombshell earlier. She’d felt like a master planner. But she had a rethink when Halimat asked her about peace and closure and suddenly, she realised that out of everything she felt, peace wasn’t one of them.

“I’ll survive.” She consoled herself before joining her sister in the room.



Dapo stared at his sister on the hospital bed and his heart constricted. She laid on the bed with eyes closed, far away from her present reality. He'd stopped taking the calls coming into his phone immediately he heard the news of his sister. He never paid attention to gossip but a friend had sent him a message earlier in the day asking if the news making rounds about Lara's childhood were true or perhaps a rumour.

He didn't bother to answer.

It was not until Bibi showed him what was trending online that the air got knocked out of him and he felt the dull ache in his heart.

Someone was trying to get their family name in the mud.

Physical abuse? His father couldn't. No, their father loved Lara. He wouldn't do such. He understood that the man came across as intimidating on some days but he would never hurt his own daughter.

He kept telling himself it was a rumour, a disgusting rumour by some pedophile or pervert who loved to conjure up stories and wanted to hurt Lara.

He'd tried to call Lara just before a call came through. It was her secretary, screaming and crying that her boss had collapsed in her office.

Oh God no, please let it not be true. Not Lara, not my sister.

He raised a hand to his mouth trying to hold back tears as he stared at her looking so innocent and lifeless. Had she gone through so much and did not have courage to tell him? Or tell on their father? Couldn't she have told their mother? How long did their father abuse her? The gossips had mentioned she was eight years old when it happened. Was it when his parents had their first separation? Perhaps it was when Lara was all alone in the house with no mother to look after her or care for her. His sister had looked fine. Whenever he came home, she always looked fine. Maybe he'd thought so because he had been so self-centered back then. He'd cared about no one but himself.

He blamed himself.

If he had been sensitive, he would have known what happened. He should have probed further and done everything to ensure his sister was safe.

But he'd been busy chasing after girls while his sister was probably being abused by their father. He couldn't say how long it went on for, but it was enough to mar and mould her into the woman she had become today.

The door opened and he turned to see his mother stroll in with swollen eyes. He knew she had been crying. His mind briefly flashed to the conversation at dinner on Saturday and he tried not to cringe.

What kind of father did he have? What kind of husband was he to their mother? He knew the man had been unfair to their mother in the past but this… Not this.

Not his daughter.

Not his sister.

Was that why she sought comfort in a guy like Soji? A man not good enough for her, and in other men as well, men like their family doctor and other men in their father's circle; Married men. How did they even look at his sister?

Something had to be done. He had to see to it that Lara's name was cleared out of this mess.

"Why don't you grab a cup of coffee and I'll stay with her for now."

He shook his head. "I want her to see me when she wakes up. She has to know I'll be here for her no matter what."

Mrs Kitan rubbed his back soothingly. "I'll stay with her. Nimi and Ikenna are here to see you."

He sighed rubbing his head. "You called them?"

"They said they had been trying to reach you but you wouldn't pick their calls or answer their texts. I had to give them the hospital address so they wouldn't worry more than they ought to."

He kept staring at his sister for a while before rising from the chair. Leaning close to plant a kiss on her forehead, he caressed her cheeks mumbling softly to her. “I love you baby girl and if you can hear me, just know that I’ll always love you, no matter what.”

He turned and embraced his mother, holding back the tears. He shouldn’t be the one crying. She should while he comforted her.

“Are you alright?” He asked.

“Of course, sweetheart.” She assured him although he was certain her heart was breaking into pieces. If there was anything he was sure of, it was how strong his mother was. She was built to absorb anything his father threw at her.

But this? This was a whole new ballgame entirely.

“I love you, and I want you to know that when Lara gets better, you guys can move in with me. In fact, I insist you do.”

She smiled. “We will figure it out later, okay? Just go and see your friends for now.”

He nodded and left the room. Immediately he stepped out, he saw Ikenna and Nimi heading towards him. Ikenna got to him first. They embraced briefly, not saying a word.

Nimi watched him quietly. He reached for her and broke into tears. She wrapped her arms around him, comforting him.



Nimi settled beside Dapo and passed him a cup of coffee. He took it and reached for her free hand squeezing gently.

“I feel bad that I yelled at her just before all of this happened.” Dapo mumbled.

“You shouldn’t beat yourself over it.” She tried to console him. When she heard the news, she initially dismissed it as one of those rumours that flew

about. Tolani showed it to her, and she'd thought her sister was joking or someone was probably trying to get fame or money from tarnishing the Kitans name.

But now she knew it was true.

Her heart suddenly went out to Lara. Was that why Lara hated her so much, because her father had hurt her in the past?

Who knew about her ugly past and who could do such a thing to her? Who would be so ruthless to go as far as digging up her past?

Could it be a vengeful friend or a jealous lover?

This was just cruel. No love at all, no mercy. She knew she'd had a taste of Lara Kitan's cruelty herself but Nimi could never do something this cruel to her. This wasn't mockery but shame and humiliation. Her father had used her when he should have protected her.

"I should have listened to you when you tried to calm me down about her behaviour towards you. She was just hurting, why couldn't I see it?"

Nimi's mind suddenly flashed back to the moment Lara rolled her eyes at her father after his outburst at dinner. There'd been a flash of hurt and betrayal in the Lara's eyes and Nimi had wondered why she'd looked at her father that way.

"I've never seen a woman that makes my daughter sound like a jealous lover. It makes me wonder if you have something that she doesn't."

A cold shiver ran through her at the thought of Chief Kitan's words. The internet trolls had lots of things to say. Some had gone as far as saying he had probably used the girl's innocence to boost his wealth.

She looked at her boyfriend. He was broken and she had to focus on him and how to help them all. It was probably the reason why God had sent her to Lara in the first place.

She recalled the dream of the girl in blood, the very dream that had troubled her the morning before she encountered any of the Kitans in flesh and became part of their lives.

"I'll resume at the office and help out till Lara gets better." She said after much contemplation. God had told her not to leave in the first place. It was only natural to believe he was confirming it again.

Dapo's gaze settled on hers. The last time she'd seen him this broken was the night he'd revealed his past to her. "Thank you."

She nodded.

"Are you sure it's fine because I could get someone…"

She shook her head. "We've talked about this in the past. God who wanted me to stay with her knew this was coming. I was her PA and I know how things work in the office so I can step in. Lara won't have a backlog when she's stable enough to resume. I can take her calls and answer the important ones. Help to nip the whole incident in the bud till it finally dies down. She will need you around her and I understand."

He remained quiet and managed a smile. "What can I do without you?"

She expected to feel happy and satisfied but a troubling thought lingered. Dapo had just made a simple statement of him not being able to do without her.

Something told her she would find out. Soon enough.



Lara blinked and was greeted by the white ceiling and bright lights above her. She tried to adjust to her present reality and wondered why she was here in the first place. Her head ached and her throat felt parched, like soil starved of moisture. Her eyelids felt heavy and her brain tried to recollect what had happened for her to feel this way.

It all came back to her.

Her emotions came flooding in at once like a wave crashing at sea. She broke down when she realised no one was in the room with her. Feelings of pain, anger, humiliation and bitterness engulfed her as tears rolled down her cheeks. She couldn't think straight. She didn't even know what to think and how to organise her thoughts. Was she running mad? Was this what it meant to be psychotic? A wire in her head seemed to have snapped somewhere as she felt paralysed, shattered and helpless. Aisha had not only further broken her heart but like tiny pieces of paper ripped into shreds, she'd thrown them away to the wind, leaving her to scramble for the pieces she could find.

Aisha was the devil in the blue dress she should have run from. She had given her a tool and all the girl did was sharpen it and stab her in the back with it.

How foolish she had been. Where would she start from? Was life worth anything anymore?

And her father… he would think she had betrayed him by telling someone their secret. She'd vowed not to tell anyone about it but she'd trusted Aisha enough to share everything with her. She thought she'd found someone who understood her pain and could share her burden.

Her father had called it love but it'd hurt so much. Aisha hadn't told her it was incest then. She just listened to her and consoled her, assuring her she would get over it.

But Lara didn't need anybody telling her what had happened.

She knew.

She had just lived in denial for years keeping that part of her life safely tucked away while trying to find comfort in the arms of men who told her she was beautiful. They told her they loved her, and they couldn't get enough of her. Even with their wives and children at home. They were happy when she gave them what they needed, even if it was just for a few minutes. She'd felt happy when they expressed how they couldn't do without her in their lives.

Soji would know everything now. He would know she was even worse than he was and he would hate her. He would blame her for coaxing him into aborting his baby. He would look for a way to pay her back as well.

Just like Aisha.

And her friends… she wondered if anyone of them had been around to see her. She knew they were probably laughing at her.

The reputation she'd built for years had crumbled within seconds. The image she'd painted to the world had been tarnished.

What about Dapo? And her mum? Would they be able to stand her? Would they even want to help her now that they knew the kind of girl she was?

She didn't want to imagine Ikenna's reaction to the news.

Someone walked in and she turned.

"Sweetheart… Oh praise God she's awake." Her mother walked briskly to her side.

She tried to sit up when her brother came in, following their mother behind. Glancing at their faces, she couldn't read their expression. The tears flowed again and she choked on her sobs "I-I don't know what to do…, I'm sorry."

"Shhh… baby, everything is going to be alright. You'll be alright and I'm not going to let anything happen to you." Dapo held her and she clung to him.

"I'm sorry Dapo. I didn't mean to…" She sobbed, her voice muffled by his shirt.

"It's okay baby, it's okay. You didn't do anything wrong. Stop blaming yourself."

"I thought you would hate me…"

"And why would you think that?" He released her to look into her eyes gently placing her hair behind her ears.

"Everything you heard about me, what I did..."

"But it's not your fault." He consoled. "I should have been there for you, I should have protected you. You were only a child. There was nothing you could have done."

She relaxed, enjoying the fact that her brother was willing to take the blame for her. She wished everyone would be this way. Take some form of blame for everything she did while she remained untouched and unscarred in all of this.

Her mother drew her into an embrace and kissed her on the head. "My poor baby, what you must have gone through."

Dapo stood up from the bed and went to stand by the window. "You're moving in with me Lara. Mum and I talked about it. It's safer for you there. Ikenna will be around as well. Nimi is back as your PA and she would help you out in all ways necessary while I ensure the news remains a rumour. I'll try and trace the source and move from there, ensure all of this dies down as soon as possible."

"It was Aisha." She spoke up. "I shared all my secrets with her because I trusted her. She was my best friend and I can't imagine why she would hurt me so much."

"I'll talk with a few people and see what we can do about retrieving some of these things from the internet. Let Aisha be. Whatever a man sows, he will reap. I'm just glad that you came out alive from this." Dapo said, coming to stand beside her.

Lara wanted to protest but remained quiet. Her brother would take the 'Christian' route and do everything but track her enemy. If her father was involved, he would do a better job, pay Aisha back in spades.

"You said Nimi is back to help me out?"

Dapo nodded with a smile on his face. "Yes dear. She said she was going to help out and stand in for you. She was really worried about you as well. Ikenna is also here."

"Ikenna is here?"

Not Soji.

Not Mabel, Clara, Angel, Maxine or any of her friends.

"Yea" He hugged her again. "Can you see that you still have some people in your life that love you? I want you to always remember that. If you're not ready to talk about it now, we won't push you. Okay sweetheart?"

She nodded.

"You can tell us whenever you're ready." Her mother chipped in looking into her eyes worriedly. It was obvious her mother wanted to know how bad she'd been hurt.

"What about daddy… is he here?"

Mother and son glanced at each other. "No love, you don't have to be scared. He's not here."

Little did they know she wasn't scared of him. She just wanted to be sure she remained in his good books.

"I don't want to talk about it." She said.

"Then you don't have to." Dapo assured her before facing their mother. "Mum, I know this can be quite hard for you because of Dad but please try and understand Lara can't share anything now."

"Of course. I apologise if I came across as being pushy. I was just worried and thought you wanted to share something with us. If your dad needs to be prosecuted…"

Lara shook her head adamant this time. "I'll be alright."

"As long as I'm here, no one's going to lay one finger on you."

"Thank you. I don't know what I would have done without you and mum in my life."

Her mum held her close again.

CHAPTER 23

Sumbo returned to the house late in the evening after a long day battling with her conflicting thoughts on the kind of man she'd been living with. She was exhausted mentally and physically. She had shed her private tears and though Lara was feeling better, she knew her girl was not fine. She was a victim and she'd lived like that for years, making the wrong choices and acting in ways that made her wonder if she had raised her.

She'd been away for almost two years and her husband had taken advantage of their daughter. She blamed herself too. She should have taken Lara with her during their separation, but Chief had resisted her. The society wasn't so fair on women. A woman like her did not get the chance to take her child away from her husband's house at the time. Sumbo came from a wealthy family as well, but Lekan had the upper hand. He'd ruled her life from the day she got married to him. He became wealthy and it didn't take long for the chieftaincy title to follow. Women were attracted to him because of the security they felt he could provide them. Looks could really be deceiving. He'd been the one she thought she couldn't do life without till he started cheating and hurting her and she felt she could not stay and watch him continue. Divorce hadn't been an option, so she'd settled for separation.

Lara was a child and Sumbo didn't want to interrupt her child's life or school. Her husband had hurt her, but she never imagined he would go as far as hurting their daughter.

What if it was a rumor?

She closed her eyes. If it was a rumour, her daughter would have denied it. But she didn't. She looked scared, like she had done something wrong.

How could Lara feel she did something wrong when she was the victim?

And Aisha? She'd thought they were friends and their friendship had turned sour because of Soji Bello. But to go this far? Why?

Why did Lara conceal this from her? Why did she not speak up? Lara had been so young and petite and so beautiful, often using her cherubic features to take advantage of others as she grew older. It was hard to remember her daughter as the child that had bounced on her knees, the little Lara that would giggle when tickled and talk about everything. She'd been a chatty and playful child that brought joy into her life years after Dapo. Sumbo loved adorning Lara with all the accessories she could find and would watch her as she ran around the neighbourhood with Ikenna, ebony curly hair tied up in frilly pink ribbons, bouncing around her cheeks.

Sumbo had a soft spot for Ikenna back then and couldn't help but wonder if something would brew between the duo. She would watch Lara and Ikenna hold hands and laugh together, throwing jabs at each other and talk for hours like they were the best things that happened to each other. Sumbo had often wondered if they would become childhood sweethearts and get married. But Ikenna had moved away and Soji Bello had waltzed in and changed her predictions. He'd brought out the worst in Lara. In the couple of years they courted, Sumbo had seen disturbing tendencies in Lara's life and she grew worried about it but there was really nothing she could do.

How would society look at her daughter now? Who would even want to marry her? She had not heard from Soji and when his name came up, Lara

clammed up. Was she scared Soji would reject her after everything he might have heard about her?

Dapo said he would find a way to nip the news in the bud ensuring it died down as soon as possible. She knew her husband would find a way to ensure the news was buried and forgotten.

But rumours like this were not easily forgotten.

Calls had been coming in ever since but she ignored them. All she wanted to do was soak in a warm bath and drink herself into a coma, just to wake up and discover it was all a dream.

But it wasn't. Reality stared at her in the face when she got home and found her husband helping himself to a glass of wine in the bar. She felt her heart constrict. Explicit images of what she wanted to do to him flashed before her eyes. He looked like a pathetic fool. She couldn't believe she had lived with this man for years, even shared the same room with him. A man who was brazen enough to hurt their child. What kind of a man was he?

He stood up when he saw her. "Sumbo…"

She ignored him turning to Samira and the other maid waiting on her for. She shook her head indicating she did not need them to see to her tonight and headed straight for the stairs. Her husband followed behind her.

The house felt cold. The coldness seeped into her, further leaking out any strength she had left. She didn't want her daughter returning to this house. She would send Lara's things to Dapo's place. As for her, she could go to her sister's place in Abuja and stay there for a while.

"Sumbo… will you at least look at me?"

"Haven't you done enough?" She spat. "You abused our child Lekan! Our daughter!! What did you see in that little girl that you couldn't get from your tramps outside?"

"You believe I would do that to her? Did Lara tell you this herself?"

"It's all over the news. That's enough proof." She hissed heading for her wardrobe. She doubted she could sleep in their bedroom ever again.

He grabbed her by the arm and turned her to face him. She struggled to break free almost cursing as his nails dug into her skin. "Believe me, I would never do such! I'm her father. Why would I hurt my own daughter?"

"She told her friend Aisha…"

"She was a child. Lara was just making up stories, the way teenagers do. You know our daughter and how she loves attention. She could come up with anything newsworthy irrespective of who gets hurt in the process. I could never do such! It's abominable! But here you are looking at me like a monster. You chose to believe rumours instead. You chose to think your husband is a sick pervert…"

Sumbo looked into his eyes then and a flash of doubt crossed her mind. Lekan looked sincere. Was he lying again, like he lied to her in the past about his mistresses?

"I want you to do something, get Lara alone and probe her about these things. I know Dapo must be upset now so don't let him be present. Lara will tell you I never touched her. I loved my baby girl like a father should." He coaxed.

"But the mails… Why would she say such about you? It doesn't make sense that she would frame you up and send it to Aisha."

"Lara called me this evening to apologise…"

Sumbo frowned. "Lara called you?"

He nodded as one of his hands slid down her arms while the other caressed her neck. "She called to apologise about the incident. She felt bad for making up stories. She was worried about how I took the false news."

Sumbo shook her head. Her husband's hands on her neck was distracting her and mixing things up in her head. She tried to focus. Lara had not denied it before them. Her daughter had looked distant, confused and angry.

"She wasn't a child to make up stories like that." She protested.

"Aisha could have coaxed her into exchanging dirty mails. Teenagers play dirty games." He leaned close to kiss her but she moved away.

"I need to think about this Lekan. I really want to. With everything you've said, I don't know what to believe anymore."

A part of her doubted. *What if Lara was scared of telling the truth?*

"If all you've said is true, then we have to do something about it. The press has to know it was just a silly game exchanged between friends and nothing more. You have to speak with Dapo too."

"I've handled the news. I will speak with my son…"

"But why didn't you come to the hospital?" Sumbo queried again.

"I was hurt that my own daughter would make up stories about me!" He cried. "And if I'd been at the hospital, it would only paint the false stories as true. My enemies will clamour for news like this. I cannot let them take advantage of the situation."

"This is really confusing." She sank into the bed, raising her hands to her face. She was emotionally and mentally drained.

"I know but you need to relax sweetheart." He sat beside her and interlinked his fingers with hers. Raising it to his lips, he kissed it softly while brushing the back of her palm with his thumb. He definitely knew her weak spot. "I'll prepare your bath and ask Samira to make your favourite tea to calm your nerves. You're not leaving this house till you're strong and hearty okay my love?

She managed a smile. "Thank you."

"That's my girl." He stole a kiss from her and helped her out of her clothes. Sumbo was too weak to complain so she allowed him, silently praying that all her husband told her was true.

For her sake and for everyone's sake, she wanted it to be true.



Nimi settled on her bed exhausted. This was the third week after the whole incident and though she enjoyed helping Lara out, she couldn't deny the work was demanding. Especially since Lara hadn't been at work for weeks. She had to keep tabs on all Lara's calls, personal and business alike. She'd ignored the whispers and the eyes that bore into her the first day she returned to the office. But sometimes she overheard the snide remarks they made about her cleaning up the Kitan's mess.

Just the way the poor bore the brunt for the rich.

Lara's secretary Nonye was no better. With Lara's absence, Nonye chose to chat with her friends in the office, things she couldn't do when her boss was in.

She wondered how long she would continue to fill in for Lara. Dapo's texts and calls had reduced since the incident. She was working on her dissertation but that hadn't stopped his calls in the past. His late-night calls had subsided, his early morning texts were becoming brief and vague and she wondered if he was just going to give her a back seat in his life because he was taking care of his sister.

At least he should have been here to help her out with the recent development of things but all the Kitans just seemed to have dropped their baggage on her like she was some maid.

Lara had not even texted a simple thank you to her for opting to return. Even at the hospital, Lara only glanced at her and continued chatting with Ikenna and her brother, like Nimi was just a piece of specimen to be ignored.

She took a shower and threw on a lighter shirt before ambling toward the kitchen to feed on the beans and plantain Tolani had made for dinner. It had been a while she ate out. Dapo didn't have time to take her out, but she saw how often Lara uploaded pictures of herself and her brother on WhatsApp.

Nimi felt a sharp pang of jealousy when she saw the latest one Lara had uploaded. A picture of a beautiful lady and Dapo looking chummy and grinning into the camera. She didn't ask Dapo about it because she trusted him. It wasn't a bad thing to have friends of the opposite sex.

She picked up her phone. If Dapo wasn't going to call her first, she would.

"Hello…" A female voice cooed from the other end. Nimi closed her eyes praying it wasn't Lara. The last time she called, Lara had picked the phone and asked her a dozen questions about the office instead. She did not even get the chance to talk to her boyfriend. She'd expected Dapo to call back but he didn't.

"Hi." Nimi managed. Relief flooded her when she heard her beau's voice from the other end.

"Nimi?"

"Dapo. Hi! Are you alright?"

He laughed. "Yea, don't mind Jibola, she can be mischievous sometimes. How are you doing baby?"

I'm upset and running low on my patience meter! "I'm okay." She replied. "Who's Jibola?" She asked before she could hold it in.

"Just a family friend. She decided to come spend some time with us because of everything that happened. Are you alright though?"

"I just got back from work. Tiring day."

"Yea, same here. Is everything fine? I've missed you."

He didn't sound like he missed her. She wanted to challenge him but held her peace instead.

"It's been a while we spent time together and so I was wondering if we could hang out this weekend like we used to?"

"Uh…" He hesitated. "You know what, why don't you come over instead? Is that okay?"

Why did he sound like he was trying to squeeze in time for her? Wasn't she important enough for him to take time off babysitting his sister and hang out with her?

"Sure, that should be fun I guess."

"Okay baby. I've got to run. I'll call you tonight okay? Love you."

"I love you too."

And he hung up.

There was one thing Nimi knew she was going to do when she got to his place on Saturday. She was going to find out who the Jibola lady was, her role in Dapo's life and what she was doing in his place at this time.

CHAPTER 24

Nimi had mixed feelings on her way to Dapo's house. This was the first time she would be visiting him at home and though she had an impression in her spirit not to go, she was desperate to fight for what was hers. She wanted things to be the way it had been between them before the whole scandal happened. She had spoken to Tamuno and her friend had advised her to be careful. Pastor Arike also advised her to pray and wait on it, so her mind would not take over God's leading. The last thing she wanted to do was build her relationship on the wrong foundation when it was still growing.

She arrived at his place early despite the slight traffic she encountered on the way. She brought a peace offering of soup with assorted meats she made for him. Cooking for Dapo made her happy in a way.

The picture he'd taken with the beautiful lady floated into her thoughts but she shook it away. Within three weeks, he'd made her doubt his love for her. He hadn't paid her a visit in a while. She understood Lara needed him but she needed him too. She wasn't asking for too much. She just wanted him to spend time with her, call her like he used to and not act like he was in a hurry to get off the phone.

All her life, she'd always seen herself as a strong woman, but Lara had managed to break through her defence of recent. Now, her boyfriend who had made her feel secure and special was beginning to act strange.

She walked up to the gate and pressed the electronic doorbell. A security guard opened the gate for her after clarifying with Dapo from the house if he could let her in. She found her way inside, paying him brief compliments to which he returned the gesture.

Dapo had a beautiful place although it was not as huge as his parents'. It was a duplex located on one of Ajah's exclusive streets and the architectural design was elegant. A few trees stood tall around the house, their silhouettes casting shadows and providing shade the moment she stepped in. She strolled to the back door and took a deep breath trying hard to steady her racing heart. She was about to knock when Dapo opened the door and smiled into her face.

He spread his arms to receive her.

"I've missed you baby."

She forgot every word she'd planned to say and allowed herself bask in his embrace. "Me too."

He released her and smiled into her eyes, caressing her cheeks. She noticed he was still in sweats. She glanced up at him and saw white powder stains on his cheeks. She silently wondered what it was as she stepped in and he closed the door behind her. A delicious aroma permeated the kitchen and Nimi stopped short when a familiar face turned to greet her. She immediately recognised the face as the one she'd seen in Lara's uploaded pictures. There were white stains on her face as well.

"Hi, I'm Jibola, it's nice to finally meet you." She waved excitedly. "Sorry my hands are messy, but I'd give you a warm hug the moment I'm done."

Nimi noticed the girl was also in sweats. She was beautiful without makeup on and her hair was tied in a bun. "Hi. Nice to meet you too." She managed and received Jibola's hand.

"Dapo has told me so much about you, it's amazing to finally see you in flesh."

She glanced at her boyfriend. "It's amazing Dapo has not told me so much about you."

"Oh we've been childhood friends and I'm just here to visit."

Nimi nodded forcing a smile. She turned to Dapo. "What's that on your face?"

"Oh, flour…"

"Yea, I'm making pancakes, we got silly and had a flour fight." Jibola giggled. "Dapo told me you were coming over so I decided to make more."

"Lara was the one who started the flour fight." Dapo laughed and helped Nimi with her bag. "Trust me, Jibola makes the best pancakes and you're so going to enjoy it." He reached for her hand leading her to the living room. She was quite stunned to see how large and inviting the room looked. His sitting room looked like a cinema house, neat and masculine with some furniture in strategic places. But this didn't eliminate the beauty and radiance reflecting Dapo's taste. It was obvious a bachelor lived here. He had a few portraits and paintings on the wall by artists she wasn't familiar with. Sunlight sliced through the large windows casting off glows against the wine-coloured velvety drapes.

He led her to the leather couch and settled beside her still holding her hands. "You don't know how much this means to me. You being here with me is like a dream come true."

She bit her lip nervously. Maybe she was selfish wanting too much when he obviously had to work and look after his sister. He only had to look into her eyes and she forgot everything she wanted to tell him.

"Do you like it here or is it too early to ask?" His smile melted her heart.

"It's okay I guess…"

"I was thinking of giving out the home theatre recently, but Lara came into the picture and she's always binge watching."

Nimi looked around the room. She hadn't seen Lara. Had she gone out?

"How was your trip here? I'm sorry I couldn't come over to pick you. Look at me, I just got back from the gym like an hour ago and I was about to go take a shower when I heard you were around."

"It's fine. I brought you some homemade stew. I felt you guys would need it."

"You know I would do anything to have your food in my house. Thank you for thinking about me."

She nodded smiling.

"Can you drop this in the kitchen for Jibola while I go upstairs? She made some watermelon smoothie which I think you'll like. Do you want me to turn on the TV or you would like to look around?"

"I'll help myself to the smoothie and look around."

"Okay love. Don't miss me too much." And he was gone.

She looked around again and felt overwhelmed. It was a different world compared to hers. The couch was so comfortable she could almost sink in. She thought of the number of women he must have brought home in his past but she shut out the thoughts. She stood up and headed to the kitchen.

"Hi…" She greeted Jibola again. She looked around wondering how a kitchen could be so large and well designed. It was a U-shaped kitchen with a flowery wallpaper design and she fell in love with it immediately. Whoever did his home décor knew how to pick the right colours. A large white fridge stood tall beside the counter where Jibola stood cooking.

"Hiya." Jibola greeted cheerfully dishing the first batch of pancakes.

"I was going to ask where I should put this."

"Oh, what's that?"

"I made stew since I thought you guys might need it."

"Oh, that's so thoughtful of you darling, please put it in the top compartment of the fridge. I'm sure it will come in handy."

Nimi's brows furrowed when Jibola continued. "I made soup yesterday evening so I'm sure we would have something to use when we run out of mine."

She nodded trying not to be offended by her statement.

"So, how long have you two been together?" Jibola asked.

"We're currently in our fourth month."

"Nice."

"Thank you." Nimi glanced at Jibola surreptitiously. She noticed her thin camisole and exposed cleavage as she moved around the house. There was no way she would bend without revealing more. As a curvy woman, with flesh in the right places, Jibola wouldn't find it hard to attract any man's attention.

"Do you have a family?"

"Yea, they're in Atlanta." She laughed. "If you're asking about a husband though, no. I'm not married and don't have a family of my own yet." She looked at her. "Why do you ask?"

"I was just curious. I mean I was wondering if you had one and if they wouldn't be missing their mum or something."

"Nah.. Still trusting God for the right timing."

"You're a Christian?"

"Who isn't?" She teased with a smile. "On a serious note, yes I am. Orthodox though, Anglican."

"Okay." Nimi nodded. She was about to ask for the watermelon smoothie when Lara stepped in.

"I am hungry Jibs! Are the pancakes ready?" She stopped when she saw Nimi.

"Oh hi Nimi. How are you? What a pleasant surprise."

Nimi's heart raced. "Hello Lara, I hope you're good."

She shrugged and did a little dance mimicking a popular artiste. "I feel good…"

Jibola laughed. “Lara is just the best. I have some pancakes ready sweetheart.”

“Thanks Jibs. You’re amazing, as always.” Lara gushed and planted sloppy kisses on Jibola’s cheeks. Jibola nudged her playfully.

“Ewww… get off me. I don’t do girls and I definitely don’t taste like breakfast.”

Lara laughed. “Any man would be lucky to have you, you know that right?”

“Of course, I do boo. C’mon let’s stop making Nimi uncomfortable and talk like normal human beings.”

“It’s not like I was talking dirty.” She chuckled and faced Nimi winking at her. “You and Dapo should try it sometime, it’s healthy.”

“Ignore her please.” Jibola shook her head. “Whatever works for you and Dapo in your relationship dear. Don’t listen to her.”

“You need to believe me when I say those two behave like prudes around each other. They don’t even share a kiss.”

Jibola did well in hiding her shock and glanced at Nimi who was embarrassed already.

Lara hasn’t changed one bit.

“Pancake time!” Jibola cut in and passed a plate to Lara.

“Guess who’s on time.” Dapo called out as he strolled into the kitchen looking clean and nice in stone-washed jeans and a burgundy polo t-shirt. He smelled good too and for once, Nimi felt like giving in to her flesh to prove Lara wrong about them sharing a kiss.

Her spirit stopped her in time.

Dapo reached out to tear a piece of pancake. Jibola smacked his hand and snatched a fork from the counter.

“What did I tell you about using a fork, huh?” Jibola cut through a piece and fed it to him.

"Umm, delicious." He smiled at her.

"I know right." Lara cut in. "It's like Jibola should just be here forever."

"Wishful thinking." Dapo kept chewing and headed for the fridge. "She has a life babe. We can't be selfish."

Nimi raised an eyebrow. Were these people aware she was in the room watching everything going on? How could Dapo allow Jibola feed him in her presence and he didn't think it was offensive? And Lara made an absurd statement about Jibola being here forever and he just went with it?

She wanted to leave. She wanted to yell at Lara, push past Dapo and leave with her sanity still intact. But she endured it all and excused herself to the living room.

Dapo followed behind. She was surprised he did. He should have stayed there and allowed Jibola keep feeding him like she was his wife.

How would he feel if some guy was in her home as a family friend and was feeding her?

"Baby…"

She ignored him, wanting to be far from him as possible. He caught her hand in time and turned her to face him.

"You're upset."

She raised a brow. So he realised she was upset.

"What are you upset about? Talk to me."

He was too close to her and she was beginning to feel uncomfortable.

"Nothing." She pulled away and headed for the couch. She picked up one of the fashion magazines from the centre-table, trying to distract herself. He was beside her in seconds and he reached for the magazine.

"Is this what we're turning to now?"

"What?"

"This… you acting up all of a sudden…"

She sighed and looked into his eyes. “I came here thinking we could spend time alone, but with all this happening, it’s like I’m not even wanted here at all. I get that you would like to spend time with Lara and all but what about us Dapo? What about my needs? If you need me in your life, then show me. I just feel like a stranger here.”

She shook her head and continued. “And you feeding from Jibola…”

“She’s just a family friend Nimi…”

“Well, it didn’t look like that to me babe and it makes me wonder how much you’re willing to reveal to me.”

She noticed Dapo was staring at her with mouth agape and she stopped.

“Did you just call me babe?” A contagious smile tugged at his lips. She didn’t want him to infect her but it was too late as she was smiling as well.

“I think getting you angry brings out the best in you. Do you know how long I’ve been dying to hear those words from you?” He reached for her hands and squeezed gently. “I’m sorry you feel that way. Jibola is here because I see her as family, nothing else. I can’t have you alone in my house because my feelings for you would drive me crazy and I’ve vowed to God to honour Him first, then you and our bodies after getting married. I know what could happen if we get alone and if I’m getting all lovey-dovey with you in that kitchen or anywhere else in my house. That’s one of the reasons I haven’t invited you here before. If I’m eating from your hands, trust me, it won’t stop there. I do it with Jibola because there’s this sister image in my head when I see her and I wouldn’t want anyone to change that.”

Nimi swallowed. “I’m sorry I…”

“Hey, it’s okay.” He touched her cheeks. “But she’s going to leave in about two weeks so you my baby can rest assured that I’m here all by myself…” He tried crooning a song to express his loneliness but failed at the attempt. Nimi laughed out loud.

“You’re amazing.” She told him.

“Sometimes I can’t comprehend how I’m so blessed to have you in my life. I often wonder if it’s a dream. If it is, I never want to wake up.”

“Let me show you how real this is.” Nimi leaned close to hug him.

She looked up and saw Lara and Jibola looking at them. Jibola smiled warmly as she headed to the dining table with two plates of pancakes while Lara returned to the kitchen.

Nimi released him and smiled into his eyes, for him alone. “Let’s have breakfast already.”

“That’s my girl.”



“I’m gonna tell you how this works.” Dapo handed over the blankets to Jibola. Nimi was still seated beside him on the couch eager to understand how movie night worked.

“First, we are starting early because I have to get you home before ten.” He explained. “Secondly, we eat lots of popcorn and soda and candy. Lara likes to call it sugar binge. Lastly, if it’s horror, Lara cuddles because she can be a chicken sometimes…”

“No I’m not!” She retorted and Nimi thought she was cute.

“Whatever. So, yea, we also turn off the lights and pull the curtains, so it has the cinema effect.”

Nimi nodded excited already. She imagined movie nights alone with Dapo when they were married. He would be able to hold her and cuddle her and kiss her all he wanted, perhaps even forgetting the movie and just being together would suffice.

“You ready?” He broke into her thoughts.

"What?" She felt embarrassed staring at him and was glad her thoughts were hidden. It was amazing how her thoughts were beginning to take some routes she wasn't ready for.

"You're our guest so you'll do the honour of picking a movie for us." He presented her with a choice of movies in his DVD rack.

"I do hope it's not some lousy drama that has no romance." Lara mumbled. "Besides, can't we just do Netflix?"

"Ignore her." Dapo interjected. "She's a hopeless romantic. Anything you pick will be just fine."

"Indiana Jones."

Dapo smiled at her. "Great choice."

"Oh crap!" Lara protested.

"Sorry sweetheart." He winked at Lara. "But you can't have your way tonight."

"I was meant to continue watching vampire diaries, but you think it's inappropriate because Nimi is here."

"Lara, let Nimi have her night. You can always watch Twilight or whatever blood drinking series you want to watch with Jibola everyday if you want."

Jibola chuckled and grabbed the blanket. "Don't mind baby Lara." She faced Lara. "*Oya* scoot over."

"To where?" Lara frowned.

"You stay with Dapo and Nimi stays with me?" Jibola gave her a look that was enough to pass the message across.

"But what's wrong with Nimi and Brother Dapo staying together? That's what couples do. They cuddle, kiss and watch movies together."

Nimi blinked. Lara always found a way to dampen her mood.

"Lara…" Her brother spoke up.

“Fine.” She picked the blanket and went over to join Dapo. Nimi went to join Jibola. Jibola placed the popcorn bowl in her laps and smiled at her. “I love Indiana Jones by the way.” Jibola whispered.

“Thank you.” Nimi smiled and turned to face the screen as the movie came on.

The day was finally turning out for her good after all.



When the movie ended, Nimi sighed with satisfaction. She glanced at Dapo and their gazes locked. A soft smile tugged at his lips and he winked at her. She was learning to read his expression and she currently loved the one on his face. He had eyes only for her, not Jibola or anyone else. At the right time, they would be able to fully express their love for each other physically.

And it would be perfect God willing.

Nimi excused herself to the bathroom as Jibola and Dapo cleared up the living room. She thanked God things had not turned out as disastrous as she’d feared it would when they had the slight misunderstanding in the morning. All the doubts she’d had earlier were gone. She’d told God the kind of man she wanted, and he just surpassed her expectations.

Dapo was kind and considerate and brought God into everything even to his movie choice. He understood boundaries and had handled Lara’s disagreement with the movie choice maturely. He had even agreed with the seating arrangement so as to avoid any kind of temptation.

She stepped out of the restroom and almost collided into Lara.

“Hi.” Lara greeted.

“Hello.” Nimi replied. She was about walking past but Lara stood still, blocking her path.

Nimi looked up. The way Lara acted at times almost convinced her that she was possessed with an evil spirit that antagonized hers.

"You haven't updated me about the office today."

"You mentioned you were resuming next week. I felt it would be appropriate to give you the report on Monday."

"And what stops you from giving me the report now?"

"Now?" Nimi couldn't hide her surprise. Lara was becoming obnoxious day by day. She'd thought Lara's stay with Dapo would have improved whatever internal conflict she was facing but that theory proved to be false.

Lara shrugged. "Is there a problem?"

Nimi's tolerance was starting to decline. "I came to see my boyfriend Lara, give me a break please."

"Oh so that's how you play now isn't it?"

"I'm not playing at anything. You're demanding something impossible of me and I gave you a reasonable answer. I came as Dapo's girlfriend, not your PA. Now if you'll excuse me…"

Nimi tried to get past her but Lara pushed her back making Nimi stagger.

"You enjoy this, don't you? You enjoy shinning like some good girl who gets to impress everyone with her 'unquestionable' character. You think I don't know your type? You see class and you dash for it. *Ohh* I saw you pretty well. I watched how you kept looking around his house and I'm sure you can't wait to hop into his bedroom when you two are alone. You couldn't help ogling my brother when he asked you to join Jibola. I know you want him so bad. But you're scared, aren't you? You're scared I'll see you for the kind of girl you are and realise that you have some badgirl traits in you as well. You're scared that you're just like me. You're only afraid to take that liberty because you don't want Dapo to see you as a bad girl."

Nimi wanted to hit her. She wanted to pull at her hair and keep smacking her till she shut her mouth. She knew if she gave in to her uncensored thoughts and smacked Lara senseless, she would lose control.

Lara wasn't repentant, even with all that had happened. She kept taking from people till she left everyone empty.

"Did he tell you Jibola was his childhood crush?" Lara taunted further.

Nimi bit her lip. She felt her heart breaking at the revelation but remained mute.

"Oh, don't worry. When he gets horny, he has someone to satisfy his needs, definitely not some church girl who thinks she's the best thing that ever happened to any man."

"You are crazy and you need help." Nimi snapped.

Nimi…

No father let me talk. Let me talk sense into her stupid vulgar brain.

Nimi, ignore her and leave.

No Lord, she needs to get it from me tonight so that she knows I'm not some mumu girl whom she can dump her trashy words into. She keeps doing this and she needs someone to put her right.

"You know what, I feel sorry for you." Nimi spat, rolling her eyes. "I feel sorry that my boyfriend is wasting time on you when you should be in Rehab. Look at you, just look at you. Are you not even ashamed of yourself? There was a time I thought you were just a girl who needed help but now I know better. You are just an attention starved girl who would do anything to get her name out there, even when it's obvious your time and season is over.

"So what? What if I want Dapo, what if your brother wants me, at least we have boundaries unlike you who would settle for anyone even when they don't respect you or give a hoot about you. I used to wonder what you saw in your so-called boyfriend Soji, but now I see it clearly. You two deserve each other."

Lara raised her hand, about to charge towards her when Dapo intervened and pulled her into himself. Lara struggled to break free, kicking and crying.

Nimi looked at Dapo and she knew he'd heard every single word she said. He looked away while Jibola assisted him, withholding Lara from plucking Nimi's eyes out.

Oh my God… what have I done?

Did he hear the nonsense his sister had spewed? Lara had said worse and she was making her look like the bad person in all of this.

"Lara, it's okay…" Dapo coaxed, pain etched on his features.

"Did you hear what she said?" Lara protested in between sobs.

"Jibola please take her to her room while I drive Nimi home." Was all Dapo could say.



As Dapo drove Nimi home, she kept glancing at him, desperately hoping he would break the silence between them. She felt torn as doubt and guilt clawed at her till she felt she would crumble into pieces.

Oh God why didn't I listen. Why was I bent on having my own way? Will Dapo even forgive me?

She had to tell him what happened. She had to make him see that she wouldn't have said so much if Lara had not pushed and provoked her.

"Dapo…"

There was no response.

"Baby… I didn't mean to. Whatever you heard, I was really upset. Lara said words…"

"I would like to concentrate on my driving please." He said, not even giving her a glance.

She felt slapped in the face and looked away, the tears stinging.

Was he not even going to hear her out? So just because his sister had shed some crocodile tears, she ended up being the bad person in all of this. Was he choosing his sister over her?

What happened to '*I would never let anyone hurt you*'? And about Jibola being his childhood crush. Did he not think she had a right to know?

When they finally arrived at her place, she spoke up.

"And is this how we are going to say goodnight to each other?"

He sighed. "Nimi don't make this worse."

"Oh, so it's Nimi now."

He remained quiet.

"I think I'm going to make things easy for you Dapo." She felt the anger rising to the surface again. She'd endured everything they threw at her but the tables turned, and they took it personal. How could he be quiet when she needed him to hear her out?

"You would have to choose between me and your sister."

"What?" Dapo looked at her like she'd gone crazy. "You can't be serious."

"I'm dead serious."

"Is this what it has come to? Choosing? You're going to take this path because you had a row with my sister?"

"I'm not taking any path Dapo. I'm wondering where you stand in all of this." She felt the tears burn and did her best to hold it back.

"What do you expect me to do? You told my sister she needs rehab. You told her she deserves a man like Soji and other men that took advantage of her… No woman deserves that bastard Nimi, and I wouldn't pray any sane girl ends up with him."

"So that automatically makes me a bad person?"

"Lara was hurt…"

“So was I Dapo! So was I. Nights when you didn’t call. Days when you two left me in that office working my heart out to ensure everything was going well. Did you even think about me? Did you? Did you think of how much I needed you to tell me you still love me?” She threw her head back, trying to hold back tears. “Sometimes I wonder how much I mean to you. Maybe I’m just a girl you’re going to dump somewhere when the pressure rises… just like you’re doing now. I have done everything I can do for you and your family. I’ve been there for you, I’ve encouraged you, I’ve prayed for you and I’ve been the best PA I can ever be to your sister and this is what I get.” She shook her head as the tears escaped and fell across her cheeks. “You can marry your sister for all I care. I’m tired of running errands.”

And she stepped out of the car.

“Nimi!” He called but she ignored him and hurriedly ran inside the house. She silently prayed he wouldn’t run after her. She wasn’t sure if she would give in and let him hold her or push him away. But the moment she stepped into the house and closed the door behind her, she realised he hadn’t even stepped out of the car. She felt relieved but it was short-lived as disappointment flooded her soul.

She broke down into tears.

"I was wondering what..." Tolani spoke up but stopped in time. Mouth agape, she asked. "Sis Nimi, are you alright?"

She shook her head running to her room as the tears refused to stop. "Dapo and I just broke up."

CHAPTER 25

Dapo got home upset, trying hard to control his tattered emotions. Nimi had outrightly ignored him when he called her. He knew she was hurt but he was hurt too and so was Lara. He knew she wasn't the kind to explode in anger, she was decent and had a good character but those words coming from her had shocked him. He had never imagined she would say such things.

He'd been cleaning up with Jibola when inaudible noises filtered into the living room. He grew suspicious when he heard Lara's voice. A few seconds later, he heard Nimi's voice. He knew his sister and his girlfriend didn't do well together. So he went to check what the matter was, Jibola following behind him.

As he drew near, he'd heard everything Nimi said and it stung. Even Jibola had been shocked and her face showed it.

He knew Lara must have said something to provoke Nimi. But he felt Nimi could do better. She'd handled Lara's outburst better the last time. Why did she act so different now?

Was something happening to her he wasn't aware of? Was she changing? She'd asked him to pick between her and Lara. How could she? That sounded selfish and arrogant. He loved her but he had to make her know she'd done

wrong. Lara was still his sister and asking him to choose was a wrong move to make.

He was seeing something different in Nimi which he hadn't seen before. What if she had more hidden inside and they would only become more evident as they continued their courtship and finally got married?

He took a deep breath and shook his thoughts away. He was probably paranoid. He was about heading up the stairs when he saw Jibola strolling downstairs in her pyjamas.

"Are you okay?" She asked.

He nodded unable to express how bad he felt at the moment. Everything had gone so well initially and now it felt like their relationship was currently at a crossroad.

"Lara is in her room. She said she wants to see you when you get back."

"Thanks Jibs."

"I'm sorry about you and Nimi. I hope you two come to an understanding and sort things out."

He swallowed. "I'll go check on my sister."

She stretched her arms. "Hug it out?"

He looked up and he saw something flash in her eyes. Was he mistaking sympathy for desire? Surmising he was just being paranoid, he hugged her. He stepped back almost immediately when he felt a nudge within his spirit, like a warning.

"What's wrong?" She asked looking into his eyes and he felt his body responding to hers in a strange way.

It wasn't a godly feeling.

He was tempted to curse himself. Who hugged a girl in her pyjamas?

A man running on his emotions, that's who!

"Nothing, I'll go check on Lara. Goodnight Jibs. Sleep tight. I'll be leaving for the first service tomorrow. Will you be able to make it?"

She blinked. He felt her withdraw and he was relieved. Had she been expecting more from him?

"Uh, I'll try I guess, or I'll just opt for the second or third service."

"Okay, cool."

He bounded up the stairs, desperate to leave.

He walked into the room Lara was occupying and saw her nicely tucked in between sheets. She smiled when he settled in beside her.

"Hey sugar bunny."

She hugged him. "I'm sorry Bro Dapo. I didn't mean it."

"It's okay baby girl. I'm sure Nimi didn't mean it either."

"She was so harsh to me…"

"Shhh… it's okay. She was just upset."

She released him and reached for his hands. "I want you to believe me. I was just asking her about the office. I know it was selfish but I asked and she went all out on me about wanting to have her personal time. I might have said words, but I wasn't expecting her to get all upset."

Dapo looked into her eyes and squeezed her hands gently. Something told him she wasn't saying the complete truth.

"Sweetheart, I need you to come clean. You know how much I love you right? Just do me a favour, tell me the truth. Did you say something? Anything at all…"

She looked into his eyes. "Well…I just said you and Jibola were pretty tight as teenagers and she just got all saucy declaring 'this is my boyfriend's house *blah blah blah*."

He closed his eyes, taking a deep breath.

You're searching for answers from the wrong source.

"Try and get some sleep." He managed a smile.

"I love you Brother Dapo and I don't want anyone to come between us."

"No one will."

She kissed him on the cheeks and slipped back into the sheets. “Do you have to go to church tomorrow? Why don’t you stay home so we can watch movies in the morning while Jibs makes us oats and *moinmoin*?”

He laughed. “I have the rest of the day to spend with you two so don’t steal my time with God.”

“Do you think he cares about how much time you spend with him?”

“Well, if you have a relationship with someone, you spend time with them don’t you? You tell them how much you love them and you show it. You spend time in their presence just listening to what they have to say to you. Sometimes you can’t look away because it’s just too good to be true. That’s what a relationship with God feels like.”

“You make it sound interesting.”

“Of course it’s interesting.” He reached to caress her cheeks. “And he’s waiting for you to reach out to him.”

“I don’t think he’s gonna like what I have to give.”

“And who says He’s interested in what you have to give? You don’t even have anything to give.” He laughed. “Look at me, I was a mess before Jesus. We can’t give anything. He takes away the filth and everything we are, giving us a new life in return. His love is unconditional. You know about my past, you know what happened between your friend and I back then, how I was reckless and hurt others, and look at me now, I’m a happy and free man. I’m no longer a slave to my fears or past atrocities. Jesus wipes the slate clean.”

He saw the fear flash in her eyes at the mention of Melissa, whose child he had aborted, and he thought she was worried about that.

“Hey, I’m sorry, did I upset you?”

She shook her head suddenly looking normal again. “No, I’m fine.” She looked at him. “So God forgives murder just like that? He doesn’t seek revenge and send people to hell the way those preachers yell on the road?”

"Of course, he forgives all kinds of sins once you acknowledge how you're willing to come to him. Believe in his name in your heart, confess with your lips. That's all you need."

She nodded almost as if she didn't believe him completely. "Soji has not called me Bro Dapo, ever since that thing happened. I felt I was going to forgive him if he came looking for me, but I don't know if I can right now."

"Stop thinking about him. He's not worth your time baby. Look, you're going to find someone who loves you irrespective of your past. But truth is, God is the only one who can love you regardless. He carries your burden so you don't have to carry it anymore. He then gives you someone who loves you like he does who wouldn't judge you because you've become a new creation in Christ."

"I don't think anyone can love me that way."

"God first, then the mystery guy will show." He said to console her.

What if there is no mystery guy? What if I'm the only one she needs right now?

He inhaled deeply. "Remember that journal bible I bought for you when we went to church together weeks ago? The pink one with the buttons."

She nodded.

"Did you read 1Corinthians chapter thirteen that talks about God's love and the way he wants us to love as I asked you to?"

She balked.

"Lara… I can't help you if you keep choosing to do things your own way."

"It was boring. I'm sorry but it just feels hard and so... I just don't think I'm cut out for stuff like that. Nimi is better at things like that. She's the good girl. She's the virgin girl who got the perfect guy and doesn't have a body count. She's the kind of girl God would want to listen to. Not me."

"See why we fight? Because you just dig up facts from all those stupid shows and books you spend time binging on." He sighed. "Look, God is not Godzilla, or some white beardy guy who is waiting to punish you. And Nimi before Christ stood on the same grounds you stand right now. All have sinned Lara. No one is better than the other. Even if you were a virgin and did not know Christ, it doesn't matter to God. We were all weighed on the same scale and found wanting. No one had the 'better' sin. Sin is sin. The moment you acknowledge that you need him, he makes the slate clean. Nimi is righteous because of Jesus. She has no righteousness of her own. She is human and fell short of God's glory, so did we. She accepted Christ and she became clean. Stop thinking she's clean because of something she did. She chose to honour God with her body and stayed away from sex because sex outside marriage isn't God's will for mankind. Sex is something beautiful and sacred that should be between man and wife. No one else."

She watched him not saying a word.

"Rahab was a woman in the bible through whom Jesus came. She was in the lineage of Christ the Messiah. And guess what…"

"She was like virgin Mary?"

"Opposite. She was a prostitute. She wasn't even a Jew."

Lara watched her brother. He got so excited when he talked about Jesus. It was a pity she couldn't understand his passion.

"Heard of Tamar?" Lara shook her head and he continued. "Well her father-in-law slept with her. She was the first woman in the lineage of Jesus Christ. And what about Bathsheba? The woman who committed adultery with David? These women had no qualifications and yet God took them in and made them something. He gave them beauty for ashes."

"How do I know you're not making all these things up?"

"Pass me your bible please…"

She reached for the book she'd kept aside and passed it to him. He opened the bible to show her where the stories of the women were written. He highlighted the places he wanted her to read when she was alone. When he was done reading, she shook her head. "That was some messed up lineage."

"So if you can call it messed up, why do you think God is not ready to deal with your mess? These were women who had no one, no hope to be called into God's family and yet God's mercy still found a way to call them his people. He's not looking for the good people or the perfect people. He's looking for people who are willing. People who are ready to rise from the dust like the prodigal son…"

"Is that another story?"

"Yes." He sighed and opened the bible to show her where it was, marking it so she could read it later on.

"But sweetheart, all these things won't appear if you don't open your bible to read it. The bible is for reading and studying, not to decorate the house."

She nodded.

"So I want you to do me a favour. Read these things before bed or tomorrow morning while I'm away at church. When I get back, I want you to share what you've read with me and I'm going to give you a big surprise."

Her eyes brightened. "What?"

"Not telling. That's why it's a surprise."

She giggled. "I'm going to read it. I promise."

"I love you sweetheart."

She hugged him.

An eerie feeling enveloped her the moment Dapo left her room. Out of fear, she picked the bible, flipping through it desperately hoping it would make the feeling disappear.

What are you doing?

She ignored the thoughts in her head; the voice that had been leading her for years.

Oh, so you're suddenly going to become a reverend sister because your brother gave you some bullshit talk about Jesus and the yada that goes with it.

Well, it sounded good.

All bullshit. You better do what you do best. You think God is really like that? You allow him into your life and he makes life miserable for you.

She struggled to concentrate.

Didn't you see Nimi? You know she's dying to sleep with your brother, but she's scared. She didn't deny it when you asked her. This 'God'… some god that a bunch of people just make up refrains them from showing love to a man or woman they love. He hates pleasure. You've known sex as love all your life, why change now? Why make life difficult for yourself?

Dapo told me about God who is ready to receive me. I think I would like to find out about him and Dapo said the bible is the only way to find out.

The voice in her head snickered and she grew scared.

Oh, so you think God will forgive you? After what you did…

Stop

After killing your best friend's baby.

I didn't. Soji did.

Oh but you pushed him. And now you're pushing the blame on him. Very typical of you darling. So typical.

What do you think Dapo will do when he finds out the whole truth?

He can't find out

She felt the tears brimming already. *He's the only one I have right now. Oh god, he can't find out.*

Oh if you keep going this way with this bible thing, then rest assured that He will. He will find out about how you killed Aisha's baby in cold blood, he will find out about the incest game you and your father played, the lies you

told to cover up and you know what's going to be the major touchdown? He's going to find out Nimi was right about the kind of person you are. He's going to hate you when he realises he's been defending a liar, a murderer and a lunatic bold enough to cover up her father's atrocity.

She dropped the upturned bible on the bed and sobbed.

What am I going to do?

Shhh… everything will be alright. Just do what you've been doing. And we will play this game all well and good. As for that bible, drop it somewhere. It's going to ruin things for us.

She dabbed her face and picked the bible only to drop it back on her bedside table. She saw the part Dapo marked and for a moment she froze as the words reached out to her.

Love is patient, love is kind. It does not envy, it does not boast, it is not proud. It does not dishonour others, it is not self-seeking, it is not easily angered, and it keeps no record of wrongs. Love does not delight in evil but rejoices with the truth. It always protects, always trusts, always hopes, and always perseveres.

Love never fails. But where there are prophecies, they will cease; where there are tongues, they will be stilled; where there is knowledge, it will pass away.

Her brother's voice echoed in her head and she read it again. The voice in her head went silent as she read.

Did you read 1Corinthians chapter thirteen that talked about God's love and the way he wants us to love as I asked you to?

God's love is patient. God's love is kind. It keeps no record of wrongs.

The voice in her head was not kind. It was not patient. But that same voice had led her through life and had brought her this far. She couldn't just jump into this God's love train that wasn't familiar.

What if she couldn't keep up?

"God, are you real? Are you here? Did you want me to read this? I don't know what to do. I'm confused and there's a war going on inside me." She cried.

No answer.

She sighed in resignation. She should have known he wouldn't respond. What was she expecting? A voice thundering from heaven telling her what to do?

I told you he wasn't real.

She turned on her iPod to play some music hoping that would drown out the voice and cause her to sleep.



Dapo finished praying and was about settling into bed when he picked his bible. The Spirit led him to Proverbs chapter thirty-one verse ten.

A wife of noble character who can find? She is more precious than rubies.

He knew God was interrogating his thoughts and everything that had gone through his mind tonight. The doubt of Nimi's character and how his heart had jumped to make insinuations about her.

He sighed. "I'm sorry Lord, but she…"

No buts. You were wrong.

"So what do you want me to do? Call her tonight and say sorry?"

No, do things the right way. First take care of your own household before anything else.

He remained quiet.

Jibola has to leave.

He swallowed knowing the HolySpirit was right. He'd sensed something could happen if he let down his guards around Jibola next time. At the stairs,

hugging her had stirred his blood and only God's mercy had saved him from falling into sin tonight.

I never told you to bring her in the first place but I just allowed it.

"I'm sorry."

Don't give up on your sister. Nimi's outburst had a negative impact on her tonight but it's something I can work on. I will come to her at the right time.

He kept writing down as the Spirit led him to.

Forgive Nimi and mend your relationship. Stop taking her for granted.

He inhaled deeply. He realised he was missing her already as the Spirit began working on his heart and ministered to him.

But you will have to tread softly with her this time and pray against the trick of the enemy. She's still licking her wounds so she might struggle a bit but just trust me. She's my child so she'll yield to me.

"Thank you Father."

He began to think up different ways to send Jibola home without being rude about it. A few seconds later, his phone rang and his mother's ID flashed on the screen.

He didn't want to pick the call since he sensed God was still talking to him but feeling led to pick it, he did.

"Mum? Is everything alright? It's almost midnight."

"Can't I call my son again?" She chuckled.

"I'm sorry Mum. How are you? I'm glad you called." He smiled.

"Yea, I just thought I should say hello and check on you and the women of your household." She teased. "By the way, tell Jibola I want to see her *o. Ahnahn*… since she came to Lagos, she hasn't even been here to see me. Are we fighting? Tell her she should pack her things and come spend the remaining weeks with me or I'll come there and drag her myself. There are so many things we have to discuss."

Dapo blinked. *Oh my God. Father, is this you?*

"Oh that's… that's good. I'll tell her tomorrow morning or when I get back from church."

"I tried calling her but the network was bad. I decided to try yours and I'm glad it went through."

"I'm glad too."

"Okay my prince. Let me not keep you awake for too long. How's my baby Lara? My mind has been on her; can she come home sometime next week or thereabout?"

"Do you think it's safe for her?"

"Dapo, I told you, your father said he didn't do all those things. Lara has explained what happened to us. She said it wasn't true and it was some silly game she'd played with Aisha years ago."

"I want to believe him, but maybe Lara is scared Mum."

"Young man, the way you're being overprotective of Lara, I hope it's not affecting your relationship with Nimi *o*. You know the both of them don't get along."

Was God speaking through his mum too?

"If there's any woman that should be there in that house with you, it's Nimi. I know you've told me you two don't do stuff like that in Christianity. You need to make sure Lara knows her place in your life and Nimi is not threatened by it. If there's something that turns a woman off, it's when a man is too attached to his family. I'm not saying you shouldn't show us affection, but I'm a woman and I'm just saying how women feel."

"Mum you know I love Nimi and I'll stand up for her anytime…"

"When last did you see her?"

"She came over today…"

"Oh…" The line went quiet for some seconds. "With Jibola and Lara in your house?"

Dapo kept mute. He realised how unreasonable he had been.

"You going quiet tells me a lot already. I hope she went out of your house the same way she came in?"

"We haven't broken up if that's what you're asking."

"Okay *o*. Just give me feedback on whatever happens between you two. Hopefully she still sees you the same way."

"*Ah* Mum, do you know Nimi more than I do?"

"Sorry *o*. I may not know her the way you do, Mr Kitan Junior," She emphasized as if to drive the nail deeper. "But I saw that girl's eyes the day you brought her home and I could detect one or two things about her."

The conversation was getting interesting. His mum had never told him this before. He'd heard about older people seeing things younger people did not.

"What did you see?" He probed.

"One, she's madly in love with you. I could sense that she's someone that could go lengths without blinking twice. Secondly, she looks like someone that gets jealous easily. She's quiet I know, but when she gets jealous, hmmn, you won't like it. Who knows, maybe you'll have to start attending classes to learn how to make your future wife not jealous." His mother laughed.

"Very funny." A smile tugged at his lips. He'd prayed hoping Nimi would yield to God as he had said.

But God told him to tread softly as well. Was there something ahead?

"We'll be fine." He assured her feeling confident in his wooing skills. Nimi had not been able to resist him in the past. So why now?

"Thank you Mummy. We'll talk later. Love you ma."

"Goodnight my son. Love you too dear. Later."

She hung up.

"Dear God, you have to grant me strength for whatever is coming up." He prayed before drowsing off to sleep.



Nimi found herself in the Children's department as Ebele who took the children classes had not been able to make it to church because she was sick. She didn't have a problem standing in for her spiritual sister. Maybe God made it happen that way so she wouldn't be too engrossed in her troubles while sorting out the books in the Library. Working in the library had its perks. She enjoyed it, but she had to get her emotions in place when it pertained to spiritual sensitive situations that required her recommending books and today wasn't a good day. She had never complained about her work in church. She believed it was God who led her to do it and she couldn't imagine working somewhere else except God asked her to.

Her mind briefly flashed back to the misunderstanding she had with Dapo the previous day. Deep within, she knew she'd done wrong initially by ignoring the inner witness not to go to Dapo's house. But at least Dapo should have tried to hear her side of the story, instead he had chosen to see her as the bad person. It was obvious she wasn't important to him as she thought she was.

And the Jibola lady… Nimi couldn't get that fork incident out of her mind. She tried not to imagine what would have happened if she wasn't present. Dapo could have comfortably eaten from her palms and allowed her *eat him* with her eyes.

She shook her head. Where had those crazy thoughts come from?

All her life she'd never felt this anger or jealousy over someone she loved. Maybe it was because she had never been in a relationship. But was this what a relationship did? Expose who she really was? Pull out thoughts from nowhere, or had the thoughts been inside her all along? Was there a dark side to herself she wasn't aware of? Was this a journey to discover who she really was inside?

She had thought relationships hid things like this but it was the opposite. Every feeling, every emotion she had ignored in the past when she was single just came out of nowhere and took over her senses making her feel ungodly.

Was she capable of so much in her heart and all these things were only beginning to reveal it?

Was Lara right after all? Was she no different from her? Nimi couldn't imagine having a childhood similar to that of Lara. Would she have been the same, seeking love in the arms of every man who professed love for her? Would someone like Soji have attracted her too? Would she have done anything just to keep a man because she didn't want to end up alone?

Her mum wasn't aware of their break-up yet. Even Dapo had not called her as she had hoped he would later that night. Maybe if he'd called that night, things might have turned out different. Or if he had gotten down from his car and followed her into the house, she might have changed her mind.

She was right. She wasn't worth much to him.

Her attention drifted to a little girl who was dragging a pencil with a boy. She smiled at her hoping to work things out between them. The girl was pretty wearing a blue frock. She'd imagined giving birth to a girl. Some nights when she was alone, after speaking with Dapo, she would stand in front of her mirror and place her hand on her stomach wondering how and when a child will comfortably sit in her bulging abdomen. She was going to cherish every minute of it. The image of Dapo standing behind her with his hands covering hers would suddenly rise to the surface; she would blush with happiness and go to bed, dreaming of their relationship and their future together. She couldn't wait to have his babies.

"Whose pencil is it?" She snapped out of her thoughts turning to face two children.

"It's mine." The boy said still struggling for it.

“Thomas, stop it. What did Jesus say about being kind?” She took the pencil from him before it injured anyone of them. She turned to face the girl. “You know what, I’m going to give you another pencil if you give this back to Thomas okay?”

The girl relaxed.

“What’s your name?”

“Andrea.”

“That’s a lovely name.” She reached for her hand. Nimi was glad that the fight had ended and she’d made a new friend.



Nimi was tidying up after service when she felt someone tug at her skirt. She turned to see it was Andrea, her new friend.

The child beamed at her.

She looked up and saw a young man with dark brown eyes. He had a slight resemblance to Andrea.

“Hi...” He greeted, smiling at her. He had a pleasant voice and a nice accent too. She wondered why he was looking at her in that funny way. “When my niece told me about the amazing aunty who gave her a Barbie pen, I didn’t think I would meet someone this beautiful.”

She managed a smile.

“I’m so sorry, where are my manners. My name is Eric but my friends call me Ricky.” He extended his hands.

She received it. He was quite forward but she didn’t seem to mind.

“Nice to meet you Eric.”

He kept staring at her. He had a disarming smile and a lovely accent. She silently chided herself. Why on earth was she noticing all of this?

“What’s your name?”

"Nimi."

"Lovely name. It means my own or something like that right?"

"Uh, the full name is Oluwalonimi. It means God owns me." She smiled when he nodded like he was enraptured by her explanation.

"Oh wow, makes it much better. Lovely name, lovely face, lovely smile and a lovely heart. Andrea won't stop talking about how kind you were." He continued. "Do you work here? I've never seen you before."

"I work in the church library and I'm just taking Ebele's place today."

"Oh I see. So that's where they hide such beauty, such royalty. Why do they do that?"

"I don't know." She chuckled wondering why he was making her feel like she was some kind of Miss Universe that had been hiding in some hole.

"Okay forgive me for sounding Shakespearean but thanks for helping this little chipmunk here." He tugged at Andrea's hair and grinned when she tried to retaliate.

"Are you leaving? Andrea and I are on our way home and we can drop you off while I get to know you."

"Uh, I don't think it's a good idea." She replied.

"Why?" There was an innocent look on his face.

"Uh, I still have to wrap up a few things and check out the library since I'm done here."

"Oh okay. So you wouldn't mind giving me your number, would you?"

She hesitated. She knew she wasn't meant to. But she shrugged. Was there any harm in giving the guy her number? They were just acquaintances and nothing more. Besides, networking for career opportunities wasn't a bad idea, she told herself.

He typed it in and buzzed her, smiling when it rang out.

"I would really love to see you again Nimi."

She nodded without saying a word watching him as he left with his niece. Andrea turned to wave and she reciprocated the gesture.

She felt a warning check in her spirit.

“I’m sure he’s going to forget me once he gets home so don’t worry about it.” She said to herself and relaxed.

But why did she feel like she’d made a wrong move?

CHAPTER 26

Nimi arrived at the office a few minutes past eight that morning, after much contemplation. She knew Lara could come up with anything just to embarrass her again. She expected the worst. Nothing seemed out of place, but she was still on edge.

She wondered if Lara would remunerate her for the time she spent working and running her errands or if she would be cruel as usual and treat her like a slave who deserved no compensation for her efforts.

She thought of her bible study that morning. She had skimmed through the part of the scriptures God had led her to read.

Love does not keep record of wrongs. Love covers a multitude of sins.

She couldn't think of that right now. She was going to do what she could do. She needed to be strong and not let people walk over her like a doormat. The bible verse she'd read that morning made her feel vulnerable and weak. She needed something to toughen her up.

Everyone looked unusually quiet and well composed. She surmised her boss must have resumed. Even Nonye was at her best behaviour and she greeted her warmly the moment she stepped in.

"Good morning Nimi, how was your weekend, fine I hope?"

"Good morning Nonye. My weekend was alright, thank God." She managed and settled into her chair heaving a sigh of relief. She glanced at Lara's office door and her heart skipped a beat. Lara was really becoming a terror to her. How did God expect her to survive working with such a disturbed woman?

Have courage Nimi, have courage.

"Oga wants to see you." Nonye turned on her chair and faced her.

Nimi nodded. She dabbed her face and sprayed some body-spritz before her *boss madam* would say something nasty about her body again.

Nonye smiled at her. "I'm in your good books right? You'll stand up for me in case you're being asked about my behaviour in the past couple of weeks."

Nimi forced a smile. Nonye was the last thing on her mind. Nimi was sure that was the last thing on Lara's mind as well.

No matter what her boss spewed at her, she wasn't going to let the pernicious effect of Lara's words sink in. Her guards were up.

Tolani had been singing a secular song this morning, something about 'haters hating'.

Yea, focus on the song, not some bible verse about loving those that despise you.

She blinked wondering where the voice had come from. Shaking her head, she stepped into Lara's office and closed the door behind her.

Her eyes widened at the sight of Dapo. She retreated almost losing her balance. He was officially dressed, looking handsome as always in a navy blue custom suit and brown brogue shoes.

"Hey beautiful." He smiled, standing in front of Lara's table. She did a quick assessment to confirm if his sister was sitting behind him.

She wasn't. Of course Lara couldn't be sitting quietly watching Dapo lavish his attention on her without a fight. What was she expecting?

There was a nicely wrapped bouquet of roses planted on the table beside him. He picked it up and walked towards her. He looked nice as always with beards well groomed and clean. Even without a tie, his white shirt did enough justice to his appearance. He didn't need to pull much off to look good, he always looked good.

"I'm sorry about Saturday." He reached for one of her hands and squeezed it gently looking into her eyes. "I thought about everything you said and I'm here to put things right." He raised her hands to his lips and planted a soft kiss on it. "You're the one for me, you know that right?"

She recoiled, unsettled by his action. Did he think he could just waltz in here with some roses and cover up the breach between them? She couldn't pretend she wasn't hurt or that nothing happened between her and Lara. He had chosen his sister over her. Lara's drama was the last thing she wanted to deal with if she was going to be spending the rest of her life with him.

He had Jibola and Lara. He seemed to be doing fine without her in the picture.

He noticed her retreat and his brows furrowed.

"Baby, what's wrong?"

"I'm sorry Dapo, but I don't think this thing between us can work anymore."



Dapo laughed and shook his head wondering if she was doing that thing women did. Playing hard to get, pretending not to be interested so he could chase them. It didn't take him long to make them change their mind.

This is Nimi.

He adjusted his thought pattern and smiled trying to reach for her again but her body language said it all. She wasn't even looking into his eyes. He began to feel uncomfortable with the flowers in his hands.

"I don't understand…" He dropped the flowers and looked at her. "Am I misunderstanding something here?"

She shrugged. "I'm glad you're setting things right Dapo, but maybe I'm just not cut out for a life with you and everything that is involved in your world."

He closed his eyes inhaling deeply not wanting to get upset again. "Is this still about me choosing between you and my sister?"

"Far from that. It was selfish of me to ask you to choose. I'm just making life easy for the both of us. I want Lara to be fine just as you do. I've worked for her and my dignity has been sacrificed at the altar of her mouth. I've tried to bear all that she does, but I know my capacity. I believe God knows my capacity too. You seemed to be content and it didn't look like you needed me when I came over on Saturday. I'm happy for you. So let me leave while my sanity is still intact."

His eyes bored into hers and he remembered his mother's words.

"Is this about Jibola?"

She raised a brow and looked at something else, but he'd seen the look in her eyes before she averted her gaze. She was jealous. Nimi couldn't hide how she felt about Jibola's presence in his house.

"She left today, just in case you're wondering." He said, hoping that would make things better.

"Happy for you." She replied.

"Babe, why are you doing this?"

Tread gently

She ignored him and at that moment he was tempted to grab her and kiss her senseless till she gave in, rather than go through the long route of coaxing her with words.

"You talk about me being selfish and you're breaking up with me. You told me you love me. Where did all the love talk fly to?" He was still trying to wrap his mind around her attitude.

"Sometimes Love thinks of itself too." She spouted. "I can't love you if I'm being dragged in the mud every single time by your sister. What happens when we get married and she's still the same way, huh? What happens when I need you to be with me and *Baby* Lara needs her brother? I'm not going to be a competition in any man's life Dapo, neither am I going to be an option."

"Love doesn't seek its own Nimi. Why are you talking like this?"

He watched her battling with her emotions. He tried to reach for her, but she turned away from him.

"You just keep hurting me and I don't know what to do anymore. Honestly Dapo, I just…"

"Hey…" He reached for her arms and turned her to face him. When he saw her tear-stained cheeks, he pulled out his handkerchief and wiped her face gently pulling her close to him. "*Shh…* baby, I'm sorry. I love you. Please forget what happened on Saturday. It's not going to happen again."

His arms slid around her. He raised her right hand and placed it against the left side of his chest. "Right here baby, that's where you are and no one can take your place. You are the queen of my heart. You make this heart do amazing things whenever it sets eyes on you. Don't you know what you're capable of doing to me? Don't you see how my life is beginning to make sense since you walked into it?" He touched her cheeks, hoping she would stop fighting him and give in.

She kept staring at him, her hands still on his chest.

"You're safe with me baby." He smiled into her eyes when he saw she was beginning to soften. "Don't you see what you do to me?"

She looked away and pulled her hands from his. "I need time Dapo. I need time to think about us, about all of this."

He swallowed. What had he done? Was he losing her forever? He'd always seen her as the starry-eyed girl who had her heart in her eyes. The girl that would smile and laugh at his jokes and often tell him how she loved him. The girl that came all the way to Ajah to see him and brought a bowl of stew with her. The girl that shared her heart with him whenever he called her at night.

Had he only seen the good side of her then?

"How much time do you need?" He asked. Part of him felt as if it was being ripped apart.

She sighed. "A month maybe." Shaking her head, she continued. "I don't know, I just think I need to get my life in order. My life doesn't feel balanced anymore. I need to discover myself, find out what I really want. Everything was fine for me before you stepped in. You came in and just turned my world upside down. This whole relationship thing is new for me and with all that's going on, I don't know what to call it anymore. I don't want to hurt you or Lara. So maybe it's better I stay away for a while. Besides, I'll soon be rounding up my master's program so maybe this is just the time I need to focus on my dissertation."

A month! Dapo managed a smile when he felt the Spirit cautioning him again to tread softly.

She's not asking for a week Lord; she's asking for a month. A whole month!

What if this lasts longer than a month? What if she changes her mind finally? What if some guy comes in and swoops her away?

Pray for her

"Are we going to be calling each other during this break?" He asked.

She nodded. "I just need you to understand that I don't want you bringing it up whenever we talk, and if I don't pick, please understand I'm trying to make sure I'm not being put under pressure."

He stared at her. She wasn't playing nice. How could she do this to him?

"We can be friends till I'm sure I'm ready to put my feet into this again."

She seemed to enjoy putting down rules for him.

"Is God asking you to do this? Is he the one leading you or it's just your ego?" He blurted without thinking twice.

She shot him a dirty look. His mention of God's leading had definitely hit the wrong spot.

"What if it's my ego leading me? What if it's the pride I have left that's keeping me standing? At least that's the only thing that makes me feel human right now, and not like a cripple."

He raised his hands. He had obviously made the wrong move. "I'm sorry."

She rubbed her temples and inhaled deeply. "I have to go. If you need me to sort out anything, just call."

He watched her leave and could do nothing about it.

Dapo sat on the table behind him and placed his head in his hands.

This was harder than he had anticipated, and it had not gone well at all.



Lara was glad when Dapo revealed the surprise to her. Ikenna was going to be spending some time with them and she couldn't be happier. At least he would make her forget Soji and she really needed someone in her life now that Jibola was gone. She suspected Jibola's sudden departure had something to do with Nimi even though Dapo had told her their mother had requested to see her.

She watched her brother as he sat quietly on the couch staring at the screen absentmindedly. The moment he came in from work, she knew something was wrong. There was an aura of defeat around him and she wondered if it had to do with his relationship. She was tempted to ask him but she debated her thoughts within.

Was it Nimi? Had they finally broken up? She doubted it. Nimi didn't look like someone who could let her brother go so easily. One part of her was glad the girl was gone from their lives for good, but the other side of her wanted to reach out to him and probe further to know if he was alright. He'd gone to her office earlier to help her sort out things and he'd returned looking downcast.

She asked him about his day hoping to get more from him. He had smiled and told her he was fine.

But she knew he wasn't.

Had she also hurt her brother? She'd thought taking Nimi out of the picture would make them all happy, but why did she suddenly feel she had taken something special away from the brother she loved?

She reached for the remote and turned down the volume of the TV. He glanced at her and she asked.

"Just tell me…"

"What?"

"You look withdrawn. You're not the Dapo that left here this morning."

"Work I guess." He stood up.

"It's Nimi, isn't it?"

"I doubt she's a topic you want to delve into tonight."

"Did she break up with you?"

He shrugged and she saw her brother look so vulnerable for the first time in his life. He suddenly looked like a boy that wanted to cry. She wanted to reach out and hug him but she sat still.

"Something like that." He replied and bit his lip while shaking his head. "To think I…"

"She'll come back." She heard herself say and doubted she meant it. "She's quite stubborn y'know."

He nodded and planted a kiss on her forehead. "Make sure you go to bed soon if you plan on spending the whole day with Ikenna. If I remember clearly, you two can't get enough of each other when gisting."

She smiled and watched him head upstairs. Turning back to the TV, she wondered if Nimi was right after all. Maybe she needed more help than Dapo could provide. Maybe she needed rehab. What kind of a girl hurt people who loved her? Her brother had done all he could to help her and here she was hurting him. Was it jealousy that drove her to do this or something else? Was she just cruel or disturbed? Nimi had never done anything against her. Nimi had been kind to her since she walked into their house yet she'd been nothing but cruel to her. She'd taunted her by insinuating an affair between Jibola and Dapo and Nimi hadn't taken that so well.

Lara silently wondered if she was capable of really loving anyone. Was that why all her friends left her and yet, she still found a way to hurt those that stayed?

She was going to resume work soon. It was probably because she was staying home for too long that all these thoughts were crawling in. She would spend this week with Ikenna and make plans to move on with life when he was gone.

For now, she was going to cherish the moments she had with him. She couldn't let him go too.



Nimi stepped into the KEA AFRICA building, the NGO she had applied to weeks ago to help out in her research. She had sent them a letter on short notice, hoping God would make things work in her favour. She was glad when she got a mail in response to her letter.

Glancing at her watch, she felt satisfied within as she'd arrived on time. She had never met the boss before and when he scheduled an interview with her, she had written down all her plans, hoping they would oblige to her request. She just needed some information that would help her in analysing the data in her research including statistics that revealed the place of KEA AFRICA in Nigeria. How far had the NGO done in impacting Nigeria in terms of developing the society and promoting women's rights? She hoped the other NGOs would give her a call soon.

She was sitting at the reception when someone stepped out of the main office and she looked up just to see a familiar face.

Eric?

She was about to look away when his eyes caught hers. He even looked nicer in a button-down shirt nicely tucked into carton coloured pants.

"Nimi?"

She waved shyly and felt ashamed that a few seconds ago, she'd just tried to ignore him. He called her a day before but she had missed his call unintentionally. She hadn't been bothered to call back though.

"Hi!" He beamed and headed towards her. "Nice to see you on a Wednesday morning." He grinned down at her.

She smiled back. "And you too."

"You look nice by the way." He complimented and she was glad she picked the yellow blazer over the brown today. Dapo often told her yellow looked good on her.

"What are you doing here?"

Should I tell him?

"Uh, I'm running my master's program so this is part of a project."

"Oh, what school?"

"Unilag."

"Interesting. Kunle is a close friend of mine and I could speak with him to help you out."

"Oh really?" She beamed. "I would really appreciate that."

"But only if you promise to have lunch with me."

She smiled at him. He wasn't going to let her off easily. It was just lunch and she would know what his intentions were, if he had something else in mind.

"Okay, just lunch."

"You just made my day. C'mon, I could introduce you and put in a word for you." He stepped aside when she rose to join him.

"Thank you so much Eric. You don't know how much this means to me."



"You know you can always feel free around me." Eric sliced through a piece of chicken and helped himself to it with a fork. "I'm the kind of guy that appreciates an open-minded lady because what are friends for?"

"I appreciate what you did for me. I wasn't expecting the meeting to be that fast."

"Well, if you had gone in alone, Kunle would have drilled you trust me. But thank God I was there at the right time. I can't imagine you going through so much stress when you have other aspects of your dissertation to focus on."

"Yea..." She took a sip of her juice and sighed.

"I finished my undergrad from Ife but did my master's degree in Unilag as well."

"Oh really, that's nice. What year?"

"About three years ago."

"Wow, who would have known."

"Why?" He smirked.

"You look young. Very young." She allowed her eyes settle on his features and got lost for a moment. Dapo was ten years older. That had also been a cause for concern at a point but she'd waved it away with time.

She wondered how old Eric was.

"I get that a lot." He grinned. "I graduated early so yea, it's expected. I'm just twenty-seven. I know you ladies don't like saying your age but…"

"I'll be twenty-six in November." She replied.

"Oh, that's nice. Just one year apart. We fit almost perfectly." He looked into her eyes and she looked away, the meaning of his words sinking in.

She remained quiet.

"Or is there some guy I should know about?"

"It's complicated." She replied. "I don't think I would like to talk about it."

"It's okay." He shrugged. "I just wanted to know if I stood a chance in your life."

Wow, the guy was pretty forward. This was only lunch not a date.

She searched for the right words. "You're a great guy Eric, but my boyfriend and I…"

"Is it serious?" He asked.

She sighed. Right now she didn't know what it was anymore. These days, she hardly allowed God lead her. She was just bent on following her emotions and they seemed to be getting her into trouble. Like the Eric guy, he smelled like trouble, but her emotions were having none of it. They just wanted to relish the fact that someone else could spend time with her and see her as special. He looked like someone who loved having fun and she could tell she wasn't the first girl he was treating this way. He seemed to be well known in the restaurant too.

He had probably brought other girls here.

"Do you mind if we don't talk about it?" The thought of Dapo and how she was doing this behind him suddenly hit her and she felt guilt seep into her.

I'm not cheating on him.

"Can we just be friends?"

"Of course. I'm here if you need a shoulder to cry on or someone to lean on."

"Thank you, I appreciate it." She looked at her wristwatch. "I have to go home now, it's getting late."

"Where's home?"

"Ketu."

"I can drop you at home if you don't mind."

"I don't think that's necessary Eric."

"I insist. That's what friends do, they help each other."

His words struck a chord in her heart and her mind flashed back to how she'd expected Dapo to stand up for her but he'd chosen to defend Lara instead.

"Thank you." She said as he stood up to join her.



Nimi bounded up the stairs, exhausted but glad she'd had a nice time. She'd killed two birds with a stone and was glad she'd been able to sort out a part of her project. Eric was knowledgeable about many things and so it was easy talking to him. He was the kind of friend she would love to hang out with if he was going to let it stay that way. He had a certain charm about him and for once she didn't feel the need to remember she was talking to someone older or someone who had a sister that hated her and wanted them apart.

Eric got her talking. She had nothing to say initially but he had a way of making her talk and they'd kept the conversation going. She was surprised

when she found herself sharing the frivolities surrounding her master's program with him, things she'd never shared with Dapo. Eric was a guy she could relate with since they had both studied here in Nigeria and had gone through a similar vigorous process. They'd had a good laugh when he told her about his lecturers and mimicked them. She'd laughed till her sides ached.

Eric was right. He was someone she could get comfortable with. He had said he would call her tonight. She didn't mind.

Her mum was home when she returned and Nimi greeted her politely. Tolani kept watching her like a vulture ready to feed on a prey. She wasn't going to let her spoil her mood tonight. Tolani had disapproved of Nimi breaking up with Dapo. Well, she was the one in the relationship and she could do whatever she wanted to do.

"Good evening Mum."

"Good evening dear, how are you and how did your day go?"

"Fine. Thank God."

"Did you get what you went looking for?"

She nodded and faced Tolani. "What's for dinner?"

"Uh, Madam, why didn't you tell me you had broken up with Dapo?" Her mother cut in.

Nimi glanced at her sister. She was tempted to slap the girl's big mouth.

"I was going to…"

"After the young man that brought you home or before?"

"I did not want to disturb you mummy, besides it's not permanent." She rolled her eyes at Tolani.

"The way it's going, it will soon become permanent. Who is the guy?"

"He's a friend I met in church mummy. He helped me out today and was kind enough to drop me at home."

"Okay, just be careful. I don't like how things are going between you and Dapo and you didn't tell me, your mother of all people. I don't like that you're leaving me out of sensitive things like this."

"Because it wasn't a big deal and I just wanted peace from all their family *wahala*. His sister needs family time so I want to give him his space."

"And how does he feel about it?"

"He's okay with it I guess." She wasn't ready to start narrating one long story about how Lara kept coming between them. She'd told Tolani about Lara's antagonistic nature and she hoped her sister had not spilled that too. Nimi would never trust her sister again if she did.

"So, is it alright if I call him to come and see me?"

"No mum, really it's only going to make things worse. We are just taking a break that's all. It's not like we are even engaged or anything. You don't have to call him mum. I'll be fine, I promise."

"But I can call him at least? I think he's a man of impeccable character and he must have a reason for this."

She sighed. Her mum wasn't taking no for an answer. "Okay you can. But please just let it be as it is. I'm begging you mum."

"Alright."

She headed for her room and settled into the bed taking off her blazer and her shoes. Her phone rang and she reached for it.

It was Eric.

"Hello Milady!"

She giggled. "At least give me one hour to settle in *now*."

"I'm sorry, I just wanted to be sure you're in and safe."

"Yes I'm in. Are you home already?"

"Close. I hope you had a nice time."

"Yes Eric I did. Thank you."

"Has anyone ever told you that the way you call a name is attractive? You just say it with too much finesse, so effortless and exotic?"

"Uh, you'll be the first and thanks if that's a compliment."

"I mean it. You don't say it with the H-factor Heric or Helic. You're just exquisite and you have exquisite taste."

"Hmmn, you *ehn*. You won't flatter me to death." She chuckled when he mimicked the names. "Anyway, I have to clean up now. I'll call you tomorrow to discuss more about my project since you mentioned you have one or two clues about it. Thank you so much."

"The pleasure is all mine. Later Nimi. Sleep well."

"And you too Eric. Goodnight."

And she hung up.

She was about rising from bed when another call came through and without thinking or looking at the caller ID she picked it. "Hey Eric, did you forget something?"

"This is Dapo."

She swallowed as her heart raced faster. "Uh, Hi…"

"Who's Eric?" He asked bluntly.

Nimi tried to play it cool though her heart felt like it was going to jump out of her chest, she thought she would be able to bear him calling her the way he did before their breakup.

A smug smile tugged at her lips. There was a kind of thrill she felt when Dapo demanded to know who Eric was.

Oh now you see how it is.

Love does not behave rudely. Love thinks no evil.

"He's just a friend." She shrugged wishing the love scripture will fade into the background.

"I called you earlier, your line was busy." He went on. "I'm going to take your word for it, if a friend calls you at this time and seemed to be 'forgetting something'."

"It's not a midnight call Dapo, *jeez* take it easy. You talk like I'm not allowed to have friends anymore. I don't choose your friends for you, neither do I ask who you talk to at night. And we are meant to be on a break if I remember correctly."

The line went quiet for a while and she thought he'd hung up till he spoke up again. "How are you?"

"I'm fine thank you, and you?"

"I'm good. I was just calling to check up on you. How's mum and Tolani? And how's your dissertation coming up?"

"It's all going fine I guess. Mum and Tolani are fine."

"Can I come and check up on them?"

She hesitated. He was obviously looking for a way to see her. "Sure."

"Are you free this weekend? I know we are on a break but I was wondering if we could hang out. A friend is opening up a restaurant in Lekki this weekend and he invited me to the launch party. It's been his dream for years."

She closed her eyes inhaling deeply. Lord knew she wanted to be with him and go places with him. It could even help them bond again. Maybe it was what they needed. But her pride came up again. "Let me think about it."

"It's funny how I've been getting so many invites recently." He laughed. "One of my cousins staying in Abuja is getting married next month. She was a widow before she met Yilu. She's a reserved person so she wanted something private."

"Oh I see… I'm happy for her. That's great news."

"Yea."

"How was work?" She was finally able to ask him.

"Stressful."

"Sorry, try and relax. Take care of yourself okay?"

"Sure."

"What about Lara?"

"She went out with Ikenna, hopefully they'll be back soon." She could hear him smiling over the phone.

"That's good."

The line went quiet again and Nimi waited not knowing what to say. When did they go from two people who couldn't get enough of each other to people who could hardly keep a conversation going?

"I miss you Nimi…"

"Dapo…" She pleaded but he went on.

"I don't care about you wanting to take a break from me babe. You keep pushing me away and I feel like you're playing with my heart. What if I wronged you? Am I too far gone to apologise? I am not some guy you saw one day and we just hit it off. We had a path ahead of us. We knew what we were about. We knew God was leading us.

"But right now, you're not listening to God or me. It makes me wonder if I have to walk on eggshells around you because I'm worried about what you're going to do."

A tear ran down her cheek and she wiped it away.

"I love my sister Nimi, and I love you too. If you were in her shoes, I would take your side first. It's only natural. She needs help. She's battling many demons of her past and present. Do you think I don't secretly wonder if I can't help my sister? If she really needs to go to someplace where she can receive better help? Do you think I don't secretly imagine what her life would be if she has no one to be there for her? Lara is not like you Nimi, she's not put together and needs people around her so she doesn't harm herself. She's no saint, she says words and when she says those words to you, they hurt me too.

"I just wanted you to understand that she's a girl hurting and tends to hurt others. I wish I could make her stop hurting you, I really wish you two would be best friends forever but for now, it's not that way. Are you now going to let her come between us? Is that how little I mean to you?"

More tears poured down her cheeks. He was transparent about his feelings.

He sighed when she didn't respond.

"Goodnight. Sleep tight."

And he hung up.

Nimi dropped the phone on the bed and wept into her hands as everything he'd said suddenly felt true and revealed her heart. Why did she behave that way? Why didn't she realise that she was playing with his heart? In the past she'd heard stories of women playing with men's hearts and she would subconsciously judge and despise them. But now, she'd done the same.

Was she capable of much more she wasn't yet aware of? She was scared of herself. How much more did she have hidden inside of her? Dapo had made her sound like an unforgiving and rebellious child.

She couldn't deny it. She'd been acting like one since their breakup.

Even God, who she asked for guidance each time, now seemed distant.

"Daddy are you mad with me?" She sobbed into her hands. She couldn't hold it in. "I'm sorry, I didn't mean to." She picked her bible and knelt down. "What kind of a person am I? Why did I choose my ego over you, Dear Lord? She sniffed. "Please forgive me. Forgive me for hurting Lara with my words, even if she hurt me. You're more concerned about what's going on in me than whatever happens to me on the external…" More tears flowed. "I'm sorry about Dapo, sorry I chose to push him away, even when he kept coming after me, I chose to relish in the thought that I could hurt him with Eric too unconsciously. I kept thinking of myself and what I wanted. Please help me to receive your healing and I pray for Lara too, that you'll continue to work on her heart and

heal her." She wiped her face carelessly. "And whatever she throws at me, grant me the grace and the strength to smile and bless her in the midst of it all. In Jesus name."

For the rest of the night, she prayed in tongues before drowsing off to sleep.

CHAPTER 27

“Why are you scared? I just want to show you something…” A dark man in a hoodie pulled at Nimi’s hands, almost dragging her. Casting furtive glances around, she balked.

“I don’t want to see anything. Please leave me alone.” She kept struggling but the man pulled her closer to a room where another stocky guy who had been smoking was waiting by the door.

The struggle grew intense and she started to cry.

Her captor raised his hand, smacking her across the face so that she fell to the floor. When she managed to rise, she was bleeding but that didn’t stop her from trying to crawl away.

“You’re not going anywhere.” He grabbed her by the waist and she kept kicking and crying while he manhandled her. When she was too spent to resist him, he threw her over his shoulders laughing and exchanging vulgar remarks with his friend.

She looked up but was too weak to move. When she realised she’d been overpowered, she cried out. “Dapo!”

“Nimi!”

Dapo jerked from the pillow only to realise he'd been dreaming. Heaving a sigh of relief, he settled back into bed. His bible was still on his chest and he placed it on his bedside table.

It had felt so real. He had been trying to see the guy's face but he couldn't because of the hood. The other stocky guy was unfamiliar, and he wondered if Nimi was in trouble.

What kind of trouble could she be in? Should he call her and tell her to be careful?

Pray for her

He had learned to recognise the burden when it came. And so immediately he got the prompting of the Spirit, he began to pray for her as the Spirit led him to.



Nimi was about leaving home for school the next morning when she got a call from Eric.

"Hello Eric, good morning."

"Hey dear, good morning to you too. Hope you slept well?"

She was going to ask him to reduce the way he used endearing words for her but she let it slide and replied him politely. "I am fine thank you. Sorry I don't have the luxury for a chat right now, I am on my way to school…."

"Yea, that was one reason why I called. Uh, Kunle just buzzed me today and told me he's rethinking what we spoke about yesterday. He said he was going to let you know when he had the time but you know all these big Nigerian men. They forget things easily."

"Oh no… really?" She frowned. "I don't understand. I thought this was resolved yesterday?" She sighed impatiently. "But why now…"

“I told him I would come and pick you and drive to his office if that’s alright by you. I will stand in for you as a reference. If any complications arise, I will be the one responsible. I think it’s due to the bad experience they had in the past, so he’s reluctant. But I’m sure he will release the data to you, since I’m standing in for you.”

Nimi glanced at her watch. She intended to meet with Kemi before classes, but she would just have to cancel.

She felt a nudge in her spirit and wondered what it was. It was an uncomfortable feeling and she tried to place a finger on it.

“Uh okay, you can come and pick me at Maryland around the BRT side.” If he didn’t come on time, she would go herself. Ikeja wasn’t so far away from Maryland.

“I’m on my way already. Later dear.”

She hung up and stared at her phone. There was something wrong, but she couldn’t place it.

“Daddy, please take control.” She whispered as she left the house.



“When did Kunle call you?” Nimi asked Eric, curious that he was volunteering to help her without much ado.

“Last night, after I spoke with you. I didn’t want to call you again since it was late.”

She nodded, trying to take in his words. She grew suspicious when he kept typing into his phone as he drove.

“But don’t you have to be at work or something? I don’t get why you would come all the way to pick me when I can go by myself.”

"I can go to work from there, it's around Ogba. I just wanted to be like the Good Samaritan you know. Like Jesus talked about in the bible." He glanced at her and winked. "You look beautiful by the way."

"Thank you." She looked ahead and the traffic initially building up seemed to have died down which she was grateful for. They sped up Mobolaji Bank Anthony and kept going till she realised he was taking a turn she wasn't familiar with.

"Uh, I was thinking… the project you told me about, I have a friend who is very knowledgeable about things like that, especially when it comes to the statistical aspect."

She got the nudge again. "I think I will like to get down here Eric."

He turned to look at her quite surprised. "What?"

"I said I would like to get down here."

"Why?"

"I just want to get down. Is it now a crime to get down?" Her heart raced faster as she saw his demeanour change. He was obviously driving in the opposite direction of KEA AFRICA. She knew her way around Ikeja quite well so she could tell if it was a short cut or it was entirely another route.

The guy was up to no good. She should have known he was the one the Spirit was warning her about that morning but had been too distracted to listen.

"I'm sorry babe but you can't get down here. At least let me get to a place where I can park properly so I don't get fined by the police."

"I don't care. I just want to get down. I don't care if the police stops you, I'll just tell them you're holding me down against my will."

He frowned and glanced at her shaking his head. "You think you're abroad." He scoffed and his laughter frightened her.

God! How could I be so stupid?

"You better calm down. You think the police will take your side? They will ask you what you're doing in my car in the first place."

Her mind raced and she kept praying. *Daddy what should I do? Daddy do something…*

A thought dropped into her mind and she jumped at it.

She picked her phone and dialled Dapo's number. "It's like you don't know who I am, or who my boyfriend is…"

He seemed to panic. "Who are you? The Governor's daughter?"

"More than that, I am God's child. You just watch." She didn't know where the boldness came from, but she knew it had to do with the power of prayer and the presence of the HolySpirit within her.

She ignored him hoping Dapo would pick. *Oh God, please let Dapo pick*. She glanced at Eric and saw fear flash in his eyes. He seemed to be threatened by her actions and the confidence she exuded.

He kept driving till they got to a spot where some policemen were flagging down cars with gun in their hands. She heard him curse under his breath realizing that he had not anticipated the police would be stopping cars. He picked his wallet and when his car approached them, they flagged it down. "These bloody police officers. *Na bribe go kill* them I swear."

"Officer…" He greeted when the policeman kept glancing at him curiously. He reached to put money into the man's hands but the other policeman who was unaware of the exchange called out.

"Oga, this car looks like the one we have been looking for *o.*"

"What?" Eric glanced at Nimi like she was the reason behind his bad luck and turned off the ignition. She took the opportunity to get down from the car still hoping Dapo would pick his call.

"*Ah, oga,* you might have to follow us to the police station *o."*

"This is ridiculous…"

"And your girlfriend too."

Nimi frowned. "I am not his girlfriend. He held me down against my will."

"Don't mind her, we were there together…" He snapped.

Nimi protested. "Officer, who are you going to believe?"

The other police officer raised his gun threateningly. "*Madam, if the man hold you down, you no suppose be inside him car na. You go follow us go station o."*

"Nimi…" Her boyfriend's voice came through finally.

"Dapo…" She breathed, relieved to hear his voice. "Please I need you. I'm in trouble."



Nimi was seated in a restaurant moments after her narrow escape. Her boyfriend had found a way to pull her out of the police incident that morning. Dapo happened to know the Deputy Officer who was able to talk to his men about releasing her. They had taken Eric away and Nimi could not imagine what could have happened if God had not intervened with the police.

Her disobedience to God had led her to all of this. If only she'd listened and avoided Eric in the beginning. Yet God still came through for her.

She couldn't bear to think of what Eric had planned to do. What if he had some diabolical plans up his sleeves? What if he'd tried to rape her?

She grew cold at the thought and shivered in the warm weather. She cringed. She wouldn't be able to live with herself for the rest of her life because she had no one to blame but her foolish ego that had almost put her into trouble.

For a while, she sat in the restaurant still dazed by everything. She wanted to cry but no tears came. She just stared into her cup of Pepsi on the table.

It felt like hours before Dapo came and found her. She got up when she saw him and ran into his arms. She stayed there for a while, scared that if she let go, she would lose him completely.

"I'm sorry." She mumbled into his shirt. She tasted salt but wasn't bothered to wipe her tears away.

"Hey… you're here, you're safe and that's all I need to know." He rubbed her back soothingly. When he realised she was crying, he pulled up her face to look into her eyes rubbing the tears away gently.

"I was stupid…"

"No baby, it could have happened to anybody. C'mon, let's get you out of here." He pulled her close to himself protectively while carrying her bag in his other hand. She slid her arms to his side and allowed him lead her to his car.

"But don't you want to hear what I have to say…" She protested wondering why he was letting her go so easily. He needed to yell at her and tell her she deserved it for breaking up with him and allowing another man's attention get into her head.

The way she'd said Lara deserved Soji. She deserved this too.

He smiled at her leaning close to kiss her forehead. "If you're fine with God, then you're fine with me. I am just glad you're alright and you're here. And that's all that matters really."

She could not believe him. If she was the one, she knew she would let him know how she felt. She was beginning to put the pieces together about Dapo's character. When Dapo loved, he loved with abandon. He'd done the same for his sister. She was different and had been upset because she felt his love should be critical like hers.

Still fazed by his character and how loving he was, she stood on tiptoe and pressed her lips against his.

She sensed his surprise and smiled against his lips. He hesitated, though not for long as he wrapped his arms around her pulling her close to him so he could further lean into their kiss. He was her first and it felt so good but brief. She never knew kissing him would feel this way. His lips were so soft and delicate as they pressed against hers with a gentle nibble.

He stepped back and looked into her eyes caressing her cheeks. He looked lost for a moment as his eyes danced around her face, drinking in the sight of her.

"Are you okay with us doing this…?" He asked finally looking into her eyes.

She nodded, smiling sheepishly. "That's to say thank you."

He bit his lip returning her smile. "I hope you don't plan on giving me another kiss to tell me how much you miss me."

She grinned. "If you tempt me, I will."

He reached for her hands and squeezed it. "Let's grab something to eat and I'll take you to school when we're done. Is that okay baby?"

"Sure."

"I love you."

"I love you more Dapo." She whispered. He opened the door for her and waited for her to settle into the passenger's seat before driving off.

Deep within, she knew she wasn't supposed to kiss him due to the boundary they'd previously agreed on but she pushed it out of her mind settling on the present.

It was just a kiss. And she would leave it that way.

She was happy. God had forgiven her and rescued her. Dapo was her man who received her still and it was all that mattered. She was going to bask in the moment as long as she could. She reached for his free hand like a love-sick woman. He glanced at her and smiled as if to re-assure her of his love for her.

And at that moment she was content to be his alone.



Lara watched Ikenna as he waited at the counter making an order. She picked up his phone from the table and scrolled through the pictures on it. He'd given

her his password after her relentless teasing. Dapo who used to give her his password had started locking his phone recently with a new password.

She knew why he kept his phone away from her. Her brother and Nimi were back together and he was not leaving her any chances to come between them anymore. Lara would try to unlock his phone all for her to see a selfie of Dapo and Nimi pouting at the screen like lovesick puppies. Just when she wanted to get a peek at their notifications popping in, she would remember the phone was locked.

She wanted to be happy for Dapo, she really wanted him to find happiness with Nimi but she couldn't bring herself to feel that way. Nimi was stealing all the attention her brother had to give leaving her to lick her wounds alone.

"Hey you!" Ikenna broke into her thoughts and she smiled at him showing him a picture on his phone that was taken years ago. "Why do you look so ugly?" She teased.

He shrugged, laughing as he set the tray on the table and sat opposite her.

"Is that place comfortable?" She asked hoping he would take the cue and come settle beside her on the couch rather than the chair that looked so far away from her. They had been hanging out lately and her feelings for him were growing. He wasn't as handsome as Soji, was obviously not building muscles in the gym like her ex-fiancé but he was fair in complexion and had a rugged look. Although she wasn't into fair and lanky guys, Ikenna's features worked fine for her. She was certain he had a nice body too. She'd seen him a couple of times in a snug white t-shirt and she couldn't stop fantasising about him.

She'd suggested helping him shave his beards hoping it would lead to something more but he'd declined. She knew the reason why he refused. He was fighting his feelings for her. She knew he wanted her. Her mind had already started conjuring thoughts about the both of them together and she often wondered if Ikenna would still be with her if he knew what she was thinking.

It had been a while she'd been intimate with a man and Ikenna occupied her thoughts more these days, especially since Dapo was spending more time with his girlfriend and left no space for them to hang out.

Maybe that was the reason he had brought her Ikenna, deliberately placing Ikenna in her life so that he could be a distraction while Dapo lived his life.

She felt like going home and hoped Ikenna would follow her and spend time with her over there. She desperately hoped he would give in to her pleas. "Why don't you come and sit here…" She suggested casually dropping his phone and picking a fry.

"And why?" He asked oblivious to her intentions.

"So I can steal some of your fries." She giggled and he joined her. She was glad when he came to sit beside her and she shifted closer to him. He didn't seem to mind and she hoped their body contact led to more.

"Happy now?"

She shrugged hoping he couldn't see how excited she was that he sat close to her and made her heart want to explode. The warmth he exuded sent sparks through her. Her body was eager for him.

"When are you going home?" He asked as he nibbled a fry dipped in ketchup.

"Next week maybe. I'll have to resume work anyway so...."

He nodded as if assimilating what she was saying. He looked into her eyes and she could feel the intensity in them.

"You know you can always come visit me at home." Lara added.

"It's not that. I'm just wondering if it's time for you to go home y'know. What about your dad, your friends and everyone else who hurt you? I just want you to know I'll always be there for you and you can trust me with everything you would like to say."

Her heart melted and she reached for his hand. "Thank you."

He smiled softly at her and at first she thought he was going to kiss her but he continued. “When the rumour of your abuse got out, I have never stopped wishing I had not gone away. I can’t stop berating myself for not being there for you. Maybe you wouldn’t be hurt. I know your dad says he didn’t do it, but I remember clearly what happened to you before I left for PH. You withdrew, you were no longer the Lara that used to have fun with me. I just wish…”

She bit her trembling lip. So he was the only one who knew something was up.

“You wish what?” Her eyes stung with tears.

“I’ve often blamed myself and I tried to imagine the kind of life we would have had if all that didn’t happen. Maybe you would not have fallen into the wrong hands…”

She reached to touch his face. “You make me wish my life wasn’t this way but this is what it is. And I don’t know if anything can happen between us now. So many things happened while you were away. I’m damaged. I don’t know if I will be good enough for you.”

“You’re no different to me Lara, I want you to know that. But I just want you to receive healing from the One who heals broken hearts and can restore you.”

“Who’s that?”

“Jesus…”

She closed her eyes feeling like someone had poured cold water on her and she withdrew immediately. Did he have to spoil the moment for her by bringing up religion?

“Thank you.”

“Lara…” He reached out but she recoiled. He’d spoiled the mood already. What a nice way to ruin the perfect moment for her.

“I’m hungry, let’s just eat and get out of this place.”

She saw he was hurt by her withdrawal, but she wasn't going to allow him reach out to her the way Nimi and Dapo had been trying to. She didn't need any Jesus or any God. She needed someone who could understand her and love her: flaws and all. Not this God who left her to battle strange voices and watched as her father hurt her several nights in a row. Or the same God she'd cried to days before and he just remained quiet. Dapo had said he wasn't like that.

Well, seeing was believing. God hadn't showed up for her and she wasn't ready to start digging to find Him.

He could find her whenever he was ready. As for her, she wasn't ready to play hide and seek with some beardy guy somewhere who loved to dish out judgements and had no concerns for her.



Lara and Ikenna returned to the house later in the evening. Dapo was not back from the party he'd gone for. His house felt lonely and scary when he wasn't home and she wondered if it would be any different when she went back home. Ikenna slept over sometimes but she knew he wouldn't if Dapo wasn't home. He made her feel like a plague when he wouldn't even touch her.

Men would die to be alone with her, but he was just different and chose to live by what the bible preached.

Just like Nimi.

The reality of what her life was becoming disturbed her. She'd never been alone. She tried to call Dapo but his phone was switched off. So much for her brother loving her and telling her no one was going to come between them.

Nimi was coming between them again and again.

"You okay?" Ikenna asked still in her car.

She turned. "I don't know. No one is home and I'm just scared to be alone I guess."

Ikenna looked at his wristwatch and sighed, she could see him battling with his thoughts.

"You can stay till Bro Dapo comes home." She urged hoping he would give in.

She saw him hesitate before he smiled at her. "Sure babe."

She beamed and threw herself on him. "Thank you. I promise I won't talk your head off."

He laughed and they found their way inside. Switching on the lights, he headed straight for the TV and turned it on forgetting the reason why he was here with her. She was about to accuse him of neglecting her, but another idea came up in her head and she smiled to herself.

"I'll just pick up from where I stopped on your brother's Xbox. At least the noise should make you remember someone is home or you can come join me if you like." He winked at her as he pulled off his jacket and settled on the rug.

Was he inviting her? Maybe he was getting the hint after all.

"Sure, let me just go and change and I'll be right back." She gave him her best smile and headed for the stairs. When she got into her room, she checked the time, hoping they had enough time to themselves before her brother came home. She pulled off her clothes and took a quick shower. Wearing her favourite lingerie, she let her hair down while applying slight make up on her face focusing more on her lips. She sprayed one of her sensual perfumes and adjusted her lingerie, ensuring she revealed enough cleavage so that he wouldn't be able to resist.

She was sure every thought of God would even fly out of his head when she showed him what he was missing and how she was offering herself to him because she loved him.

She knew he loved her too. And this was how two people in love showed each other what love was about.

When she got downstairs, she saw he was still engaged in the game and didn't look at her.

"Wow, something smells nice." He said, his face still on the screen while tapping on the pads.

She giggled and strolled towards him. She settled in beside him and when he turned to face her, he did a double take. She chuckled when he was at a loss for words. Quickly taking advantage of the situation, she moved closer to him and planted a kiss on his cheeks.

"You want me Ikenna and you can have me. I hold nothing back."

When her hands reached for his shirt, he withdrew.

"Oh God no…" He gasped and broke free from her like she'd stung him.

She stared at him confused. "What's wrong, don't you love me?" She leaned close but he moved away quickly, scrambling away from her like she had suddenly turned to a hideous creature within seconds.

"I'm sorry Lara, I love you but…"

"But what?" She stared at him, hurt that he was shattering her heart to pieces. Her body ached for him but he was reciprocating with a startled look on his face.

He snatched his jacket from the couch and ran out. She didn't understand what was going on and kept staring, hoping he would come back, but he didn't.

Thirty minutes passed till she realised he had left her all by herself looking like an idiot.

How could he do this to her? How could he leave her high and dry? How cruel could a man be? She suddenly hated him, hated him for how he'd treated her, running out on her without an explanation.

She pulled at the strap of her lingerie which had fallen over her shoulder, and adjusted her hair trying to maintain the dignity she had left. Switching off the TV, she headed to her room and closed the door.

She fell to the floor and broke into tears.

CHAPTER 28

Nimi and Dapo's relationship blossomed as they spent more time together. She almost forgot that Lara had tried to separate them in the past. Although Nimi hardly saw Lara, she prayed for her. She was also glad that Dapo showered all his love on her whenever they were together. Their moment together was special, and she couldn't wait for them to get married. Sometimes she couldn't help but wonder if he was going to pop the question anytime soon.

Some days, her body felt like it was on fire and she couldn't believe she had all those feelings hidden inside. Like atoms, they got excited whenever she saw Dapo staring at her. Some days, he only had to throw his arms around her casually and she would feel alive. Out of reflex, she would reach for his hands and hold on to it. She wanted to bask in his warmth and feel his heartbeat.

Sometimes she wished he would kiss her again, but more passionately this time. It'd been about three months since their first kiss and she told herself he was holding back because of what they'd promised each other and the boundaries they created to honour God. But she had never stopped thinking of the kiss hoping that one day they could just kiss again.

She often caught herself staring at him longingly. She did not understand her body and why it acted this way. She always thought she wouldn't be like

those women who would fall for a guy just because he had charm and was drop dead gorgeous.

But Dapo is my man; she consoled herself with the thought. She had a right to think that way, didn't she? The right to look at him and want him, the right to fall for him which she did almost every time he smiled at her. She had a right to look into their future and imagine herself with his babies.

Yes, she wanted to have his babies.

She laughed at the thought. If someone had told her she would be acting like a fool in love, she would have denied it. With the way Dapo showed her love, she wanted to forget reasoning and just explore a little.

"And where did you get that dress?"

She snapped out of her daydream and saw Tolani staring at her wide-eyed.

She smiled with satisfaction, pretending she wasn't aware of how the dress did a good job of hugging a figure she'd never had the boldness to reveal before Dapo. "What do you mean?"

Her sister closed the door behind her and stepped forward.

"My goodness Sis Nimi…" Tolani went behind her to assess her figure while shaking her head in wonder. "You want Bro Dapo to have a heart attack when he sees you *abi*." She chuckled and blew a slow whistle clapping her hands playfully.

"But seriously, is it that tight?" Nimi looked at herself in the mirror admiring what she saw. A woman wearing a burgundy off-shoulder sheath dress with a mane of dark hair tumbling over her shoulders. She'd sat for hours in the salon as the hairdresser skilfully fixed the weave in place. She'd spent a good amount of money on the hair as Dapo had sent some money into her account earlier that week when she told him she wanted to get a few things. She had learned to stop arguing with him whenever he gave her money.

He seemed to enjoy giving her things and buying her gifts.

It was probably one of the ways he knew how to express his love. From a new phone, to a new laptop for herself and Tolani.

He had mentioned they were going for a dinner party a friend was throwing for his engagement at Radisson Blue Anchorage Hotel V.I and she wanted to look stunning. She wanted him to proudly display her as his beautiful woman in his arms. Maybe Dapo would see her this way and remember their kiss.

She frowned wondering why her thought had been dwelling on that for days.

Because you're paying less attention to me and my purpose for your relationship.

She closed her eyes sighing heavily. She couldn't just let go of the dress. It was the only one she had suitable for the occasion.

This dress was expensive. What am I going to wear if I don't wear this?

She turned to Tolani. "Well, do you think it's indecent? It's not showing my cleavage or anything."

"Well, true. It's just showing God's work and Mr Chocolate will get to appreciate it very well."

"I guess I'll just have to put it off then."

"No, you shouldn't. I mean it's great. It's beautiful. All we need is the make-up and you'll be looking like a goddess, having all the men bow at your feet." Tolani helped her adjust the zip and went to get her kit. "I was just surprised because I've never seen you dress like this before. You look bold and daring which I really like. The colour really looks good on you and the hair is just *amazeballs*. You will trend on my Instagram timeline tonight don't worry."

"See your life. So all that time I used to wear normal clothes, I didn't trend. It's now you're proud to display my picture."

"*Yelz* of course."

They both laughed before she settled down for Tolani's artwork. She searched her spirit for any nudge or warning again about the dress but got none.

She was good to go then.



Dapo smiled as Nimi kept chatting her way throughout their journey back home. He wasn't aware his girlfriend enjoyed engagement parties. She'd been going on and on about it. Quiet Nimi had suddenly become chatty Nimi who talked about the love between the couple and how the bride-to-be looked stunning and how the décor had been top-notch.

He glanced at her and for one strange reason, she suddenly reminded him of Lara in so many ways though the two were opposites.

She looked beautiful. He couldn't stop thinking about her. Throughout the party she'd been quiet. When people came out to dance, he wished he could, but he knew if he was going to dance with Nimi, there was no way their bodies wouldn't touch. His body would definitely remind him of what he was missing. Her dress did little to ease the tension he felt when he set eyes on her and the last thing he wanted to do was touch her in that dress.

She stirred his blood. The familiar lustful desire that consumed him in the past rose to the surface but he managed to push the thoughts away when she settled in beside him. He hadn't been aware Nimi had such a stunning figure. She resembled a model stepping out of a magazine cover. Her hair was beautiful and smelled nice, like a mixture of coconut and lime, intoxicating his senses. He wanted to run his hands through it, feel the lustre against his fingers. He could not believe this woman would be his in some months' time. He didn't like fantasising about his girlfriend but sometimes he only had to look at her and the thoughts would come crashing into his mind.

When they arrived at her house, she turned to look at him.

"You seem quiet." Her eyes danced around his face before settling on his lips.

Did she want him to kiss her? He couldn't trust himself not to want more if he did.

"Uh.. nothing sweetheart. It's just…" He reached for a slim velvet box he'd kept at the backseat and placed it on her lap gently. Maybe the next one would be a ring but he wanted to be sure he wasn't being driven by passion but God.

"What is this?"

"Why don't you open it and tell me if you like it."

He could see her smiling already and she suddenly pouted. He saw only her lips and he wanted to kiss them.

"C'mon!" He laughed. "Open it already."

She finally did and her eyes widened when she saw the expensive jewellery sitting comfortably on the pouch in the box.

"Wow, Dapo this is…"

"Don't you like it?" He was afraid she might not like it. He couldn't read her expression.

"Of course I do!" She looked up at him. "It's so beautiful. I'm just trying to imagine…"

"How it's going to fit nicely on your neck." He cut in hoping she wouldn't refuse his gift.

Her eyes softened and she asked. "Would you like to help me put it on?"

"Sure." He said without thinking twice. He reached to clip the neckpiece around her neck and he saw how flawless her skin looked. Her off-shoulder dress revealed enough skin he was tempted to lean close and plant a kiss on her neck. Better still, trail kisses down her shoulders. His hands began to tremble but he quickly adjusted before he did something foolish.

"There you go." He swallowed grateful Nimi did not know what was going through his mind as he helped with the neckpiece.

She turned to face him fingering the piece delicately. "Thank you."

Her face was close to him now and he could read the look in her eyes. He'd seen that look in the eyes of several women he dated in the past.

Tell her to step out of the car.

He kept staring at her unable to mouth the words the HolySpirit was admonishing him to say. He watched her as she leaned close to kiss him on the cheeks.

He turned and took her lips in his, forgetting everything else.

She didn't resist him but received him, allowing him to kiss her with all the pent-up passion he'd stored up for weeks. Moments later, he pulled back and stared into her eyes.

She smiled and touched his lips with her fingers. "Remember this baby?"

He laughed and planted kisses on her fingertips understanding fully well what she meant. He'd never known Nimi to be so bold to touch him this way.

"I thought you didn't want to kiss me again because I was bad at it." She confessed reaching to kiss him again.

He allowed himself get carried away for a while. *Oh just a little more*. He leaned in wanting to enjoy their moment together for as long as possible.

When they broke free, he shook his head. "You are driving me crazy baby. If you know how long I've been thinking about this."

She chuckled and relaxed against her seat, staring into his eyes like a starstruck lover. "Is that a good thing or a bad thing?"

He looked into her eyes and every form of spiritual sense and admonition flew out of the window. "It's a good thing."

"I like when we kiss but I think I like it too much and I don't want to get carried away." She admitted.

He nodded. “I think it’s okay to stop it here for now. I’m scared of my feelings and how I might be unable to hold back from touching you.”

He noticed she didn’t look disturbed at the word ‘touch’ Maybe she was tired or didn’t know what he meant. But he was glad they talked openly about things like this.

“I have to go inside before my mum starts wondering what’s going on with us.”

“I’ll call you.” He promised.

She blew him a kiss and got down from the car. He kept watching her still trying to believe his luck. Did she know the effect she had on him?

As if reading his mind, she turned to catch him staring and he smiled sheepishly. He felt embarrassed that he’d been staring at her for too long but she smiled shyly and waved at him while he raised his hand unable to wave back.

Dear Father, I need you to knock some sense into my head tonight. When did I become lust-struck?

He shook his head and turned on the ignition driving home.

He remembered Nimi’s smile when she’d caught him staring. She didn’t know what he was capable of. When his flesh took over, it did not stop and would keep looking for justifiable ways to keep him going. He had to quench the fire now and he would tell her the same.

Music, prayer, bible passages and a cold shower. He was pulling out *Voltron* on the lust of his flesh tonight before it got himself and Nimi into trouble.



Nimi was glad she was already rounding up her project finally. All the hassle she’d gone through would be worth it she hoped. Her life seemed to be going fine at the moment. Her relationship with Dapo was blooming so well she had

nothing to worry about. Sometimes she would stretch her left hand and stare at the fourth finger smiling that a ring would be placed on it soon.

Her mind suddenly wandered to the type of ring it would be. She was sure it would be something golden and beautiful. She'd been dreaming of him proposing. How and where would he propose? Somewhere exotic? Her head was swimming with lots of ideas already and how she would be Mrs Olakitan Junior. She could imagine herself in Dapo's house already, making him dinner before he got home, helping him to loosen his tie, making love till they were both satiated.

God was really good to her.

She sighed wallowing in her daydream again. She'd often wondered how her wedding night would be. Sometimes she got scared that as a virgin, it would hurt but she'd heard some women talk about it. They'd mentioned how she was going to enjoy it after a while. Recently she had started reading books on intimacy and even stumbled on some that she would normally regard as 'ungodly'. She had been reading it before it dawned on her and she deleted it from her phone.

What was happening to her? Why was she getting carried away so easily? Why did she dream of Dapo's kiss every night even after they'd agreed not to kiss or cross any boundaries again? Sometimes she would even imagine him touching her and she would feel strange sensations in the pit of her stomach. She wished she could hide her thoughts from God because they were becoming more ungodly and uncensored by the day.

Dapo should just propose already.

Marriage isn't the solution to lust. God is.

She blinked wondering where the thought had come from. She wasn't battling lust neither did she think she was capable of lust. Her mind only expressed how much she loved Dapo.

Love does not rejoice in iniquity.

"I'm not rejoicing in iniquity." She sounded defensive and shrugged. Why was the Holy-Spirit picking on her unnecessarily?

Her phone rang and she stared at the caller ID wondering who it was. She was still getting used to her new iPhone but it was serving her well.

"Hello…"

"This is Mrs Kitan, am I speaking with Nimi Adeyemi?"

Her heart raced. "*Ah*.. Good afternoon ma. I'm sorry I didn't know it was you. I don't have your number ma."

The woman chuckled and her laughter sounded like honey.

"C'mon, it's no big deal. How are you doing my dear?"

"I'm fine ma. Thank you ma."

"Are you free tomorrow morning? Dapo told me you're rounding up your program pretty soon and I was wondering if you could stop by and say Hi. I would like us to spend sometime together."

She swallowed. This was her future mother-in-law and she had to be in her good books.

"Yes ma. I would love that too."

"Okay dear. I'll tell the driver to come pick you and also take you back home so you don't have to stress yourself about Lagos traffic."

Nimi was overjoyed. "Oh thanks so much ma."

"I already told Dapo you'll be spending your Saturday with me." She said, with a matter of fact tone in her voice. "We will have breakfast, spend time beside the pool and talk about different things. You can bring your bikini and if you don't have one, there are dozens in the house still brand new. This is your home now so whatever is ours is yours, okay dear?"

"Yes ma, thank you ma."

"You're welcome my darling. Take care dear."

Nimi waited for her to hang up and stared at her phone slightly terrified. She wondered what the woman was going to talk to her about.

Father, let this work out for my good. She prayed before dropping her phone and heading out to the market to buy groceries for the house.



"You can enrol for swimming lessons." Mrs Kitan said when Nimi explained she didn't know how to swim. Mrs Kitan had suggested they relax by the pool moments after the huge breakfast she'd thought was only eaten outside Nigeria. Toast with crispy bacon and assorted scrambled eggs. Desserts ranging from apple pie to cheesecake, chocolate cake and all kinds of choices were displayed before her. She had maids attending to her. The private dining room décor was exotic, modern and sophisticated. It felt pleasant to have breakfast with Mrs Kitan. She'd never been so privileged to be invited as part of the family.

The clear swimming pool stretched out before them and she wondered if she would have been bold enough to swim even if she could. The thought of jumping into the water in a skimpy bikini terrified her. What if Chief Kitan walked in on them? She didn't like the way Chief had looked at her the other day and she just couldn't look at him the same way after what he'd done to Lara. Though it had been refuted as a rumour, she didn't believe it.

"Come, I have some gifts for you." Mrs Kitan broke into her thoughts leading her upstairs. Nimi was fascinated by how large and beautiful the house was, it felt so intimidating. "I stopped by one of the malls at V.I yesterday." She continued, carrying herself like royalty while holding a part of her Ankara dress from being caught by her feet. "I remember you mentioned liking my prints and so I thought I should get you some for your closet. I wasn't certain of your size, I'd have gotten you some lovely gowns as well. We could go shopping sometime. We have all the time in the world, don't we?"

When they arrived upstairs, Nimi froze. Bundles of expensive and luxurious looking lace, brocade and beautiful Ankara were splayed on the couch.

"Dapo told me you have a sister, I got some for her and for your mum too. As for your brother, I was thinking he could settle with the Senator material…"

"Ah ma…" Nimi went on her knees immediately. "This is just too much ma."

"Oh get up please. I have told you. You're no longer a stranger in my home. See me as your second mummy. You're my second daughter now."

Nimi blushed, rising to her feet.

"Thank you Ma. I don't know what to say but thank you for being kind to me."

Mrs Kitan settled on the leather couch, a satisfied smile on her face.

Nimi looked round the room. Was there anything that didn't reek wealth in this house? The living room upstairs was half of the one downstairs and had a cosy look. She could see other rooms at a glance and another hallway leading to a different compartment of the house and she wondered how many rooms were present in the mansion. Beautiful pictures of Dapo and Lara adorned the shelves while Chief's portrait hung on the wall. Images of abstract landscapes and different countries were displayed for guests to admire. Porcelain dolls and other ceramic pieces spread across the shelves just beside the TV. "I can take you to meet my tailor. He makes dresses for top society people in Lagos. You have a beautiful body which I'm sure he will do justice to when he makes you dresses."

"Ah.. you don't have to ma. I can get someone to sew them. You've done so much…"

"I haven't even started." Mrs Kitan beckoned her to join her on the couch. Nimi sat beside her amazed by how favoured she was. "When my grandkids start coming, I'm going to spoil them rotten." She giggled and Nimi joined her.

That sounded like a stamp of approval.

“So, my dear, have you and Dapo started talking about kids yet?”

She shook her head. “We talk about it sometimes but since Dapo hasn’t proposed, it’s not something we like to talk about often.”

“Oh I see.” Mrs Kitan reached for her hands and smiled. Nimi sensed the conversation was leading somewhere. Her kindness was making her almost uncomfortable.

“But don’t you guys want to try? It’s not bad to try you know.” She smiled sweetly, casually toying with a dangling earring. Her eyes were intense on hers. “Have you ever wondered if it could give you an advantage?”

“I don’t understand…” Nimi’s heart raced.

“I love the way you two are madly in love. But a word of advice my dear, don’t let your man starve to the point where he starts looking outside. It’s not like you two won’t finally get married. But if you get pregnant now, Dapo would stop drawling and propose. Don’t you want that sweetheart?”

“Well… I…” She was suddenly worried about offending the woman after she’d shown her so much love and attention. She’d spent most of her days daydreaming about his future proposal and their wedding, but she didn’t want to push it.

“Did you know I was the one who told Jibola to come and stay with me when you went over? I was the one who counselled him after the incident happened between you two. You can see I’m rooting for you two.”

Nimi swallowed and looked down. “Thank you, Ma.”

Mrs Kitan patted her hands and Nimi looked up. “You are a beautiful woman Nimi, and a lucky one to be noticed by my son. I know you’re the jealous type too and you wouldn’t want any other girl to take your place. You’ve got to do your part too. You’ve got to be wise in these things. I know you two say you’re Christians and don’t believe in things like that but I just feel

there's nothing wrong in expressing love to one another. Besides, he has brought you home and made his intentions clear, you're his woman.

"You know what happened to my daughter Lara. I was thinking she was going to get married to Soji. I couldn't wait to hold my grandbabies, but with everything that happened, I can't help but wonder if my baby girl is going to be stigmatized for the rest of her life. I wish she could leave Nigeria and start a new life in a different country, but I don't want her to feel lonely there too. She has Ikenna here at least. I don't want someone who would marry her for her money. Ikenna seems to be the only honest man around her. It's the reason why I feel you and Dapo should give it a try y'know, make me happy."

Nimi nodded at a loss for words. She suddenly felt for the poor woman but was that enough to compromise? She wouldn't want to mention it to Dapo and turn him against his mother. Besides, the thought of sleeping with Dapo had been crossing her mind for a while now. She'd often wondered what it would feel like.

You two are going to be married afterall. So it's really no big deal. I mean, you know God has said yes so it's certain.

But pre-marital sex…

It's just between you two. No one will know. Besides, you can always ask for forgiveness afterwards. God will definitely forgive you.

But Dapo and I already agreed not to.

C'mon, didn't you see how you two were on fire for each other the other night and how he couldn't take his eyes off you. Didn't you like it? The power you had over him.

I don't want to pull him down. I can't.

It's just once. Only once. C'mon Nimi. Let's do it and know what it feels like. Even his mum doesn't think it's a big deal. God understands that you have blood running through your veins as well.

She was aware the thoughts were beginning to feel normal because she'd let down her guards for too long, permitting all kinds of toxic thoughts to dwell in her heart. She sighed. The temptation was getting worse by the day. She had to spend more time in God's word because the immoral thoughts were waxing stronger. She was aware God would forgive her if she sinned, but what about the harm she would be doing to her soul? What about the shame and guilt afterwards? What about the disgust she would feel in the spirit and Satan's taunting remarks of her disobedience? Yes her flesh wanted to get laid, but her spirit knew she would be harming her soul by giving in. God would forgive her, but the sting of the sin would hurt. She knew all of this, but the urge was strong enough to forget all the God theory on some days.

Mrs Kitan broke into her thoughts.

"I'll give you time to think about it sweetheart. But remember that I only want the best for you two."

"Yes ma."

Mrs Kitan smiled. "Let me take you around the house. I think you should come and spend some time with me and sleep over as it gets lonely here sometimes."

Nimi nodded. "I would love that."



Lara picked up her handbag and placed it at the back of the car while Dapo assisted with her luggage. She was slightly apprehensive about going back home although she tried to hide it. She hadn't seen her father since the incident. She wasn't going to let him know Ikenna was aware of what had happened either. She was scared her father might hurt him.

Though she was still mad at Ikenna for running out on her, she wanted him safe and alive. She hadn't been picking his calls or replying his texts. He

often dropped in when Dapo was home but she completely ignored him and locked herself in her room. He obviously didn't love her so she wasn't ready to spend time listening to whatever he had to preach. She wanted him to love her the way she understood but he had refused, avoiding her like a plague.

Lara was bemused. What other ways did a man show a woman love? Or was he impotent? A full-blooded male couldn't have refused her. Sometimes she would lose herself into pornography, eager to escape from her present reality.

Ikenna wanted to talk when she just wanted to get straight to business.

Her father was only concerned about saving his reputation and her mother was too scared to face the truth.

Every single person she knew were saving their heads and she felt like someone thrown outside in the dark, naked and vulnerable. The nightmares were coming back again. Dreams she hadn't had since her childhood days were resurfacing again. They would wake her up, leaving her restless and frightened. The dream would begin with her in her little princess room, wearing her favourite colour coral and playing teacups with Barbie and Ken. Then she would be on her bed talking to the stuffed animals her mother had bought for her. Her father had said she was getting too old for stuffed animals and role plays with dolls. She'd named each one of them. Ikenna would come into the room and play with her. They'd always played like this. She allowed him into her space because he was her friend. They would laugh and talk about how she was Barbie and he was Ken.

Suddenly she would look up and the room would grow pitch black.

"Mummy! Daddy!" She'd pull the covers around her, scared of something she couldn't see. Turning to hold Ikenna, she'd find him gone. She would scream out her father's name and he would come into the room to comfort her.

"I was scared." She would sob into Daddy's chest, holding him tight. "I can't sleep ever since Mummy left me."

He would rub her back soothingly and she would relax into him, trying to find sleep. But the touching won't stop. He would tell her to lie down and close her eyes and she would be fine.

You'll be fine Princess. Always remember Daddy loves you. It's okay, just close your eyes.

His hand would slip beneath her dress. She would struggle to move away from the bed scared and shocked, but he was too strong for her. The fear and initiation began that night and wouldn't stop haunting her dreams. It was the night that turned everything upside down. She found it hard to remember life before that. Only the dreams gave her glimpses of a past she couldn't remember but it always ended up where she'd been abused and hurt or was it 'loved' by her father.

She thought they were gone. Why were they returning? What was going on with her? She'd thought it was forgotten. She couldn't tell Dapo. She had lied to him already.

What kind of girl protected her father's perverted acts or didn't want to kill a man who raped her over and over again?

"Are you sure you don't want Ikenna to follow us? I think whatever is going on between you two should be resolved." Dapo broke into her thoughts. "Girl! Your box is heavy *o*, what did you put inside?" She watched him as he opened the trunk and threw her box in.

She shook her head and threw on her shades so her brother wouldn't see her eyes. Dapo had agreed to take her back home after church and he was keeping his word. She couldn't bear to live here anymore. With the way he was going with Nimi, they would probably get engaged soon and need more time and privacy. The last thing she wanted to see was her brother smooching the girl she hated so much. Miss goody two shoes was going to have the perfect man and the perfect home and the perfect babies while she was going to end up in rehab soon if the dreams didn't stop.

"Did Ikenna call you?"

"He's been buzzing me. He says you won't pick his call. He is already on his way. The least you can do is let him come with us. C'mon sweetheart…"

"Okay fine." She said. "If you insist."

Her brother sighed. "I'm just looking out for you and want you to be surrounded by people who love you."

She shrugged. "Let me check your room to see if I didn't forget anything."

"Sure. Let me see grab some snacks too. Ikenna will be here soon anyway so we better hurry."



When they arrived at the house, Dapo realised his parents were not home and he knew they had gone for their usual Sunday outings at Ikoyi club. He thought of waiting till his parents got back so he could talk with Chief and clarify any misunderstanding between them, arising from the abuse scandal. Lara insisted she could handle it and she needed to spend time alone for a while.

He obliged after much persuasion.

Lara found her way inside and the maids helped her with her boxes exclaiming and expressing how much they missed her. She wasn't sure if they were being honest, but she didn't care.

She just wanted to be alone. She was probably going to be alone for the rest of her life.

But she didn't want to. She was afraid of being lonely. She'd never felt she would come to this in her life. No friends, no lover, not even any of the men she'd slept with in the past. Everyone had a meme on the internet mocking her and dragging her name in the mud. She checked her phone and saw no missed call or texts. All of her friends had deserted her. Aisha had surely paid her back in spades and she wondered if she could ever trust anyone. No one was calling

her. Soji had not been on WhatsApp for days but he had changed his display picture from her picture to nothing. Some had even deleted her from their group and she wanted to cry. She had never known life this way.

She was even scared to open any of her social media accounts because the last time she did, she'd seen a lot of crude messages from people who wanted her to '*service*' them for free since she did it for older men. People she didn't even know sent her messages on her Facebook and Instagram and even fabricated all sorts of things that she had not done.

For a brief moment, she contemplated suicide and she shook the thought away.

Why couldn't she be like those celebrities who did something nasty and were not bothered? She had never been bothered about things like this before, but now she felt so open and vulnerable. She was scared that she might go crazy soon.

She checked her text messages and she saw the bulk of the messages were from Ikenna. No one else.

I miss you.

Lara, are you upset? I left because I care about you. About us. About our future.

I love you Lara but I just want you to heal that's all.

Lara, why won't you pick my calls? I'm going crazy not knowing what's going on in your mind.

Lara, can I come and see you today?

Lara, please reply my texts and answer my calls.

A tear rolled down her cheek as she sank into her bed. She missed him too. She wanted him to love her. She wanted to be with him. She knew he loved her. She'd seen the look in his eyes as they'd driven out of Dapo's house. She'd

caught him stealing glances at her in the car but she ignored him. Was he scared of what could happen between them?

She didn't understand the way he showed love but she was willing to give it a try. Her heart fluttered and she felt warm inside. Someone loved her and still wanted her. All hope wasn't lost.

She reached for her phone and typed in quickly:

I-ken, I'm sorry. Can you come back please? You can tell Dapo to drive you back. I just realised my mistakes and I think I love you. Please don't leave me.

There was a knock on the bedroom door and she looked up wondering who it was. Her mind travelled fast. Was it Ikenna? That was not possible since she'd just sent the message.

Were her parents' home? She hadn't heard them drive in.

She opened the door excitedly but froze on the spot.

"Hello baby… did you miss me?" Her ex-fiancé drawled and walked into her room.

CHAPTER 29

Lara felt her heart constrict as her ex sauntered into her room. If she hadn't been so eager to open the door, she would have checked to know who was at the door but now it was too late. She saw the greed in his eyes immediately they settled on hers and she knew he wasn't here because he loved her.

He was here for something else.

Had he been watching her all this while, waiting for her to return to the house so he could pounce on her? How did he know she was home? He had purposefully ignored her all these days, waiting for the right time to strike.

Her heart raced wondering what his intentions were. He knew they were alone in the house. The maids' quarters were in a different building. If he tried anything funny, she would call her father or Dapo immediately.

He sat on her bed comfortably and turned to face her. Running his fingers along the sheets, he gave her a knowing smile and she cringed. She couldn't believe they'd shared the same bed months ago. "Aww.. C'mon baby, don't tell me you're not happy to see me."

"What the hell do you want?"

"Why the face? It doesn't suit you baby."

"Get out of my house Soji."

"Or what?"

"Or I'll call…"

"Your brother? Daddy who messed you up? Or the low life boyfriend that you've been fooling around with?"

"You'll regret this. I swear you'll…" She spat.

"Oh please. You think I'm scared of your stupid threats? Everything's on social media. Is it how you slept with everything male and still tried to make me feel bad about my affair with Aisha?"

She went mute.

He stood up and walked towards her, his gaze intense on hers as he reached for her. She dodged and tried to reach for the door but he caught her in time. When his grip tightened on her wrist, she slapped him with her free hand and struggled to push him away from her.

"Let go of me!" She screamed kicking and hitting him. His hands cracked across her face and he threw her against the floor bruising her in the process. Looking up at him in shock, Lara struggled to crawl away from him but he was too fast for her. He pulled her beneath him, placing one of his knees against her thighs and holding her wrists captive.

"If you don't stop kicking, I'll make sure I find a way to stop you myself."

She cussed, spitting out foul words in his face. "You monster! You're going to pay for this." She cried as the tears rolled down her cheeks.

Holding her wrists above her head with one hand while digging his fingers into her cheekbones, he snickered. She could tell he'd been drinking. His breath reeked of beer and she wanted to throw up in his face.

"Now, you are going to listen to me." He spat. "You are going to tell your parents that we haven't broken up and we are getting married soon."

She struggled again but he was too strong for her, pressing his weight down on her.

"You will tell them that we are still in love and everything is way behind us. When we get married, your inheritance is going to be shared fifty-fifty between us. You will be my wife and do as I say and as I please. We are going to be married but I'll be a free man and sleep with any woman I want. You will suffer for everything you put me through. For killing my child when I didn't want to, for manipulating me to be with you instead of Aisha, for disgracing me right in front of my friends."

"I hate you!" She yelled crying and trying to break free. "I'd rather die than marry you, man whore!"

"Oh, you think the internet has heard enough of Daddy's girl, Lara Kitan? Wait till they see all those nudes you sent me, remember the sex tape I made darling? Now the world will know who the real whore is. Aisha and I have been talking and she isn't done paying you back. I told her you made me do it. The abortion. You killed our baby and I was only a tool in your hands. You're going to pay dearly for this."

She grew weak unable to fight back. More tears fell. How could he treat her this way? How could he be so cruel? She knew if the video got out there, her life would be over.

"Are you thinking twice now baby?" He leaned close to kiss her and she bit his tongue angrily. He cussed at her and hit her again pulling at her shirt while holding her hands captive. He agrressively tugged at her shorts and she could only watch helplessly as he tried to rape her.

"Soji, please don't do this…" Her voice broke as she sobbed. She had no strength to fight him anymore.

"What? Don't go all modest on me now baby." He snickered. "We've been doing this for years haven't we? The other guys have had their share of my fiancée, now it's my turn and you're acting like you don't want me…"

"Soji please…" She screamed again closing her eyes. She braced herself for it, just as she'd done seventeen years ago the first time her father touched her.

She told herself it would soon be over. *Everything will be okay*. She clung to the shattering pieces of life she had left.

Just close your eyes and it will be over. Her father's voice floated into her thoughts and she resigned herself to her fate, blanking out the thought of what Soji was about to do to her body.

Not her.

She felt nothing. Opening her eyes, she saw him being yanked away by her brother and a fist landed on his face.

"You're sleeping in jail you good for nothing pervert!" Dapo pushed him against the wall and she sat up immediately trying to cover the upper part of her body that was bare already.

Ikenna quickly reached for one of her T-shirts on the bed and gave it to her. She threw it on immediately, trying to adjust her shorts at the same time.

"Are you alright?" Ikenna asked.

She shook her head crying. "No…"

"Hey, it's okay, you're fine now." He came towards her and she hugged him tight sobbing into his chest when he pulled her close. He smelled of lemon soap and sweat, but she didn't care. He was everything right with her world at the moment and she couldn't let him go.

"He won't touch you again, I promise." He mumbled into her hair and she nodded. She wished he would keep holding her and never let go.

She'd never seen her brother this furious. So furious he'd punched Soji till he bled.

"You have the right to come here and try to rape my sister. You're definitely out of your mind you jerk! You think I'm just going to let you walk away after what you tried to do?"

Soji laughed, unfazed by Dapo's threats. Lara panicked. What if Soji told her brother the truth she'd been dying to keep? She wasn't ready to let him hear about it from Soji's lips.

"Bro Dapo please…"

"Lara, stay out of this! His type shouldn't be left to roam the streets."

Ikenna watched her confused. "Lara, that guy just tried to rape you." He looked at her face closely and ran a finger along her bruised cheek. She flinched in pain. "Did he hit you?"

"None of that matters." She tried to wipe her face with the back of her hands. "Bro Dapo…"

"Can't you see she's begging you 'big brother'" Soji laughed despite the blows he'd received. "If there's anyone who should be sleeping in jail, it's your sweet little sister."

Her heart raced. "Soji, please don't do this. I'll marry you. Please let's just leave it that way."

"You're not marrying this retard Lara." Dapo cut in.

Soji scoffed ignoring Dapo. "Like your brother will allow it now that he's here, why don't we just let the cat out of the bag baby?"

The tears were flowing already. "Bro Dapo, I'm sorry, I didn't mean to."

Dapo turned to look at her, unable to place what was going on and the innuendos between them. "What's going on?"

"Oh, so you don't know what she did to my baby?" He began.

Dapo released him looking confused and glancing from Lara to Soji. "Whose baby? You got my sister pregnant?"

"Her best friend was pregnant; your attention starved sister got jealous and manipulated me to abort the baby to prove how much I love her. We both planned to drug Aisha and Lara recommended a good doctor that could 'fix' things for us. I was so desperate to please your sister only to realise she had

other skeletons in her closet. Like the other men she's been sleeping with for instance." Soji turned to Ikenna and continued unashamedly.

"And the little things we did in secret, take for instance the daring nudes she sent me, the videos where the little minx won't stop screaming my name…" He smirked watching Ikenna clench his fists at the explicit images he was painting. "Oh you want to fight for her? Please save your energy for something better than this trash. She loves no one but herself and she's going to ruin you till you become less than a man. Good luck."

The room grew still and Ikenna who had been holding on to Lara didn't realise he had released her.

Lara panicked and looked at the two men whose worlds she had just turned upside down. She was torn between whom to beg.

"Bro Dapo… I didn't mean it. I didn't mean to hurt Aisha. I was too consumed by anger and my emotions…" She turned to Ikenna and her heart broke when she saw how much she had hurt him again.

"IK, please… I'm sorry. Soji is just trying to come between us. I swear I don't love him anymore, it's you I love."

Soji walked out of the room after dropping the bombshell. Dapo could do nothing to hold him back.

"You lied to me." Her brother began.

She went on her knees to beg him. "Bro Dapo, I'm sorry. I was desperate. I wasn't thinking straight. I just made a suggestion…"

"Oh cut the bull Lara. I told you before things got worse. I told you to let the pathetic guy go but you didn't listen to me. How could you?! How could you take life from your friend? I knew you two would fight, but I never imagined it would come to shedding blood."

She sobbed.

"What if she had died? Would you have been happy living your life with that retard who isn't worth you? After how far I was willing to go for you." His

eyes had pooled. She could see him fighting with his emotions and her heart broke. She'd never seen her brother look this hurt.

She'd ruined everything.

"You would have agreed to marry him if I hadn't stepped in."

"I didn't want to hurt you…"

"But you wanted to keep lying to me."

She was unable to say anything. How could she? Her whole world was falling apart and this time, there was no one to run to. Her brother who took her in the last time knew her secret now. Ikenna would see her as a leftover and she could only do one thing.

Beg them both.

Dapo was quiet for a while, deep in thought. Suddenly, he frowned. "Is that why Aisha went all out on you?"

Don't tell him the truth.

What's the point? Let me just come clean once and for all.

She nodded.

He stared at her as the full realization of what had happened dawned on him and he stared at her, eyes wide.

"So it was true, what she said about Daddy hurting you?"

She nodded again.

"And you chose to cover up his sin?"

"Please don't see it that way, I…"

He rubbed his throbbing temple trying to understand. "I don't get it. Dad abused you as a child and you were willing to take his side? Were you scared or you were just trying to protect his name?"

When she didn't say anything, he yelled at her. "What kind of girl are you?"

She cowered and kept crying. "I had no choice."

He shook his head. “You had a choice. You just weren’t willing to take it.” Raising his head, he looked at Ikenna. “I can’t stay here any longer. I don’t know if you want to stay with her but I can’t even look at her right now. I find it hard to believe we were born of the same mother.”

“Bro Dapo!” She screamed running after her brother as he headed for the stairs. Reaching for his shirt, she held on to it. “Don’t treat me this way. Please you’re the only one I’ve got. I have no one.”

“You should have thought of that when you chose your path.”

“Please, I’m begging you.” Her body raked with sobs as she clung to him.

“Let go off me Lara.” He tried pushing her away when she pulled at his shirt.

She reluctantly released him then, falling to her knees once again, she cried.

Ikenna came downstairs right then and Lara turned to him. “IK, please help me beg my brother. Please…”

“At this point Lara, I don’t know if there’s anything I can do really. Right now, I…” His voice broke and she could feel his emotions spilling through. She tried to wrap herself around him, wishing he would stay and understand. He held her and buried his face into her neck.

“I didn’t mean to do it Ikenna.” She pleaded as she felt him release her. Her heart sank and she felt exposed and vulnerable. When she looked into his eyes, they were brimming with tears and she desperately wanted to stop them from falling. She felt him slipping away from her. “Please you have to let me explain. I wasn’t thinking straight.”

He bit his lip and shook his head.

“Are you leaving me too?” She looked up into his eyes hoping he would change his mind.

“I just need to know if I’m ready for this. If I can handle this…” He looked away and he raised a hand to wipe something away from his eyes. “I

won't stop being your friend, but I don't know if my heart can take this right now. I love you, but this… this is just too much for me at the moment. I'm sorry."

And he was gone.

Lara stared at the closed door for a while sitting on the floor, contemplating her life and wondering if it was all a bad dream she would wake up from soon. She couldn't suppress the suffocating feeling clawing at her. Her world came crashing all around her and she felt her heart shattering to pieces leaving her breathless.

My life is over.

She broke into tears again wishing she could die there and then.



When Mrs Kitan arrived that night, she knew something had gone wrong. The house was unusually quiet which was quite strange with Lara's presence in the house. The maids told her she'd arrived earlier with Dapo. Her motherly instinct told her something was wrong and while her husband went to take a shower, she headed towards Lara's room.

She saw her sleeping quietly on the bed and wanted to retreat but felt compelled to touch her and at least see her since it had been a while. Lara was curved into a foetal position facing her wall and Sumbo was reminded of the child she had given birth to twenty-five years ago.

Lara had arrived, bringing happiness into her life.

She looked around the room and was glad the girls had cleaned it up as she'd instructed them to earlier. Settling on the big bed, she reached to stroke her arms gently when Lara turned.

She'd expected to see her asleep but the look on her face terrified her. Lara's face was swollen like she'd been crying all day.

Sumbo panicked. “My darling, what’s wrong?”

“Why did you leave me alone Mummy? Why didn’t you just stay? And if you had to go, why didn’t you take me with you?”

Sumbo’s heart plummeted into her stomach. She stared at Lara confused. “Sweetheart, what are you talking about? I’ve been here for you. I’m right here. Did you have a bad dream?”

“Is Daddy home?” She asked glancing up.

“Yes, we came back together.” She looked into her eyes and what she had been scared to face was right there in her child’s eyes.

Lekan had lied to her.

Her heart shattered to pieces once more.

“Can you lock the door please?”

“Of course, sweetheart.” She hurriedly went to the door and locked it. When she returned, Lara sat up and she joined her. She reached for Lara’s hair that was scattered across her face and pulled it behind her ears, stroking her arm. “My darling, talk to me! What is it? Are you okay?”

Lara shook her head and her eyes pooled. “Mummy I’m sorry I lied to you. Aisha was right. All those years, daddy used to come into my room whenever I was scared because I used to have nightmares a lot. At first it was fine but later, he wanted more. I was afraid and didn’t know what to do. He told me it wouldn’t hurt and that he was only trying to show me love the way you two showed each other love. He said he missed you and you wouldn’t come home and I was the only one he had. I didn’t know what to do Mummy. I really wanted him to stop touching me but he wouldn’t stop. He wouldn’t let Ikenna come to the house either and I just hated that Ikenna couldn’t save me somehow. Daddy told me he would give me anything I wanted if I kept quiet and that I’ll be his girl. I wanted to be his girl but not that way. We hadn’t moved to this house then. We still lived in that bungalow at Ikeja back then.”

Sumbo watched her child narrating her traumatising experience and she was at a loss for words. She wanted to hit her husband till he passed out. She wanted to take her daughter and run somewhere to hide.

She was confused about what to do and she suddenly broke into tears. If only she had taken Lara with her years ago during the separation. Why? Why after all these years? Why had she married a pervert? How could Lekan take advantage of their daughter? Was that what led to his ever-blooming wealth? She couldn't fathom what he'd seen in an eight-year-old girl when he had other concubines to give him what he needed.

She wiped her face and looked at her child trying to be strong for her.

"It's alright baby." She opened her arms and Lara gladly went in. She patted her gently.

"I'm sorry I lied to you Mummy. I partially blamed you because you left me when I needed you most."

"I'm sorry my darling." She mumbled trying to stop herself from crying again. "I'll make it up to you, I promise. I'll book an appointment with a therapist and let's see how it goes from there. Okay sweetheart?"

When she released her, she tried to smile for her and leaned close to kiss her. "I'll be right back."

"Where are you going?" Lara panicked.

"I'm just going to set some things straight."

Sumbo stood up, adjusted her gown and headed for the door. When she stepped outside, she went to the kitchen and picked the knife from the shelf. Strolling back upstairs, she headed straight to the room and locked the door. Her husband had already donned a *jalamia* and was holding the remote to adjust the temperature of the air-conditioner in the room. She couldn't hold back herself as she charged towards him and raised the knife at him.

He saw her on time and grabbed her hand though the blade managed to scratch his elbow.

"Sumbo! What the hell has gotten into you?" He cried twisting her arm so she could drop the knife on the floor. "Have you gone mad?"

"You're the mad man. You good-for-nothing twisted man. You out rightly denied it when I asked you. What did you use her innocence for? Your cult? Some perverted meeting? Our daughter, Lekan, our own daughter! You are shameless. I am going to drag you down and everything you own is going down the drain. I can't believe I even allowed you to touch me. I was ready to believe anything you told me. My god! You're a monster. I am leaving this house with Lara."

"You're not going anywhere." He held her glaring at her. She grew weak as he stared at her. "You and Lara will be here till I say otherwise. I am your husband Sumbo. Do you understand me? And your husband takes priority over your children. Let that sink in."

She saw something in his eyes that scared her and she retreated.

"Blood binds us, or have you forgotten so soon, my love? You drag me down and you go down as well." He revealed a scar just below his wrist as if to remind her of what she had forgotten. "You think you're safe out there? You think you'll leave me and there will be no consequences? Who will protect you? You can run far from me but you'll always come back so I wonder why you bother." He reached to touch her chin ignoring her tears.

"No one is allowed to bring up Lara's situation anymore, and if anyone does, let them know it's in the past. We won't be talking about it anymore. My agents have erased the nonsense out of the media so there's nothing to worry about. If Lara needs to see a therapist, get her to see one that we trust or let them come to the house and check her out. We will pay whatever has to be paid. If she wants to get married, let's just wait till the next ambitious guy shows up. As for the Bello fool, he's yet to taste my wrath since he's obviously the reason behind this." He sighed shaking his head as if the topic was enough to give him a headache already. "I have to go to bed. I have a flight to catch in the morning.

I can't be late for my business meeting tomorrow and just in case you're not aware, I'll be spending a few weeks away from home. When you miss me, you can call." He went to bed and settled in almost as if nothing had happened. "And tell the girls they can skip my night tea."

Sumbo could only stare at him unable to say anything as more tears rolled down her cheeks. What kind of monster had she married? What kind of oath had she sworn herself to? Could she go on living life like this? Their child was suffering, and he didn't care. Were his name and wealth more important than his child? The man she married years ago was definitely different from the man she was looking at now. She was scared of this man and what he had turned into. A beast. A lunatic. A perverted monster.

She couldn't even imagine she had been sharing a bed with him as well.

He looked up and continued, almost as if the incident was something casual and to be forgotten. "You made me act that way when I didn't want to. Look, it's gone. Lara will go on living life. She's been living life ever since so why now?"

She remained quiet.

He relaxed and pulled the sheets over himself. "Goodnight and tell Lara I love her."

Sumbo could only watch him in shock as he looked peaceful in his sleep. When she grew weary of watching him, she left him and headed for her daughter's room.

She was going to spend the night there.



Nimi knew something was wrong though Dapo wasn't saying anything to her. She felt the discomfort in her spirit but didn't know where to place it. She

watched him eat quietly. Wanting to get his attention, she reached for his plate and forked a piece of cake.

He looked up then.

She winked at him. “Just hungry.”

He smiled and sat back watching her with arms folded across his chest. “Should I be worried?”

“About?”

“When the kids start coming…”

She blushed. “Something is on your mind and you’re keeping it to yourself.”

The mask returned. “It’s nothing important.”

“Or better said, it’s something you would rather not share with me.” She sighed. “What happened to sharing everything and being transparent about how we feel?” Her hands rested on his, hoping he would open up.

He looked so far away. She could sense something off about him. The positive presence he usually carried about him seemed to have depreciated.

“Nimi trust me, it’s not something I would like to talk about.”

“Yeah, you don’t trust me enough to.”

“C’mon babe, what is wrong with you? You and I know we’ve come farther than that.”

She recoiled; offended he’d spoken to her like that. She dropped the fork and reached for her phone ignoring him.

“Baby, I’m sorry.”

She continued scrolling through her phone. He knew what to do if he was really sorry. She wasn’t going to tolerate being scolded like a child.

He came to sit beside her. Reaching for her hands, he held it in his and raised it to his lips. “Forgive me.”

She looked at him then and caressed this face. She knew she should stop touching him but she ignored the warning and stroked his beard. “What’s wrong?”

“It’s Lara.”

Her heart raced and her mind suddenly flashed to the dream she’d had the day Kemi invited her to the Kitan mansion. The reason she was in their lives in the first place.

The bleeding girl in her dreams.

She’d had another dream last night. This time, a girl stood at the edge of a cliff and raised her arms. The girl suddenly turned and smiled at her. Her face was covered with a mask so Nimi couldn’t identify her. She was about to dive into the pit below the cliff. Nimi ran to catch her but it was too late. She’d thrown herself off the cliff, falling far into the abyss.

You are getting distracted.

“What’s wrong with Lara?”

“She lied to me. To all of us.” Dapo shook his head in regret. “I found out yesterday that she manipulated Soji to abort Aisha’s baby. Aisha retaliated by exposing her secrets. She also lied about my father’s abuse. How can someone do that? It wasn’t fear that held her back from exposing my father, it was her twisted mindset. You were right about her needing rehab. I find it hard to believe she’s the innocent Lara I grew up with. I fought with you because of her. Can you imagine that? She kept lying to me even when I kept showing her love. And she would have continued if I didn’t find out myself. Soji was at the house last night and he tried to rape her. And she would have agreed to marry the pervert had I not stepped in. Their marriage would have been based on blackmail.”

Nimi’s heart broke as she stared at her boyfriend. She didn’t know what to say. One part of her wanted to be glad that Lara was only getting what she deserved all along while the other part of her felt sorry for her.

Wow, was there anything the girl didn't do?

A man without Christ is capable of anything.

"See why I didn't want to tell you? Because she just leaves a bad taste to the tongue."

She reached for him and hugged him hoping he would find comfort in her arms. The discussion with his mother rose to the surface but she shook it away.

He was hurting but she couldn't use her body to comfort him.

What if you did?

Her thoughts scared her. Her body was beginning to have a mind of its own and it fascinated her rather than repulse her. She'd never felt this way for any man. Anytime Dapo was around her, something else took over her reason and she really wished they didn't have to wait anymore.

Lara wasn't her priority now, Dapo was, and she wanted to give him the full attention he deserved.

Dapo released her and without thinking, she reached for him and kissed him hoping he wouldn't push her away. When he didn't, she relaxed and allowed him lead.

He broke the kiss and she looked into his eyes. He looked vulnerable.

"Baby…"

"Hmmn..." She watched him intently hoping he wouldn't rebuke her for what she had done.

"I… I was thinking..." He held her hands in his and smiling into her eyes, he continued. His hands felt cold and shaky and she wondered if he was alright. "You are the best thing that ever happened to me. I can't imagine my life if all this was going on and you were not there to comfort me and be with me and take my mind off things. I keep asking myself if this is some kind of dream. I have never loved a woman like you. You are on my mind twenty-four seven, your love for God challenges me, and the way you love me has made life worth living. You are more than a dream come true baby."

Nimi laughed though her heart wanted to jump out of her ribcage. Why was Dapo talking like this?

"And life without you would be empty, it makes sense because of God, but it's a whole lot better when you're in it."

She blinked back tears. She loved him to pieces and couldn't imagine life without him in it either. She caressed his face, drinking him in. "Thank you. I feel the same way with you in my life baby."

"And so…" He suddenly went on his knees and reached into his blazer. Nimi raised her hands to her mouth. She was still sitting on the chair when he brought out a velvet box and popped it open.

"Oluwalonimi Esther Adeyemi. Will you make me the happiest man alive by marrying me?"

Her eyes pooled and her heart felt like it would explode any moment from now. She sat still unable to move. The lights flashing brought her back to the present. Someone was taking their picture and recording the video.

She nodded screaming her excitement. "Yes, Yes, Yes." Not able to contain her joy as he slid the ring into her finger, she threw herself into his arms and kissed him again.

This time he did not resist.



Nimi sat on her bed staring at her ring and smiling reminiscing over the nights she'd dreamed of her finger bearing that special ring. Tolani kept gushing about it and her mother couldn't be happier. She felt like she was floating, and life was just perfect. She was getting married to the man of her dreams.

Oh let it happen soon. She wondered how she would cope now that they were officially engaged. Maybe it would be okay to share a few kisses now that he had proposed.

No! It's not okay.

"I was thinking he was going to write it in the sky or put it in the cinemas or something like those stunts we see on BellaNaija.'' Tolani broke into her thoughts.

She'd thought of it before but right now she didn't really care. Besides, Dapo was a private person. Although his family was famous, he hated getting himself in the news.

She shrugged. "Dapo is special in his own way. He's not too friendly with social media either and I like it that way."

"Wow, your guy is just too much."

She giggled when her sister came to settle beside her.

"I noticed you guys spent some time outside before coming in, what was going on between you two?"

Nimi glanced at her sister not wanting to feel guilty. Her mind briefly flashed to how they'd both been locked in each other's arms after the proposal. Their kiss had been pretty intense this time when he dropped her at home. She had been the one to touch him first and he reciprocated. She loved how his hands did amazing things to her body.

She stilled her heart against the truth. "We were just trying to prepare ourselves before coming upstairs."

Okay, so now you're lying?

"Oh I see." Her sister gave her a knowing look before smiling. "Anyways, I trust you sis Nimi. You've kept yourself pure this long, so I'm sure you know what you are doing."

She felt that discomfort in her spirit again. Was God using Tolani to get her back on track? The way Dapo had touched her tonight hadn't been 'pure'. She'd done some ungodly touching too.

"What about Madam Lara, have you thought of what she's going to say about it?"

"Dapo and his sister are not really on good terms at the moment."

W*hich is fine by me really.*

She blinked. Where did that thought come from?

"Why?"

"It's just a disagreement. I'm sure they'll sort it out."

I hope not, so I can have Dapo to myself.

Tolani nodded and settled into the other side of the bed. Nimi turned staring at the wall as she battled with the scary thoughts in her mind. Her passion for Dapo was casting off every godly restraint she'd held on to at the beginning of the relationship. She was happy but something wasn't right and she was finding it hard to place a finger on it like before.

In the past, God's voice was her constant melody, keeping her in check. But right now, God's voice seemed to be poking at her, causing certain restlessness in her.

She was seeing a new side to her and whoever she was becoming was beginning to terrify her. Was there so much hidden in her she was yet to discover?

Dear God, who am I?

CHAPTER 30

Her hand slid across his neck as they shared a kiss. When they broke free, his hands caressed her swollen abdomen.

"Do you think it's going to be a boy or girl?" Dapo mumbled against her lips and she chuckled, placing her hand on his.

"What do you want it to be?"

"I don't mind. Whatever sex is fine by me." He leaned close and kissed her, reaching for her buttons. She smiled, watching him.

They heard a knock on the door. Nimi quickly reached to put her buttons back in place, hurriedly rising from the couch where she had been lying down. Dapo adjusted his trousers and threw on a shirt immediately and headed to the door.

"Pastor Arike…" She heard Dapo's voice.

Nimi panicked. She pulled her shirt down, thinking of how to hide her little bump.

"We were not expecting you here." Dapo sounded nervous.

"We?" Pastor Arike probed.

"Oh sorry, Nimi just came over to say hello…"

"And when did Nimi start coming to your house?" She walked past him and headed to the living room.

Nimi had disappeared.

"Nimi…" She called out furious. "If you don't come out right this minute, I'm going to bring this house down."

There was no response.

She heard someone trying to tiptoe behind her. Arike turned and saw Nimi. Her gaze settled on Nimi's stomach as she tried to cover her abdomen.

Her eyes widened in shock. "You're pregnant!"

Nimi looked down suddenly ashamed.

"And you're not married." She looked from Dapo to Nimi. "So how long were you two going to keep at this? Lying to me, to everyone, except those who want this to happen. Was this why you got engaged? You were looking for a way to hide your sin so you thought to marry on time so no one else would think the good girl had turned bad overnight."

"We didn't plan it this way…"

"You have failed God Nimi. If you keep going this way, you will drag others down with you and end up outside God's will and his plan for this family. And I pity the family you're going to have with Dapo, for none of it will bring glory to God. You're taking a dangerous path, and I'm scared you will have blood on your hands."

Arike jerked from her dream into reality and sighed in relief. The dream was troubling. She tried to relax and search her spirit for answers. Glancing at her husband who was still sleeping soundly next to her, she rose to get a glass of water and briefly checked on her children who were still sleeping in their room.

She thought of Nimi and she realised they hadn't spoken in weeks except for the call two weeks ago when Nimi excitedly went on and on about Dapo's proposal. Arike was confident it was God's will for her to marry Dapo.

So what was God saying?

Were they doing something hidden?

A light bulb went off in her head and she suddenly remembered her accusation of Nimi in the dream. Nimi had been kissing Dapo. Arike had seen them together before she walked in on them.

She wondered how it was possible to see that scene playing before her and then remembered it was a dream. Lots of things were possible in dreams when God wanted to reveal things.

Not wanting to jump into conclusions about the dream, she reached for her bible and her spirit led her to read from Second Samuel chapter Eleven. When she got to the twelfth chapter, understanding dawned on her as she read.

"You are the man! This is what the Lord, the God of Israel, says: 'I anointed you king over Israel, and I delivered you from the hand of Saul. I gave your master's house to you, and your master's wives into your arms. I gave you all Israel and Judah. And if all this had been too little, I would have given you even more. Why did you despise the word of the Lord by doing what is evil in his eyes?'

Oh Father! Has Nimi sinned against you? Her heart raced faster as she saw herself in the place of Nathan the prophet who was sent to admonish David.

"Oh God, please let it not be, Nimi loves you passionately and would go miles for you. She is not the type to put you aside and chase after mundane things. What's happening?"

Warn her for she treads a dangerous path.

Her spirit led her to read First Thessalonians chapter Four.

You should be sanctified: that you should avoid sexual immorality; that each of you should learn to control his own body in a way that is holy and honourable, not in passionate lust like the heathen, who do not know God. . . . For God did not call us to be impure, but to live a holy life"

She was further led to First Corinthians chapter six.

Flee from sexual immorality. Every other sin a man can commit is outside his body, but he who sins sexually sins against his own body. Do you not know that your body is a temple of the Holy Spirit who is in you, whom you have received from God? You are not your own; you were bought at a price. Therefore glorify God with your body and in your spirit, which are God's.

But how can people who love God so much just give in like that?

And God further led her to the book of Galatians chapter five.

The acts of the flesh are obvious: sexual immorality, impurity, and debauchery; idolatry and sorcery; hatred, discord, jealousy, and rage; rivalries, divisions, factions,

But the fruit of the Spirit is love, joy, peace, forbearance, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness and self-control. Against such things there is no law.

She closed her bible and reached for her journal documenting everything God was saying to her with the intention to call Nimi later and pass the message across.

Settling into bed, she mumbled a short prayer for the engaged couple, glad there was still hope. They could still retrace their steps back to God speedily.

But her spirit was still not at rest and she wondered why. Not being able to go back to sleep, she went on her knees and prayed in tongues as the Spirit led her to.



"Hello dear, can you spare me a few minutes of your time?" Pastor Arike placed her arms on Nimi's shoulder and smiled into the young woman's eyes. Service had ended and people were already going home. This was the perfect time to

reach out to her. She'd told her husband about the dream and He'd suggested they invite Nimi and Dapo for dinner.

"Ah of course Mama." Nimi laughed. "This one that you're acting nice to me, I hope all is well."

Arike frowned. "Why do you say that?"

"You don't ask for my time, you take it." Nimi chuckled and allowed her lead her away from the crowd and into the library office.

"Ah, it's because this one is important."

"Oh… I hope it's nothing serious." Nimi suddenly looked worried.

"Well…" Her eyes casually strolled to her abdomen as the dream replayed in her head. "Now that you and Dapo are engaged, I just wanted to be sure you guys haven't forgotten the purpose of your relationship."

She nodded. "Yes Mama we haven't. Even Dapo was suggesting I might have to start coming to his church soon so it's not so inconvenient for me when we get married. I thought it was a good idea…"

Arike felt a warning nudge in her spirit. "Uh, and have you prayed about this?"

"Well… it makes sense." Nimi stuttered and stared down at her hands as she kept clasping and unclasping it. "He would come pick me and he could drop me at home after service. I think it makes a whole lot of sense and it's convenient for me, for the both of us."

"What if you guys decide to stop by his house and you know, have lunch or something, have you thought about that?"

Arike saw her countenance change then. Nimi was hiding something from her.

"Well, we are both careful about what we do when we are around each other."

"So, you've been to his house after the Lara and Jibola incident?"

She looked down. “Well, we only spent a few minutes and he just wanted to pick something before leaving.”

Arike remained quiet then and nodded as if she was just beginning to understand what God was telling her nights ago.

Father I’m sorry I doubted you. Why did I think for one second I knew more than you?

“Did you follow him inside?”

Nimi nodded.

Arike suddenly grew scared. “Oh my goodness Nimi, are you two having sex?”

“Of course not Pastor Arike!” She cried eyes wide open. “You should know me better than this. We haven’t done anything like that. We just share a few kisses and it stops there. I suggested maybe next time I go over, we will have a bible study instead so as to prevent us from drifting.”

Arike suddenly felt unease in the spirit and she spoke out. “What do you think you are doing Nimi? Listen to yourself, Bible study in Dapo’s house? When you two are not married? What happened to the ones going on here on weekdays? I can assure you that the next time you go to his place, it’s not bible study you two will be having, it’s body anatomy you two will be reading.”

Nimi looked away obviously upset.

“Now listen to me, you two are obviously getting carried away, you especially. I had a dream about you and God wants me to warn you. If you’re not careful, you’ll be singing a different tune when you two finally get married.”

“But God led us together and we are not even sleeping together.” Her eyes had pooled.

“I can’t believe sleeping with him should even cross your mind at this stage. Beware, bad company corrupts good manners. Where have you been spending your time? I’ve told you not to entertain Mrs Kitan’s suggestions.

She's not a Christian and will never see things from God's perspective. You think its only penetration that's sex? From the birth of your desire, it keeps growing till your mind is filled with thoughts of it and you keep giving into those thoughts until you're comfortable with them. All that's left is the physical manifestation. It has happened in your heart already. You're fornicating in your thoughts already."

Arike shook her head. "You of all people should be the last person suggesting bible study in your fiancé's house. You know his past. You know the kind of man he was before Christ. He's still in the flesh and he can fall. You should not be the one making him fall Nimi. You should be pulling him up, you should be strengthening him with the word of God. You two should be talking and sharing God, the one who brought you together. Anything less than that will turn to something else. Soon, you'll start sexting each other and other things will follow.

"When Femi and I were courting, we tried to avoid any unnecessary touching as much as possible. I knew Femi's past and I avoided any contacts that will make us start imagining how other parts of our bodies felt like. He knew my past as well and so we prayed for grace and strength. We set boundaries and stuck by it through the help of the HolySpirit. Stop feeling you're too good to fall. Paul warned us about this. Let him who stands take heed lest he fall. You should be led by God every step of the way."

Nimi was quiet.

"*You surprise me sha*." Arike continued. "So sense has taken over bible verse? Come, when last did God even lead you to do something? Now sense is guiding you *abi*? It's like you don't know what's up with *Mr Flesh* when it takes over."

Nimi reached to wipe her face. "I love him ma and I just can't help myself whenever I'm with him. He's been loving and kind and he's just everything to me. I know I've been having thoughts about us but I feel it's because I love him.

I can't think about him if I don't love him. It's so hard to just put those thoughts aside and pretend I don't want him kissing me or making love to me. I see it in his eyes too. Some nights I go crazy when he doesn't call or text me. I can't even imagine life without him."

Arike cocked her brows.

She was quiet for a while and Nimi could not say anything either. She felt like she had revealed too much already.

"Don't turn God's gift to an idol Nimi. You won't like the consequences." She reached for a tissue and handed it to her so she could wipe her face.

"I love Femi, I'm madly in love with my kids. In fact I could offer my life for them if I was told to. But they can't take God's place in my life. God's love for me is more than what Femi or my kids can give me. His love is one I can't live without. If Femi asked me to pick him or God today, I would pick God without thinking twice. Femi's love should be strong enough to present me as a spotless bride unto Christ, not take me away from Christ. That is why God designed marriage in the first place. For the salvation of you both. To guide you back to Him; Your eternal home. Any love leading you away from God as the focus is no longer love. I want you to think about it, would you pick your first love or Dapo?"

Nimi blew into the tissue without saying a word.

"Love suffers long and is kind. It doesn't rejoice in iniquity. It does not seek its own. You're exhibiting a love outside God's definition my dear and that will only cause you heartache."

"I wish I didn't have to feel this way."

"Just go to God and ask Him to help you through it."

Lara needs her

Arike swallowed. *Oh God, you want me to say that now*?

"When last did you hear from Lara?"

Nimi looked up then. “It’s been a while. I told you she had issues with her brother.”

“But does she have issues with you?”

She blinked. “Uh…well, she doesn’t like me…”

“But someone not liking you doesn’t stop you from telling them about God’s love does it? Or do you think it makes things convenient for you and Dapo at the moment, compared to when she was a thorn in your flesh?”

Nimi closed her eyes and didn’t know when laughter escaped from her lips “I’m sorry, but yes it does.”

Arike joined her and the tension in the atmosphere subsided. “I believe she’s the major reason God wants you there in the first place. So do what He has sent you to do and watch things work out for good. Perhaps, it might ease the whole sexual tension between yourself and Dapo.” She winked.

“Maybe.”

“When she was on your neck, you hardly had time for all those thoughts. Now that she’s out of your hair, the enemy of your soul wants to occupy space. You know Satan likes to get busy so don’t be a victim *abeg.”*

“I won’t. I promise.”

“Not with your strength Nimi, but with God all things are possible. Okay? Let that be your motto. God resists the proud but gives grace to the humble.”

Nimi nodded. “Yes ma.”

“Would you like to come over today? I’m sure the kids will like to see you and you can help me keep them busy while I attend to other things.”

“Of course. I would love that.”

“Thank you love.”

“Thanks Mama. I don’t know what I would have done without you in my life.” She reached to hug her and Arike returned the gesture. “I love you, but God loves you more, never forget that.”

“I won’t.”



Lara had been staring at the phone for hours contemplating on calling Nimi. She was the only one who could help her talk to Dapo at the moment. Their mum didn't know the truth about what she'd done to Aisha so asking her to beg Dapo would mean opening another pandora box which she was not ready to handle. She had too much on her plate right now.

But she had mistreated Nimi. She wondered if Nimi would gloat in her face and ignore her or refuse to speak with her brother on her behalf. She'd heard about their engagement from Ikenna. Dapo had not even bothered to tell her. Lara was scared if he continued this way, he might forget her forever. What if they had kids and she wasn't allowed to come over? What if he didn't even want her in his home?

He would get married to Nimi and forget her, leaving her to suffer alone. If they both didn't want her, then she was going to die a miserable lonely woman.

No man wanted her. Even her father had not checked on her since she revealed the truth to her mother. He obviously wasn't sorry about what he had done to her. He had been protecting his own name and reputation all this while. He'd used her and he didn't care.

No one really cared.

Ikenna still talked to her occasionally but she could feel the strain in their relationship. Their conversations no longer felt funny or playful anymore. And he hardly responded to her messages. She remembered trying to call him so they could have lunch but someone else had picked his phone. A lady. She'd tried calling him again but his phone was switched off.

His recent display picture was that of a young beautiful lady and she felt Ikenna probably didn't see her as beautiful anymore. She was a tainted, damaged and miserable girl no one wanted.

Ikenna, the only man who had sincerely loved her was gone too.

Everything had been stripped off her except her job which didn't bring her joy or satisfaction anymore. A few of her friends wanted to come back into her life but she'd seen them for what they were and couldn't grant them access into her life again. She thought about Soji and his threats of releasing her video and pictures. He hadn't done it. She was glad he hadn't gone through with his threat or she might have ended her life.

What if you did? It's peaceful on the other side.

She shook her head. The thoughts of suicide had been molesting her mind recently. Ever since she sank into depression, anxiety had taken over and she was having nightmares. Horrible ones. This time, she would dream of all the men she'd slept with raping her and she would scream out. Her father was one of them. Her therapist told her it was just a dream but she knew they were more than dreams. Some weird things were happening to her recently. Whenever she tried to sleep, she would feel a dark sinister presence in her room. Turning on the lights, she wouldn't see anyone, but it felt like she was being watched.

Was someone stalking her?

Maybe someone was; Paparazzi perhaps. Maybe they wanted to see how she was faring. But that was not enough to explain the weight of someone on her whenever she slept and had those dreams. They were too real. Her body felt sore and used whenever she woke up, like someone had molested her during the night and kept her awake till daybreak.

Some nights, she had to take pills to sleep.

Why don't you just end it once and for all? There's no point living.

I'm scared of death.

Her mind suddenly flashed back to the conversation she'd had with Nimi about the next life. Nimi had been a new employee then and there was something so peaceful and beautiful about having the girl in her life, until Nimi ruined everything by stealing Dapo's affection and attention.

Next life huh?

Because of Christ, I have eternal life in my spirit. There's hope for mankind after all. All we need to do is reach for it.

What makes you so sure there's a next life?

Because there's just so much going on in this world to think and say it all ends here and the bible that predicts all says there's hope, there's life somewhere asides this. My spirit confirms it because I have the Spirit of God. Where does the spirit and soul go? The Bible says all shall be judged by one. I'd be crazy if I chose this earth over eternity. I couldn't choose my parents or the life I had growing up, but I can choose where I'll spend forever and whom I'd like to spend it with. Even if I lose all in this life, it's nothing compared to what I have in Jesus.

What if she ended it now and it was worse on the other side?

That fear held her back.

Ignore those thoughts. It's better on the other side. No worries, no fear, you just go. Everyone is going to miss you. Even your dad is going to miss you. And your brother. He's going to regret staying away from you. Don't you want that? Don't you want people to miss you?"

I wish they would. But taking my life…

Oh, taking your life would do just that. You've got nothing to lose. No one loves you, no one needs you. Besides, you have nothing in this life. Everyone hates you and wish you were gone.

I would like to try. One last time. I'll try to reach Nimi. I don't know why but she seems to be the only hope I've got right now.

You think she would listen to you?! Don't! She's only going to ignore you or laugh at you. Don't stoop so low to beg her for help.

Lara reached for her phone and dialled Nimi's number. The call would determine the next step she would take. She was going to write a note and raid her father's bar downstairs or cut her wrist and enter into the bathtub while

leaving the water to run. She had been reading up on several ways to end her life and she was going to get drunk in the tub till she passed out and drowned. Whatever came next, she didn't care anymore.

"Hello…" Nimi's voice broke into her thoughts.

"Hi, it's Lara."

The line went quiet for a while.

"Hello Lara, how are you?"

"I'm fine. I need your help with Dapo, can you help me?"

"Uh… okay."

"You know what, never mind." And she hung up.

Lara switched off her phone. Why had she even called Nimi? She'd stooped low. She wouldn't do so again. She would take the other route.



Nimi stared at her phone wondering what just happened. She inhaled deeply and tried to call Lara back but her phone was switched off.

Why would Lara call her, hang up and switch off the phone?

Go to her

She blinked. She'd learned to recognise the voice over time. Was God asking her to go and meet her?

She remembered Pastor Arike talking about Lara and how she was supposed to reach out to her. The dream about the girl jumping off a cliff suddenly came to mind and a certain understanding dawned on her.

Oh my God!

She quickly picked up her bag and called Dapo on her way out of the house.

He didn't pick his phone and she texted him instead.

Dapo I need to talk to you. It's important.

He replied a few minutes later.

Sweetheart, I'm in the middle of a meeting right now, can you call me later or text me.

She sighed and ordered for an Uber. Things like this needed cabs and not *danfo*. She stepped into the car and kept praying as her spirit led her to.

She texted Dapo a few minutes later as the Uber driver drew close to third mainland bridge.

I think Lara is in danger.

He called her immediately. "Babe, I got your text…"

"I don't know Dapo but I just sense it in my spirit that Lara is about doing something crazy." She broke down into tears. Compassion for the girl flooded her soul in such a way she couldn't explain. Her body trembled with a fearful intensity and she desperately prayed to get there on time.

"Baby calm down. What's going on, where is she? Is she at home or at work?"

"I'm taking chances and heading straight to the house. Can you call work and check up on her? I want to be sure I'm going to the right place. Maybe call to ask if she's somewhere asides home or work. And if you get to her before me, please just make sure she's safe."

"Okay sweetheart, I'll do just that. Just be careful, okay."

"I will."

"I love you."

"I love you too. And baby, can you please pray with me. Just pray as you're led to."

"I will."

She hung up and continued praying, hoping she would get there in time to stop whatever Lara was up to.

Father, please let me not be too late. Forgive me for tarrying. Don't let the plan of the enemy come to pass in her life. Don't let the dream about her jumping out of my reach to catch her come to pass.



When Nimi got to the Kitan mansion, the security guards opened the gate for her. She thanked them and hurriedly ran to the front door pounding on it furiously.

One of the maids opened the door and looked up at her curiously. "Good afternoon Aunty."

"Is Lara in?" She didn't have time for pleasantries.

The girl nodded.

"I would like to see her."

"She said she doesn't want to be disturbed." The girl replied.

Pushing the girl aside, Nimi entered the house and looked around.

"Lara!" She called out, frantically searching the room. The maid stared at her like she'd gone crazy.

"Where is she?" Nimi turned to the maid.

"She's in the second living room. She locked herself inside."

"Please lead me to the place."

"But…"

"I said take me there, or do you want me to call your Oga's son?"

"I'm sorry ma." She turned immediately to lead the way. They stopped before a sliding door and the maid knocked.

"Who's that?" Lara called out.

Nimi couldn't believe how relieved she was hearing Lara's cranky voice. She heaved a sigh of relief.

"It's Uncle Dapo's fiancée. She said she wants to see you and it's very important."

No response. Some minutes passed before Lara opened the door. She stepped out and looked Nimi in the eye.

"Leave." Lara told the girl, her eyes still on Nimi.

The girl hurried off.

"What do you want?" Lara snapped.

Nimi suddenly saw her as a suffering child and felt sorry for her. Her eyes had sunk in and she looked lean. Her gaze settled on Lara's wrist and her heart raced at the slash marks on them. Nimi peeped inside the living room and saw bottles of alcohol lined up across the table.

"I said what do you want?!" Lara screamed and Nimi jumped back in fright wondering what had gotten into her. Lara's eyes had something in them and she didn't look normal. She looked like someone being tortured by an evil spirit.

"I came because you called."

"I don't need you. I don't need anyone. Get out of my house!"

"Lara please…"

"I said get out!" Lara yelled, her hands cracking across Nimi's face. "Get out of my life! Leave me alone!" She kept screaming and hitting her.

Oh father, this hurts. Nimi sobbed.

Stay with her.

"You don't want to leave *huh?* You think you can make me change my mind." Lara headed for the table and opened a bottle of vodka. Reaching for it, she drank some and spilled the rest of the content on Nimi's face.

"Lara, please stop this. You're hurting me and you're hurting yourself." Nimi cried trying to wipe her face and her dress all at once but Lara relentlessly reached for another bottle.

“Do you know why I hate you? Because you are perfect! You have everything I ever wanted. You make me see everything I lack, your life is so different from mine.” She opened the cover and emptied another full bottle on her. “You are everything I wish I could be. Your innocence wasn’t taken from you! My parents love you! My brother loves you because you’re perfect. Because you have what I don’t have!”

“I’m not perfect.” Nimi cried amidst the abuse. “I’m just like you.”

Lara scoffed. “Bullshit. You’re nothing like me!” She spat. “What are you still doing here?!” Flinging the bottle across the room, she reached for Nimi’s shirt and tugged at it till it tore. Seeing that Nimi didn’t budge, she threw her fists on her screaming and yelling at her. “I hate you, I hate you, I hate you! Why don’t you fight back? C’mon! Fight back! Hit me. I deserve it. After everything I’ve done to you. Say what’s in your heart. Tell me I’m a promiscuous whore and I deserve what I got. Pull my clothes and fight back.”

Nimi shook her head crying. “I won’t. I can’t, because I love you, irrespective of what you’ve done.”

Lara stopped and watched Nimi trying to pull her clothes together, crying as she pulled at the remaining pieces to cover herself.

Lara froze and broke down in tears. “I’m so sorry.” She sobbed. “I’m so sorry, please don’t leave me. I didn’t mean it. I don’t know what came over me.” Nimi reached out to hug Lara and Lara held on to her. “I’m so sorry.”

“I’m here for you. I won’t leave you. I promise.” Nimi rubbed her back, grateful that God had taken control of the situation but still hurting from the pain of the abuse.

“Thank you Jesus. Oh Lord thank you.” Nimi mumbled as Lara sobbed in her arms.

CHAPTER 31

Lara roused from sleep to see Nimi sitting beside her on the bed reading from a book and stroking her hair softly. Lara didn't know how long she'd been there or how long she slept under her watch. She'd just had the most peaceful sleep in months. It felt like a miracle. She remembered what had happened and felt guilty for hitting Nimi and tearing her clothes. She had given her one of her sweatshirt hoodies to wear and she looked beautiful in it, like an angel with a halo over her head.

She glanced up from the book. "Hey..." Nimi adjusted on the bed and smiled at her.

"Hey." Lara reached out to touch her hand and smiled. Hopefully that would assure her that she wasn't going to hurt her again. Maybe she was a guardian angel sent to her. She'd been here at the nick of time. "Thank you once again."

"It's okay."

"I'm sorry, I really am. I— "

"You were upset and confused. I'm glad you're fine really."

Lara nodded staring at her. Her eyes settled on the book in Nimi's hand. It was her bible, the one Dapo had given her.

"Oh, I saw it among your things. I picked it up because it looked cute and I found the translation interesting."

"My brother bought it for me. Do you like it? I'm sure he can get you one if you ask him."

Nimi nodded and touched her head. "How are you feeling?"

"Hungry." She chuckled and tried to sit up. "How long did I sleep?"

"Five hours."

"Wow, that's longer than a nap."

Nimi nodded.

"Is my brother around?"

Nimi hesitated. "Uh, yea he was around to check on you but had to go back to work when he saw you were doing fine. He was in a meeting when I called."

Lara felt hurt he hadn't waited to see her. "I understand and it's fine."

"Your mum isn't home yet. Would you like me to call her?"

"No, please don't. She's been through so much and I don't want her to know what I almost did to myself."

"Okay…"

"Can we go downstairs and grab something to eat? I'm having a headache and I feel so lightheaded and hungry. I think it's the alcohol." Lara said, touching her head.

"Sure, what would you like to eat?"

"I'm sure the girls will make me something while I have some ice-cream."

Nimi laughed. "I don't think ice-cream is the best option for you now."

"Oh please don't go all health police on me right now."

"No, to be sincere, I think you would have to take it easy on your stomach and I was thinking we should see a doctor to be sure you're fine."

"But I'm really hungry!" She whined.

"Okay, let me make jollof spaghetti for you."

"For the both of us." Lara beamed. "The girls can make it."

"No, I think I would rather make this one myself." Nimi smiled. "How do you like your food, spicy or non-spicy?"

"A little spicy should do but babe, you don't have to do this…"

"I want to, besides, Dapo is coming back so he would get to eat out of it too."

Her face brightened when she heard her brother was returning to the house. "Oh awesome then. Cook for the whole house."

"Don't push it." Nimi winked. She rose from the bed and went to stand before the mirror. She grimaced at her reflection in the mirror and ran her fingers through her hair, trying to smoothen it with her fingers. The newly fixed weave had turned messy and the bangs across her head were rough. Though Lara had helped her wash the alcohol off, it didn't change the fact that it had become untidy. She would need to loosen the hair.

Lara felt sorry as she watched Nimi make futile attempts to put her hair back in shape. She went to stand beside her.

"Aww… come, let me help with that." Lara reached for a brush on her dressing table and tried to help her comb it. "Sit down." She ordered and Nimi sat facing the dressing mirror. "I can help you loosen it and you can fix it at the salon tomorrow."

Nimi shrugged. "I feel bad because I spent so much on it, but it's fine really."

"C'mon, I need to fix my hair too, maybe we should go together."

Nimi smiled as Lara kept brushing her hair and relaxed. "Okay if you say so."

Lara observed how Nimi kept looking at her table that was filled with a batch of body creams, make up and luxurious accessories. Lara suddenly wanted Nimi to be her new friend and share things with her. Gone was the

memory of how she'd seen her as a gold digger. If she had died, then all those things would have been useless anyway.

Besides, Lara wanted to atone for her wrongs in every way possible.

Nimi looked into the mirror and caught Lara watching at her. She looked away immediately.

"I was thinking…" Lara began, brushing the hair softly. "If you could spend some time here with me, you know. We could hang out and have fun." She allowed the thoughts settle in and continued. "I would really love you to stay." The fear of sleeping in her room alone gripped her again and she continued. "We could share my room, it's big enough for the both of us."

"I don't think that's a good idea Lara."

"Why? What's wrong? Are you still mad at me? You promised you would not leave me." She panicked.

"Okay, okay. Can you give me time to think about it?"

Lara nodded. "But can you spend the night?" She pressed as she dropped the brush and did the hair into French braids, running her hands on the fringe. When she was done, she settled on her dresser and revealed one of her fears. "Today is the first time in months I've slept without dreaming of someone watching me or coming into my dream to—"

Nimi looked up then and saw the fear in Lara's eyes. She reached for her hands. "What's the problem? Talk to me Lara."

"If I tell you, you might be scared to stay."

"Nothing is impossible for Jesus."

"Someone keeps molesting me in my dream. It's been happening for a while, but now, it's just too much to bear. Sometimes it gets so bad the pain wakes me up." She stared at Nimi wondering if she would be scared. She looked calm.

This her 'Jesus' must really be something.

But could she have him too? Would He make all this pain go away? Would he make her past go away?

He just felt too good to be true. There had to be a price. No one accepted people into their life without wanting something in return. Penance maybe? She could do penance if he wanted that.

He wants more than penance, he wants your soul.

But Nimi looks fine. If he has her soul, she doesn't look it. She was willing to love me still, irrespective of how bad I treated her in the past. Is that how God is? Does he keep loving even when he knows all that I've done? She's such an angel, maybe she's my guardian angel. She looks so happy and bold and beautiful.

It's all a scam.

Nimi reached for her hand and her thoughts dissolved into thin air. "God who asked me to come to you knows what you're about, and so if the plan is to stay, I will. He's that crazy about you. You just have to open your heart to Him dear. He's been knocking ever since, cutting through every obstacle to capture your heart. Don't you see it?"

Lara kept staring at Nimi. There was something holding her back but she couldn't place her hand on it. Such acceptance was just unbelievable.

"I wish I could, all I just see is you." She mumbled sadly.

Nimi gave her an encouraging smile. "Soon love, you'll see it and it'll blow your mind away. Just be sure your heart is open."

She nodded.

"I can read the bible to you tonight before you sleep."

"You would? Like a bedtime story?" Lara laughed. She remembered when her mum used to read her bedtime stories, before her parent's separation. It felt so long ago, when everything was alright with her world. Nimi's words of assurance created a spark inside her she could not explain.

She saw Nimi hesitate. Maybe she'd said the wrong words. "I'm sorry, did I say something wrong?"

"No, it's fine." Nimi seemed to be in deep thought. She was convinced God often spoke to her. Perhaps he was doing so now.

Lara's stomach growled and Nimi sprang up from the stool. "Time to cook!" She reached for the door and turned to her. "Are you coming or you're going to let those monsters in your stomach keep growling?"

Lara giggled and went to join her.



Dapo arrived at his parents' house late in the evening. He tugged at his tie as he found his way in. He would have to sleep over. It was evident Lara had suicidal tendencies and he considered she would have to see another psychiatrist. He knew the problem could be spiritual, but he also did not want to take any chances. At least if she was placed on pills, she would have less time to think of suicide or get depressed.

Sometimes, he just wanted her to stop interrupting his life as she'd always done. He knew he was still mad at her, but he kept telling himself he'd forgiven her.

She'd broken his trust. His mind flashed back to the incident between Soji and Lara. He'd been mortified to see the jerk trying to rape his sister and had sworn to make sure the guy slept in jail for years: only to realise the dark secret between his sister and her beau.

What if he hadn't returned to the house with Ikenna when he got her message? Soji would have raped her and kept blackmailing her. She would have married Soji and he would have kept on abusing and using her. She would have no choice but to keep living her old messed up life.

When Nimi had called him earlier, he'd thought Lara was pulling her childish pranks again. Like the time she cut her wrists because of Soji's affair with Aisha. But when he saw his fiancée's torn clothes, the state of the house, Lara's face and her wrists, he knew it was no lie.

He went inside the house and he was shocked to find his sister, his mum, and his fiancée at the table laughing and eating dinner. The aroma of the meal made his mouth water. It smelled like something Nimi had made. He couldn't wait to get married so they could move in together and leave the past behind them.

"My prince." His mum greeted as he walked inside the dining room. "How was your day love?"

Had she been expecting him?

"Nimi told us you were coming over. I'm not a psychic." She chuckled, seeing the look on his face. He looked over at Nimi who looked so good in a pink Nike sweatshirt hoodie and nice pair of sweatpants to match. He suspected it was Lara's. He didn't think Nimi owned something like that. Besides, she had been wearing something different when he came in the afternoon. He was going to get her more outfits like these. He could imagine her already in them, sitting on his couch and snuggled into him while they watched a movie. If he wanted to get naughty, he could tug at her shirt and kiss her senseless…

He quickly averted his thoughts. What in the world was wrong with him? He was very tired, probably the reason why the stray thoughts could flood his mind on seeing Nimi.

It'd been long they shared a kiss.

"Why don't you go upstairs, take a shower and come join us. I told the maids to work on one of the spare rooms since you'll be sleeping over." His mother said to him.

He threw Lara a quick glance. "Are you alright?" He asked, his mind obviously not on her.

Lara looked up at him with a smile and nodded. He wasn't going to be deceived this time.

"Hey sweetheart." He reached to touch Nimi's shoulder and she beamed at him.

"Hey you, how was your day?" She asked.

"So-so." He planted a kiss on her forehead before heading over to greet his mother who was sitting at the other side of the table. "Good evening Mum."

"Good evening my darling." He kissed her cheeks and smiled into his eyes. "I'm glad you're sleeping over to be honest."

He laughed. "I know if it was possible, you would tie me up in this house."

"Well, you're soon going to become a family man so I can't unfortunately."

"Let me clean up and come join you guys."

And he was gone.



Lara observed the affection Dapo showed to Nimi and their mother and she felt sad. Dapo had barely glanced her way. His eyes did not even show any affection for her. What could she do to make him love her again and forgive her? Maybe she could beg him again. Now that he was sleeping over, she would get the chance to talk to him. She could even tell Nimi to beg him on her behalf. He would listen to Nimi obviously. But she would have to come clean to Nimi about what she'd done to Aisha. She silently hoped Nimi wouldn't leave her and think she was vile and hopeless.

Lara watched Dapo heading up the stairs, when he was out of sight she turned to her mum. "Mummy, I want Nimi to stay with us. She can help me get better."

Mrs Kitan laughed shaking her head. “Honey, it doesn’t work that way. Nimi has no idea about your current situation. Your medical condition…”

“But I want her to stay. Her Jesus works just fine for me. I was able to sleep without those nasty pills this afternoon and I felt better when I woke up.”

Nimi watched mother and daughter talking about her like she wasn’t present. “Lara...” Nimi cautioned. “One step at a time.”

“Well, maybe I’ll move to your house then.”

Nimi looked at her in shock and didn’t know when she broke into gales of laughter. “You’re funny.”

Mrs Kitan watched the both of them. “You’ve started speaking Jesus too?” She glanced at Lara surprised.

“Well, not really. But Nimi was with me, I woke up and saw her praying for me and I just felt peaceful. It sounded like she was speaking a language I couldn’t understand. But it felt good. She’ll be sharing my room with me if you don’t mind.” Lara said more as a fact than a request.

Her mother smiled softly. “Of course, sweetheart. She’s part of our family already so the house is hers as well. I’m just wondering if Dapo won’t be jealous you’re sharing his fiancée with him. You know how jealous your brother can get when it comes to Nimi here.”

“Well I’m just his sister, it’s not like I’m a guy that wants to snatch Nimi from him.”

“And who wants to snatch Nimi from me?” Her brother’s voice interrupted them, and she went quiet watching him, scared she might say something to upset him. He had donned on a pair of grey sweatpants and a cotton shirt and he smelled of sandalwood.

Mrs Kitan looked at her son and laughed. “I was talking to your sister here since she wants Nimi to spend time with her. I felt you and *Iyawo* had private plans of your own and it’s not realistic to let her sleep over in her room. It’s the

reason why I had the maids tidy up the spare room. It's big enough for you two."

Dapo who had been feeding himself out of Nimi's plate suddenly choked up on his food and had to reach for a glass of water.

"Are you alright?" Mrs Kitan asked.

He nodded and Lara saw him glancing at Nimi who looked embarrassed. "I'm only spending a few nights here mum. Besides, Nimi can spend time with Lara now, if she wants to. When we get married, it might not be so easy to get my wife to sleep over. I'm afraid I don't share that easily."

"Oh... I see."

"Let me take this to the kitchen…" Nimi spoke up.

"The maids will take it…"

"Don't worry I can do this, besides I have to wash my hands." Nimi insisted and carried her plates hurrying off.



Dapo came into the kitchen and saw Nimi standing at the sink as she washed the plates. He went to stand behind her.

Reaching for her arms, he squeezed gently. "I'm sorry my mum had to embarrass you out there." He mumbled against her ears.

Nimi nodded, loving the feel of his arms.

"It's okay, I'll leave before weekend. I'm certain you won't even sniff me while I'm here." He assured her. "My mum doesn't understand why we're doing what we do."

She smiled glad that he was the one taking the step this time. *Jesus, thank you.*

"You look nice by the way." He asked her to turn around so he could see her.

Dabbing her hands on the napkin, she turned and folded her arms across her chest. “Look who’s talking.”

“Look at the way you’re looking like one badass chick.” He reached for the hood and pulled it over her head in a silly manner. Nimi laughed and reached to sprinkle water on him. He retaliated and moved closer, so close she could feel the steady rise and fall of his chest.

And before she could say anything else, he kissed her.

Feeling too vulnerable and weak to object, she gave in and allowed him kiss her. She clung to him for support, as his touch brought up familiar memories.

“I’ve missed you.” He mumbled as he drew back and stared into her eyes.

“Me too.” Her hands rested on his chest and she could feel his heart racing. “Baby…” She swallowed desperate to calm her racing heart. “I’m scared we might get carried away and I—“

“Dapo dear, have you…” Mrs Kitan walked into the kitchen and stopped when she saw them. Dapo stepped back from her immediately and Nimi felt worse.

“Oh, I’m sorry. I hope I didn’t interrupt anything.” Mrs Kitan said, giving them a knowing smile.

“No, you didn’t.” He replied.

Nimi quickly said goodnight and walked out, hoping tonight’s accident wouldn’t repeat itself.

She was here to help Lara and her feelings for Dapo stood in the way. Why did she keep finding it hard to resist Dapo whenever he was close to her? She’d prayed and sought God’s forgiveness. She’d repented, she’d gone back to being sensitive to God’s Spirit. She even felt better. But right now, she felt as if she was back to square one.

Father, what is going on with me?

CHAPTER 32

"Is something on your mind?" Nimi asked when she observed how quiet Lara had grown in the middle of their conversation. In the past few days, Nimi had been sharing the gospel with her and telling her about Jesus, how he loved her and what he had willingly sacrificed to be with her, his fierce and compassionate love. For a brief moment, it seemed as if Lara was been swallowing everything she said. She'd tried to answer Lara's questions praying silently for wisdom from the Holy-Spirit.

Nimi was glad and her heart was hopeful that the seeds she was planting were growing on fertile soil. Nimi had been spending her weekdays in the Kitan's home except for weekends when she had to coax Lara to let her leave. That didn't stop Lara from calling Nimi and leaving the phone on just to hear her voice as she slept.

Lara didn't mind her call credit running till morning.

Nimi knew Lara was scared and sometimes, Nimi wanted to shake her and tell her to come to Jesus and all the nightmares would cease. Why was she wasting time? Why was it taking her long to make a decision and accept Jesus as her Lord and Saviour?

Nimi kept on, hoping for the strength to continue.

She was glad Dapo had moved back to his apartment. Since their last kiss, he had refrained from touching her and though she appreciated his stance, she couldn't wait for them to get married already and start living life together. She had to keep reminding herself of Lara and how her purpose there had not come to the peak yet. Lara first, then everything else would fall into place. Praying for strength from God, she tried to focus on Lara.

Dapo called her every day and their relationship was still blooming. Lara had begged her to speak to Dapo on her behalf. She wanted things smoothened out between them.

She remembered their conversation the last time she brought it up on their way home from Pastor Arike's house. He was about to bid her good night when she spoke up.

She rested her arm on his and smiled softly. "Uh baby, there's something important I would like to talk to you about."

"Yea I'm listening..."

She prayed within as his gaze grew intense on hers.

I hope this goes well.

"It's about Lara."

His countenance changed; his brows knitted into a frown. "And what about her?"

She sighed. "Baby I think you need to give your sister a chance."

"I don't get your point." He snapped. "You talk like I'm holding her sin against her. Or is that what she's telling you? That I am not giving her a chance? If I wasn't giving her a chance, she would be in rehab right now where my father gets to pay his shrink to see to her. She was willing to cover up his acts, I'm sure he would do well to cover up his daughter too."

Nimi sighed. "Dapo, why are you saying this? You say you've forgiven her and all I can see is your anger and resentment towards her. She is still your sister and you just want to throw her away like she doesn't mean anything to

you. If anyone should be angry, it's me. I should be the one taking offence. I should be the one giving her the cold shoulder, but I'm hanging on because of love. This is the time she needs us. She has no one else. Do you want her to go back to her old friends? She mentioned one of them came to see her yesterday when I followed the girls to the market. She didn't reveal much and I didn't want to probe her further, so it doesn't look like I'm prying into her private life. I can only go where she gives me access to.

"If we don't set up walls around her, the enemy will come and camp around her heart again. Is that what you want?"

Her fiancé remained quiet, looking straight ahead.

"Lara hurt me too. She said words and pulled me down right in front of her friends and she tried coming between us. She hit me when I tried to help her. I don't have amnesia. I remember all these things but I chose not to let the past dictate my love for Lara. You were not perfect either you know. I know the battle I fought when you told me about your past and how I doubted I could move on with you. Even God, the one that our sins hurt the most doesn't take it personal the way we do with other people's sins. Do you blame Lara? She didn't know God. She was crying to me last night when she talked about Aisha's aborted baby and her betrayal. She was a desperate godless woman who would do anything for the man she thought she loved. She was selfish and the god of this world was in charge of her heart.

"Or do you want to blame her for her father's abuse? Have you ever wondered if she just couldn't face what he did to her all those years? What if she wanted to live in denial, what if she wasn't ready to admit that her father had abused her and it was incest? What if she wanted to believe it was love because it felt safer to see it that way? Because seeing it that way didn't make it look so grotesque or hideous. Her father had called it love, hurting her when she was only a child. That marred her definition of Love so she couldn't expect to be treated better."

She reached to take his hand. “That girl is broken Dapo and she needs Jesus. He's the only one who can penetrate those crevices, give her a brand-new life, a new slate and make her live life again. See what Jesus did for you? God's love has made me fall madly in love with you. He has made me see a new Dapo and not the old Dapo. He made me trust that you'll lead me and guide me in our marriage together, living life for his glory. If Jesus wasn't involved here, then there's nothing we are doing together. It's because of him we are together."

He looked at her then and she saw that his eyes had pooled. It was obvious he loved his sister and he’d just been hurt that she’d done terrible things and lied to him. He looked sober and Nimi reached out to hug him.

"She needs us baby. Just keep seeing her through the eyes of Jesus and you'll realise that all she needs is God's love. I'm not saying what she did was right, I'm just saying to help her we would have to look past that. Okay baby?"

He nodded and kissed her on the cheek.

"I don't know what I'd do without you baby." He said looking into her eyes.

She grinned and quickly changed the topic before it led to something else. She was learning to utilise self-control as much as possible and God had been helping her so far.

Lara's voice brought her back to the present. "I don't know what to believe about your God Nimi. That's just the truth."

Nimi dropped the bible in her hands and moved closer to her on the bed. "Why? What's wrong?"

She shook her head. "I don't want to offend you."

"C’mon, say what's on your mind. What's the problem?"

She inhaled deeply. "I don't know. You claim God is so good and so kind and so holy and so loving but look at me. Is my life even worth saving? I mean, if he wanted me to be good like you, he should have stopped my Dad from touching me that night. You know, send an angel, or do something. You talked

about Jesus mentioning kids having angels who stand before God so where was my angel when I cried every night? Where was he when I couldn't bear to see what my dad was doing to me and I buried my head in my pillow wishing I would just die? And times when I wished it was some dream I would wake up from. I kept listening to my father telling me it would be okay. I closed my eyes, counting the seconds for it to be over. I don't understand how a good God allows men like my father do that to children.

“At least, I get the adult part and their choices, but what about those kids that don't have choices, what about me who didn't have a choice? What about me who had no one to tell or run to? Now you come here, telling me a message on how such a God is good and loving and kind. I just find it difficult to swallow, trust me. It doesn't make sense, it feels like you all are trying to paint an image of some God in your mind when the real one can't do anything but just watch and judge from one big throne and perhaps one day throw people like me into hell because yeah, we've been bad and we did not choose him."

Nimi was hurt and was at a loss for words. In all her life, she'd never been faced with such confrontation. She did not have a past like Lara so she didn't know what to say and she couldn’t say she fully understood what the girl was feeling. There was nothing that could make Nimi feel what Lara felt. She wasn’t the one wearing the shoes. Her own father had been godly and kind to her. He had loved her and told her bedtime stories. He had carried her and swung her around. She'd known a father's love all her life. How could she show Lara God’s fatherly love when her own father had hurt her and done unspeakable things to her?

I will be a Father to you, and you will be my sons and daughters, says the Lord Almighty.

Nimi reached for her hand and squeezed gently. "God isn't the one who allows those bad things happen Lara." She prayed for strength, glad that she'd received guidance from God. "And no, you didn't have a choice then, your

heartache was your father's doing, but will you allow his act mar you for the rest of your life? Will you allow his decision to abuse you years ago dictate how you live the rest of your life? God never promised a rosy and lovely world where everyone would love one another. Only those of His kingdom love one another and are indebted to do so. You never had a good father, but God is ready to be your father. He is ready to give you a clean slate. He says he wants to be your Daddy. He says, behold if any man be in Christ, he is a new creature, me inclusive. He knew all these would happen and so he came to a dying world to rescue us, to rescue you. None of us were good. We were all unworthy.

“When your father hurt you, it hurt God that he would do that to you but people make choices and the innocent get hurt. You hear of the killings and the bombings right? Innocent people die when wicked men do things. It is all as a result of people who have chosen to live outside the life God offered to mankind. And God doesn't force himself on anyone because he has given us all free will." She saw a tear roll down Lara’s cheek and Nimi reached to wipe it away. "God was willing to leave his throne and all that he had for you. He held nothing back, he was mocked, shamed and scorned. He put his love on the line.

“He knew people would doubt and reject him but yet he offered himself up for you and me. For all of those who would come to accept him. Do you know those scars on Jesus will be there for eternity? To remind us of the price that was paid. Sweetheart, this world is just a passage. I wish you could see how much God has in stock for those that love Him and live for Him. Jesus makes all things brand new and gives you his righteousness. He knows you don't have any of your own so he freely gives his. All He wants to do is be your friend and your father. He wants to be your saviour, the one who saves you from your sins, from this world and from yourself. He doesn't require you to attain a certain height before you come to him. Just come as you are."

Lara leaned close and buried her face into Nimi’s neck sobbing. "I just wish I could see it but I can't Nimi. I can't! Sometimes I feel like I'm hopeless. Maybe I'm cursed and I'm just one of those people destined for hell..."

"Shhh.. don’t say that. Christ became a curse for you. You are not cursed when you come into Christ."

"I really want to see God the way you talk about Him, but I don't know, it's not working for me. I don't know Nimi, maybe you should keep praying for me. Is it me? Is it my heart? Maybe it’s just not able to see God as good and true."

"I'll pray for you dear. Just keep your heart open as I said." Nimi replied feeling a little disappointed.

Lara nodded and rested on the bed looking at Nimi and holding on to her hand like a lifeline. Nimi knew Lara was becoming emotionally attached to her and she was scared of what it might lead to.

"Do you want to read me one more of those bible stories before I go to bed? Read those beautiful Psalms by handsome David for me." Lara pleaded, her eyes shining with adoration for a young shepherd boy that loved tending sheep and composed songs for God with contentmentt.

Nimi nodded eagerly even as tears stung. For some strange reason, she couldn't tell why her heart broke. It wasn’t just about Lara's delay in salvation. Something else was hurting her, something she couldn’t yet lay a finger on, but might probably break her completely.

Perhaps God would reveal this soon.

At the right time.



"Have you two set a date yet?" Mrs Kitan asked as Nimi settled on the couch opposite her mother-in-law to be. She glanced at the number of wedding magazines displayed on the coffee table and picked one.

"We were thinking November thirteen, four months from now. Dapo and I suggested it as a date by proxy but we wanted to tell you about it first. My mum thinks it's fine."

"Oh that reminds me, I will have to come visit your mum so we can talk. Dapo told me you two were opting for a garden wedding. We have to start working on wedding plans, four months isn't far away anymore. Congrats once again."

"Thank you Ma."

"Your dress is going to be so beautiful. It will be the talk of the town." She giggled. "A Vera Wang dress would be perfect and you my dear have the perfect figure for the dress I have in my mind. Just let me know if there's any bun in the oven so it won't soil your shape for the perfect dress."

Nimi was aware of her intelligent tactic to see if she and Dapo were intimate already but she chose to respond politely. "I guess I'll fit into that dress perfectly."

Mrs Kitan smiled and kept on talking about the wedding invites and people she wanted to invite for the wedding. They kept scrolling through the magazines together and the older woman went on about her wedding planner and how Lara could be her maid of honour if she didn't have anyone in mind yet.

Just then, the subject of their conversation peeped in.

"Hey." Nimi waved though she felt a little uncomfortable with Lara’s presence. She was unsure as to how Lara might feel since she should have gotten married before Nimi.

Lara beamed and pushed the door wider. "What's going on?"

"We were talking about how Nimi wants you to be her maid of honour." Mrs Kitan chipped in immediately and Nimi looked at her surprised. She'd asked Tolani to be her maid of honour and she'd been pretty excited, raving on and on about it. Now that Mrs Kitan wanted Lara, she didn't know what to say, and she was scared of breaking Lara's heart.

"Oh really? You would?! Oh my goodness!" Lara hurriedly joined them and Nimi had to scoot for her to sit beside her. Lara threw herself on her, planting wet sloppy kisses on her cheeks. "Thank you! Thank you. You're amazing Nimi. I can choose the perfect dress for you babe. Trust me on this one. You want my brother to have eyes only for you and your assets on that day."

"Lara... I…"

"What? You two are going to do it anyway so let's get you something really nice and beautiful. Like my own." She ranted on, reaching for another magazine that had *'fall weddings'* by Vera Wang. "I need to get my iPad to work on some dress collections. You should have told me this so that I would have pinned them all for you. Wow, I love getting busy. Your dress is going to be hot, my friend."

"No Lara, you and Nimi have different body shapes and it would be preferable if she wore something of her choice. Besides, your brother might be offended if he sees his woman in something revealing. Dapo really does not like to share you know and I believe that applies to what Nimi wears too."

"Oh... I'm sure we will find something elegant but modest that suits your body shape perfectly." Lara reached to touch Nimi and slid her arms around her waist. "Or do you have something in mind?"

Nimi felt uncomfortable with the gesture but tried not to let her hyperactive imagination get the best of her. Touch was Lara's love language. Nimi was getting familiar with it ever since they started sharing the same room.

"I would like something beautiful, something exciting and elegant that fits my body. I want Dapo to see me and go 'whoa!'" I want it to just be perfect."

Mrs Kitan chuckled. "Don't worry, we will find the perfect dress for you." Turning to Lara, she continued. "Uh… Lara, we have so much to do and you'll need to help Nimi sort out many of the things pertaining to the wedding."

"My sister... Tolani and I have a few friends from church. They would love to be involved in the planning too." Her mind flashed to her spiritual sister Tamuno and Pastor Arike. Tamuno had gone on and on excitedly, checking her colour catalogue. Pastor Arike had even offered to help. The way the Kitans were going about it, her sister, Tamuno, and Pastor Arike might not have a part to play in her wedding anymore.

"Oh… I see. But I think Lara can handle it trust me. She's a pro with things like that."

"But you can ask them to come over if you want." Lara chipped in observing Nimi wasn't too happy with the decision they were making by excluding her family and friends. "It's to make you happy right? Anything to make you happy because you deserve happiness baby." Lara's hands reached for Nimi's hair and she kept stroking it affectionately.

"Thank you." Nimi nodded. "It would really mean a lot to me if they join in. They've been part of my life for so long."

"I understand." Lara smiled softly and went on looking through the magazines. A few minutes later, she got up and went to the kitchen. Lara returned with two tall glasses and Nimi wondered if her mum was not going to have any.

"Here's one for us and that's for you mum." She beamed and settled back in beside them.

"Oh thank you honey." Mrs Kitan looked up and saw that Lara had included two straws into her cup. She shook her head laughing. "You didn't even ask Nimi if she wouldn't mind you two drinking from the same glass."

"I knew she wouldn't mind." Lara shrugged and reached for her straw sipping slowly. She passed it to Nimi so she could also help herself to it. "C'mon, it's great, you'll love it."

Nimi sipped and managed a smile. "It is."

"Told you!"

"Uh Lara, can you get your organiser so you can take down the deets and the numbers. We don't have much time anymore. The wedding is in four months and before you know it, it's here. The earlier we start working on our plans, the better. Okay honey?"

"Sure!"

And she hurried upstairs. Nimi looked back at Mrs Kitan and smiled. "Thank you."



Lara got off the phone and sank into her bed with a smile. Her brother had just called speaking to her lovingly. She could feel the emotion coursing through his voice as he apologised for holding her sin against her and she couldn't hold back the tears when he said he would always love her, irrespective of her past. He'd only been upset because she hadn't confided in him. He was going out with Nimi tonight and he'd asked her to come along.

She couldn't be happier.

Oh Nimi. She was wonderful. Everything she touched came to life. Nimi must have spoken to her brother on her behalf. She wished she was a guy. Maybe she would have married her immediately. She was kind, had a beautiful heart, and her character was just out of this world. She wished she was allowed to love her the way her brother loved her.

And who says you can't?

She blinked. Where did that thought come from?

No, She's my brother's fiancée, and eww.., it's just wrong.

And who says it's wrong? Nimi's God or you?

She sighed. *Nimi can't love me that way. She's engaged to my brother. Besides, I don't think it's the right thing to do. She's going to run away from me if I show affections beyond normal to her.*

Something was probably messing with her brain. Nimi was her only true friend and she was having improper thoughts towards her.

She's going to get married soon. Who'll be there to love you? Who'll be there to hold your hand and pray with you? Who'll be there to read you your precious bible stories and watch you sleep off? Just you sweetheart. So why don't you take chances now and test the waters. Do you want to be alone for the rest of your life? You never know if Nimi loves you the way you do.

The creaking noise of the door distracted her and Nimi ambled in smiling. "Hey dear, have you picked a dinner dress yet? Dapo told me we're going out together. Maybe you'll pick a dress for me and I'll pick yours."

Nimi suddenly looked so beautiful.

The thoughts kept floating around but Lara shook her head. *Don't do this Lara.*

"Are you alright?" Nimi asked.

She looked up managing a smile. "I'm alright. I was just thinking."

"About?"

"Uh, I don't think you would like to know..."

Don't say it Lara

"Tell me. You know you don't have to hide it from me."

She sighed. "I was just wondering what would happen to me when you get married. I don't mean to sound selfish or anything. I just don't want to be alone."

Nimi smiled at her, crouching before her. "You're not alone. God is with you. You've got to start seeing past me and see who I'm pointing to, Jesus. If you see me loving you this way, it's because of Jesus. If you see me holding

your hands this way, it's because of Jesus, if you see me hugging and praying for you, it's because of Jesus. Everything you see me do sweetheart. It's only Jesus who loves unconditionally and that's who I want you to see."

Lara nodded and the creepy thoughts went silent immediately. Sighing with relief, she embraced her. "I love you Nimi and if Jesus is the one making you do all this for me, then I do hope I get to know him soon. I don't want to be alone anymore."

Nimi received her and for a moment they stayed together, basking in their newfound love and friendship.

"Oh, and speaking of alone, Dapo didn't want me to tell you, but I couldn't hold it in. Ikenna is coming over." Nimi cried excitedly, releasing her.

She blinked. "Ikenna?"

"Yea, the same one. Why, what's wrong?"

Lara withdrew. Heading over to the bed, she wrapped her arms around herself. She didn’t think she was ready to see Ikenna. They’d drifted apart. Had he heard of her attempted suicide? He had not even called her. She knew she’d broken his heart when Soji explicitly narrated what had happened between them. She knew right then Ikenna loved her and she’d just ruined what they could have had. The fear that he would never look at her the same way again haunted her for weeks. He was a good man and had been her best friend who could go miles for her. But what would his kind want to do with a girl like her? She had a terrible record of wrongdoing piled up to her name. He knew she’d killed another woman's baby, was aware she had been molested by her father and knew she'd been sleeping with other men and her fiancé. No one would want a left over or someone they could not trust their life with.

"I don't think Ikenna coming would be a good idea."

"But Dapo sounded pretty excited about it."

She shook her head. "I don't think I want to see him. Really Nimi, maybe you should just tell Dapo I will stay home. I thought it was just the three of us. I'm not ready to go on any dates."

"But darling..."

"No Nimi! Don't tell me how God is going to make everything okay because I don't feel okay! I don't know how to feel when my friends even think me a whore. Mabel came here the other day and she talked about how everyone had moved on and how Aisha and Soji were getting married on some exclusive Island. I don't even want to look at the tabloids for fear of what they might say about me. What kind of relationship am I going to groom with Ikenna? Am I just going to waltz into his arms and pretend as if everything is okay and those things never happened? I am just scared that people are going to associate him with something filthy and I don't want that. I really just want to be here and..."

"And brood?" Nimi replied and Lara could tell she had upset her friend. "And think about what everybody is going to say about you while ignoring what God is saying about you? If you know this is how you want to keep acting, then maybe my staying here is pointless."

"Don't say that! You and I know you've been the only one who's been here for me."

Nimi sighed and came to settle beside her. "Then do this for me would you? Come out with us tonight, smile, have fun, and talk with Ikenna. Don't run away from the battle, run towards it instead. Stop imagining these things, just let life happen and stand your ground. And what if Soji and Aisha got married, well, who needs their negative vibes around anyway?"

A smile broke through her face and she nodded.

"Stop thinking about other people's future. Think about yours and how you need to grab the wheels of your life. Think about the new life you want. Think about what God would want for you and let go. I'll be there with you, every step of the way okay?"

She nodded again as tears flowed down her cheeks and Nimi reached to wipe them away.

"C’mon, let's get dressed before the men in our lives arrive and turn back when they see us."



Lara watched the lovebirds showing affection to each other. Though they tried to be subtle about it, she could tell they held hands under the table. Her mind flashed back to the times she would make out unashamedly with Soji in restaurants or in his car and how he'd whisper that he loved her and would do anything for her. Nights when he would love her and tell her she was the only one for him. Nights when he made her feel special.

She remembered when she started cheating on him. It had been on one of those nights when they fought and she'd gone to see her family doctor, Doctor Philip for counsel. She’d gone to him because he had been gentle and kind to her in the past and had often teased her. She liked him and how affectionate he was toward her. He'd been in his office that day, they got talking, one thing led to another and she’d found herself in bed with him.

Soji had called her the next morning asking about her whereabouts. She’d lied that she had gone to the hospital because she just wasn't feeling too well after their fight. He’d picked her up and a few minutes later, all was right in their world again. She remembered the nights when she had to travel away on business trips. One of her board executives Stanley had been admiring her had suggested he keep her company since her boyfriend was away. He seemed like a nice man and it was just a fling, nothing serious. Nights Soji would leave her to travel on business trips and she couldn't bear being lonely, Stanley had kept her company.

But the truth she had fought so hard against was coming to slap her in the face. Sex did not satisfy. That kind of love did not satisfy. It was obvious. She had a big void in her heart and she wondered how Nimi's God could fill that void and satisfy her. If Nimi had satisfaction in God, then why was she getting married? Why couldn't she live life alone? The glances exchanged between Nimi and Dapo made her feel out of place. She was tempted to ask them to get a room. She'd longed for men to look at her that way and what did she get?

Burnt and hurt.

She doubted love would find her anytime soon. She glanced at Ikenna who was paying more attention to his phone than he did to her. Maybe she wasn't worth his time afterall. She picked her clutch and announced. "I think I have to go home. I don't feel too well." She smiled at the couple in love and stood. "Have an amazing night you two. Ikenna, it was nice seeing you again."

She hurriedly left the table for fear that they might see her pathetic tears and try to console her.

She ran out in time hoping she would get a cab and hurry off. She felt someone reach for her arm and she panicked. She relaxed when she turned to see it was Ikenna but her guards were still up.

"Lara, what's wrong?"

"Nothing, like I said, I don't feel too well. I'll go home, take some aspirin and go to bed."

"I'm sorry I ignored you in there." He began. "It's my sister. She's been trying to settle into the University so she buzzes me about everything. I told her I'm on a date and she still doesn't think it's inappropriate to disturb me. I'm sorry I acted like a fool back there. You know what, I'm even going to switch my phone off right now."

And before she could say anything, he switched his phone off and slid it into his pocket. He reached for her hand and pulled her close to himself. "I've missed you and your trouble-making skills."

She tried to smile. Was he just trying to be nice? The last thing she needed was a pity party thrown on her behalf. She was tempted to ignore him but thought better of it. Ikenna wasn't the type to flatter with unnecessary words. He often meant what he said so it was probably true he'd missed her.

"Yea, me too."

"Do you want to get out of here and go someplace else? Those two are making me wish I was married already. I know this great place where we can eat with our bare hands and have fun decorating each other's faces with the soup if we don't like it."

She chuckled. "I don't think I'm cut out for that tonight Ikenna"

"Okay, so you would have to pick one, go home and feel bored, or stay with me and have the best night of your life. I trust you to make the wise decision."

She giggled feeling revived in her spirit again. She still loved him. She doubted she could ever stop. He was her favourite person from day one.

"Okay, I'll be wise and choose to go with you."

"That's the spirit!" He gave her a high-five. Sliding her arms into his, she allowed him lead her away to their new destination.



Nimi kept staring at the door, desperate to check on Lara and Ikenna. She sighed, wondering how she was beginning to get attached to Lara in ways she couldn't fathom. She just prayed Lara would get to know Christ soon and everything else would align in place for good.

She turned to her beau and saw him grinning boyishly. She suspected he had some mischief rolled up his sleeves. She pushed him away playfully and smiled when he wrapped his hands around her.

"Did I tell you you look like a queen tonight? Right now, I feel like a subject standing close to you, queen of my heart."

She blushed. "Thank you. If you keep praising me like this Dapo, you'll make me fall *o*."

"I want you to fall into my arms at the right time. In a few months' time, you'll be in my arms just the way it's meant to be and I'll love you the way I'm supposed to."

Looking into his eyes, she felt her spirit stir within about the wedding. She blinked and looked away immediately. God was trying to tell her something, but she was scared it had to do with the wedding. It was just three months away. What could be wrong?

Her fiancé slid his fingers into hers and asked. "Baby, are you alright?

She managed a smile. "Of course. I just thought of something. Uh… can you excuse me for a moment while I go to the restroom?"

"Sure."

She hurried out as the fear gripped her again, her heart beating wildly against her chest. Something wasn't right. Was it Lara? Or was it Dapo? Was it her family God was trying to warn her about?

It's You

She waited, pensive of the outcome as she could sense it already. Searching her spirit, the answer rose to the surface.

"Oh God, Oh God... please not Dapo. Please not us."

Let go

Oh God no!

And she broke down in tears.

CHAPTER 33

As Dapo drove Nimi home, he observed she was lost in thought and she wasn’t ready to share her worries with him. She’d been quiet since she stepped back into the restaurant after going to use the restroom. She’d been reluctant to hold his hands, pretending to search for something in her purse. Her mood had swiftly changed from radiant to sorrowful.

The glow he'd seen in her eyes before she left for the restroom was gone. Something was definitely wrong with her and he hoped she would open up to him. He could sense her heart was breaking even though she was trying so hard to act calm. He could tell she was fighting some invisible war within.

He turned off the ignition and looked at her. He was about to ask when she broke into tears and he reached for her.

His heart raced. "Nimi, what's the problem? Are you alright?"

She nodded but shook her head again.

"What is it? Is it Mum? Is it Tolani... is it Lara? Did something go wrong in the restroom?"

"Oh Dapo, I don't know what to do... I…"

"Nimi, you're scaring me. What's going on? Did something happen to your mum or your siblings?” He asked, panicking.

Blinking back tears, she looked up at him. He reached to wipe her tears away and pulled her into an embrace and she readily went into his arms. For a while she stayed mute and his heart beat faster.

Oh God, what's going on?

He released her and passed her the Kleenex tissue box so she could wipe her face and blow her nose. Then she sighed. "I don't know if it's just me or maybe it's God..."

His heart pounded in his chest as he anticipated her words. He had an inkling it wasn't going to be good.

"I think I heard God saying I should... I don't know Dapo. It's not possible. God can't be asking me to leave you."

"What?" Alarm bells rang in his head as he stared horror-eyed at her. "You can't be serious..."

"Maybe God wants..."

"That's not God, Nimi." Dapo cut her off abruptly, wondering where the thoughts had even come from. Was she was having cold feet about the wedding? She'd been spending too much time with Lara so maybe she was just tired.

Or was she trying to dump him? He'd heard stories of people saying ‘God said’ when they were the ones who wanted to end a relationship.

"Is there someone else?" He queried.

Her eyes widened in shock. "Dapo, how can you think that of me? There’s no one else. You know you’re the only man in my life. I have never loved any man the way I love you. Do you think I'm the kind of girl who would just wake up one morning and choose not to walk down the aisle with the man she’s madly in love with?"

He relaxed. "I'm sorry baby, I really am." He pulled her close to himself rubbing her arms soothingly. "I was just wondering how you could mention God when He's the one who brought us together. He wants this... he wants us to

be together. Don't you see? Don't you see how we fit each other so well? Don't you see how we complement each other in Christ? How can God not want something this good between us?"

Nimi nestled against him and he felt her relax. It had to be the stress with Lara…

Maybe it was Lara God wanted her to let go of. The time Nimi was spending with Lara was becoming so much more than the time she spent with Dapo. God probably wanted her to take time out and spend more time with him.

"Baby, what exactly did God tell you that made you think about us?

She looked up from his chest and into his eyes. He loved this woman more each day. This was the woman he wanted to do life with, the woman he wanted staring up into his eyes as he loved her and brought their children into the world, the woman he wanted to grow grey hairs with, holding her hand as they took long strolls on the beach.

She completed him.

"He said I should let go."

He stroked her arms and slid his hands in hers squeezing gently. "Don't you see it must have been Lara? You've been spending so much time with her lately and God might not want you to become her idol."

She looked like she was in deep thought and she nodded slowly. "I never saw it that way… I just thought or felt it was..."

"No thinking darling. Just relax, pray about it again, okay? Let God make it clear to you. I'm sure He's not talking about us. We were made to be together." He leaned close to plant a kiss on her nose and a soft and slow one on her lips, glad that she wanted him the way he wanted her. He could feel it in her response and in the way she held onto him. He couldn't wait for them to get married.

He pulled back and looked into her eyes. His heart constricted when he saw tears glistening in them. "I love you Nimi. I love you so much I can't imagine doing life without you."

"I love you too Dapo. Life would be so cold without you." She reached to kiss him again.



Life would be so cold without you...

A week after and those words echoed in her mind as she stared at her phone. The email offering her a job in Ondo stared back at her, shattering her heart in pieces. She hadn't misunderstood God's voice speaking through her spirit a week ago. God was providing a way out of the great temptation facing her.

She only had to choose.

She'd randomly applied for the job in Ondo few months before she met Dapo as she was led to. She'd shrugged it off knowing her life was in Lagos. She'd gone to the interview with an open heart and prayed that God's will be done. But now that Dapo was in her life; she didn't believe it was God's will for her to leave.

Oh Father, Ondo? Why?

Dapo had sent her CV to his friends and though they hadn't gotten any response yet, she was still expectant.

Except God was closing all other doors for her to opt for Ondo.

It must be her mind playing tricks on her, or could it be the devil trying to confuse her? Maybe God wanted her to let go of Lara because as long as she was in Lagos, Lara would not stop depending on her.

But Dapo could not follow her to Ondo either. His life was here. It wasn't even in his plan or agenda. It was a foreign idea and he would laugh at it.

Father, I need you to make this clear to me. I refuse to take this sign of 'Ondo application' and just believe it's a door you opened. You brought Dapo and myself together and I don't see why I would need to leave him.

No response.

She sighed and reached for one of the stuffed animals on Lara's bed hugging it close. She felt so vulnerable and pressed the bear close to her womb. Oh what she would give to hold her child like this, a child of her own to love and care for. A little girl she would dress up to look beautiful. She would read her bible stories and tell her about God's goodness. She couldn't wait to be married to Dapo and have him stare at her lovingly and kiss her the way he'd always done but more passionately and unrestricted this time.

Her eyes filled with tears. She tasted salt as droplets fell across her cheeks.

"Why would you see something this beautiful Father and take it away from me?" She sobbed quietly as her heart broke into pieces.

Why would you give me something this good just to take it away from me… from us? A good father would not do that to his children. Everything you've told me to do, I did. I've been there for Lara, I've sacrificed my ego and my life to get that girl to you. I've done everything you've wanted and now you want me to let go of Dapo? Do you think it's easy to let go of the one you love? I don't know about you, but for me it's hard. You don't expect me to just call the wedding off. What about the invites that have been printed? What about our hopes and dreams? You said the plans you have towards us are not of evil but of good, to give me an expected end.

She wiped away the tears, glad that Lara was not in the room.

Sometimes I just don't get you Father, I don't.

Sitting up, she placed the stuffed animal aside and tried to reach for her bible and stopped. Maybe it was high time she chose to think of herself and for herself. She had a life too and she couldn't continue 'obeying'.

Her mates were married and had babies. Some had even travelled with their husbands to a different country and God wanted her to obey him and rot being a spinster? Why did he pick her to carry out such task? There were other strong women and missionaries who could do his will, so why her? Why was he placing so many burdens on her? She was too weak to carry out this particular task. She just couldn't.

Do you love me?

And her mind suddenly flashed back to the first time God had asked her that question. Weeks before she met Dapo, he'd asked her and she'd boldly declared how much she loved God. The moment the scene played before her, she shivered as she felt a strong presence in the room. God was reminding her of her promise and wanted her submission right here and now.

She remembered her answer then.

I love you Lord, I know I do.

The tears flowed and she sank to her knees when another scene played in her mind.

"Nimi I'd like to ask you a question."

"Go on."

"Is God's love really satisfying? Is Jesus really worth you being foolish for?"

"In a world that's going to pass away and with so little time that can be swallowed in eternity, yes. He's worth it. If a whole God could be despised for my sake, then who am I really?"

"You really think God did that for you?"

"For me, you...all of us."

The HolySpirit fished out a scriptural verse from the book of John to drive his point home.

Jesus answered and said unto him, “If a man loves me, he will keep my words: and my Father will love him, and we will come unto him, and make our abode with him.

He that loveth me not, keepeth not my sayings: and the word which ye hear is not mine, but the Father's which sent me.

When they had finished eating, Jesus said to Simon Peter, "Simon son of John, do you love me more than these?"

"Yes, Lord," he said, "you know that I love you."

Oh Father, this is going to break me. Her body racked with sobs. *You know I love you. I want you more than anything else. Please, help me…*

I am your first love Nimi but you still have a choice to choose between me and your second love. I want you to know that I would never do anything to hurt you. I only have good plans towards you, Lara, and Dapo. You need to trust me on this. My grace is sufficient for you my love and I'll be with you, for my strength is made perfect in your weakness. Just trust me.

How can I trust you father when it feels like I'm losing all?

When you have me, you lose nothing but gain everything.

It took a while before Nimi’s heart bowed before Christ and she surrendered her will to his. The moment she did, she felt an overwhelming peace and strength take over her being. She loved God, and loving God demanded her all, not just some.

Not my will Father, but yours be done.

Lara came into the room and saw her friend curled up on her bed with the bible close to her chest. Dropping her handbag and shopping bags, she kicked off her shoes and settled on the chair rubbing her toes. She had gone shopping for some shoes and picked a lace sample to show her friend. She hoped Nimi and Tolani

would like it. She had seen a few and was expecting the dispatch tomorrow once Nimi gave her a go-ahead. She was glad the whole wedding preparation was keeping her busy so she could hardly think of Soji and Aisha and how all her efforts to make Soji love her had backfired.

Ikenna had been kind and loving to her. He'd invited her to church the previous week and she had gone because she loved him. He felt so at home and she wondered if she could ever feel the same way. He worshipped this invisible being and cried for a love she knew nothing about. Maybe church wasn't meant for her. Nimi had tried to teach her that God didn't see her the way others saw her but it was just too hard to believe. She wished she could, she desperately wanted to, but she just felt lost and alone no matter how hard they tried so hard to pull her in.

The day before, she'd spent time at the beach with Ikenna talking and laughing. They'd held hands staring at the clouds pregnant with rain, while the sun dipped below the horizon bathing the ocean waves in a pale tint of orange. She wanted this scene to be etched in her memory forever. Being here with Ikenna reminded her of life before her abuse and how peaceful and carefree they'd been together. But so many years laced with heartbreak, pain and betrayals had made her into the woman she currently was. And peace was far from her.

She wanted to feel at peace the way her friend felt at peace. Maybe if she leaned close to him, she could take in some of his peace for herself. She slid her arms around him and just when she felt Ikenna would push her away, he welcomed her into his arms. Her heart soared when he embraced her. She felt safe lingering there.

Was it the need for a man in her life that made her feel this way? Her mind slowly drifted to this God of peace Ikenna often spoke of. Could God take away that throbbing ache she felt when she was alone? Could he love her the way she wanted, the way she could see this visible love? She wished she could love this

God they all talked about, but she couldn't grasp how much he loved her or what he did for her.

They kept saying God sent his only Son Jesus who came down to die for her but where did she fit into all of it? What kind of God sent his only Son to be killed and mocked by people... was that love? How could she entrust her life in his hands if he didn't hesitate to send his Son to *die* for her?

Even the world had no evidence of his love.

Ikenna pressed a soft kiss on her head and all her fears dissolved. She moved in closer to him, his scent surrounding her. He felt so masculine and strong. She missed this, she missed being in the arms of a man who loved her and doted on her. She missed having a man wrap his arms around her and kissing her breathless till she was left at his mercy. She often wondered if she would be able to live life without a man. All her life she'd had men at her beck and call.

But where are they now?

She raised her head to look up at Ikenna and out of reflex planted a kiss on his Adam's apple, wishing she could do more. When he looked into her eyes, she could see he wanted her too but was so restricted.

If only he wasn't.

He leaned down to kiss her softly. He broke the kiss and sighed. She felt like a woman again. She couldn't remember the last time she'd felt this way.

She saw his intense gaze on her and he caressed her cheeks gently. "Oh Lara..." He pulled her close to him till their heads touched. She looked into his eyes and she saw tears in them.

"What's wrong?" She asked, scared of the answer she might receive.

"I love you babe, God knows I love you." He reached for her hands and kissed it as if afraid he might do something disastrous if they kissed again. She cupped his face in her palms loving the feel of his matted beard against her skin. "Since the first day I saw you with your cute pink bag and your hair dressed up

like a doll, I have loved you." He looked into her eyes then. "And when you gave me permission to play with your toys and the boys teased me that I was such a sissy, I didn't think I was a sissy when I was with you, I just saw you. You were all I needed to see for my world to make sense. I thought I could stop loving you, but just one look at you again and I realised that marrying Annie would have been the biggest mistake of my life."

"Oh IK." She placed a hand on his chest, tears welling up in her eyes. "Why don't you just let me love you for once IK? Let me give myself to you."

He closed his eyes and she knew she had hurt him again.

"Look, I never loved Soji..." She shook her head hoping to convince him. "And I'm sorry he said all those things to your face, but he was only jealous. Yes, we had sex because he was my fiancé and I felt we would get married. I didn't know what I was doing. Are you scared of me cheating on you my love? I would never cheat on you, on what we have. You've shown me what real love is..."

"And what about when I can't give you all you want Lara." He released her, sinking to the floor. She joined him hoping he would give in to her plea. "What about when I can't satisfy you enough or I'm not home? What will you do when you're lonely? I'm not trying to say words to hurt you but I'm just trying to be realistic here. Do you think your love for me is enough? If it was enough for Soji, then you wouldn't have cheated on him."

She felt hurt and looked away but he held her face in his hands and looked into her eyes. "What I'm trying to say is this Lara; you won't be able to stop yourself from hurting me. I know you love me but this thing we have won't be enough till you can find satisfaction in the only One who truly gives it. When you've learned to find contentment and satisfaction in Him, you won't go looking for satisfaction somewhere else. And then our love will be built on a solid foundation. I will go away, knowing the woman I love has no other thought but for God and me. You can trust me too that my love and fear of God

will stop me from cheating on you no matter where I find myself. That's what I've been trying to get across to you baby.

“Don't you see? Don't you see how much my body wants you badly but my love for God compels me to do the right thing? If I had no fear of God or love for Him, I would keep using you and lying to you until I find someone else. But I'm not one of those men who wants to use your body or some random guy looking for a fling. I'm not Soji who cheated on you with your best friend. I'm not some guy who believes sex is love. I believe sex is just one of those things that’s going to happen *if* we get married but our marriage wouldn’t revolve around it. And I'm going to be your perfect partner because God has chosen you for me like he chose Eve for Adam and I'm in love with you. I'm going to make love to you because I've been joined to you before God and Man. Sex is not going to be enjoyed because it's sex, but because I love you and it's one of those ways I would express my love to you within the context of marriage. There are other things that are paramount, like knowing God more, building a home founded on God's love, finding pleasure in him, obeying him and promoting his kingdom within our hearts and wherever he sends us, raising kids for God's glory and so many other things."

Lara stared at him unable to express herself. No man had ever spoken to her this way. He had so many things figured out. Soji had never bared his heart to her this way. She'd thought their sex life was enough to keep them going and since they hardly had long conversations, sex had always been the solution to their fights. To her, sex was everything. But Ikenna was telling her sex was just one of those things.

Was she capable of living that kind of life with IK? And he had mentioned marriage. She was excited and nervous at the same time. But he was demanding so much from her. What did she even know about a 'godly' marriage if she could put it that way?

She saw Ikenna staring at her and before she could say anything, he pulled her close and kissed her again. The kiss lasted longer than the first one and she basked in his embrace soaking in his sweet kisses. It felt so natural between them and she believed she was actually going to enjoy being with him if they got married.

They parted and he smiled. "Let's not get carried away."

She nodded leaning into him and wishing the moment could last forever.

Oh God... She prayed, closing her eyes tight while her heart uttered the words. Nimi had told her God heard and saw everything. *If this is you coming through for me with IK, then please make it last, and make it work out. I promise I'll try to be good to him. I promise not to cheat on him. I promise to love him forever. Thank you for being good to me, thank you for loving me like this even though I haven't figured you out yet. Thank you.*

Nimi roused from sleep and Lara went to the bed to join her. She couldn't even believe that a few days ago, she had been considering Nimi in a carnal way. Ikenna was just the real deal but he said he wanted God to keep leading him and reveal the way for them both.

Whatever that meant…

"Hey love." She greeted, draping her arms across Nimi's neck. Ignoring her half sleepy state, she planted kisses all over her face. "See how you look so cute when you wake up. Did you dream about me?" Nimi smiled at her softly and Lara could see a tinge of sadness in her eyes. "Are you alright?"

She nodded. "How was your outing?"

"Stressful but fine. How are you? Have you eaten?"

"I'll get myself something downstairs." Nimi managed to break free from Lara's grip and planted her feet into a pair of slippers.

"Uh okay, let me just come with you. By the way, I got the picture of your wedding dress today and I wanted to surprise you. I know you'll be so excited. The bridal train's couture is going to be shipped in next week Thursday while

your wedding dress will be coming with my cousin from the States since she plans on attending your traditional too. I went to check out the invites but they had a little error on them so I might just have to send it back to the printer to give me my money's worth. I asked for a golden touch and not some cheap stuff."

Lara noticed Nimi wasn't too excited about the news.

"Is mum home?" Nimi asked on their way downstairs.

"No, she's not. Babe, are you alright?"

Nimi was about to respond when her phone rang. She reached for it immediately, eager to escape Lara’s scrutiny.



Nimi placed the phone against her ear, glad for the distraction. How was she going to tell Lara what God was saying? Where was she going to start from? Lara had been talking about wedding dresses and her heart was breaking. She wasn't sure if seeing her wedding dress would make her forget her decision to trust God and let Dapo go.

"Sweetheart." Dapo's voice greeted from the other end and she found herself fighting against letting go. She could pretend not to hear what God had told her earlier. How could she live without hearing Dapo’s voice anymore? A voice she'd imagined would wake her on most of her mornings when she lay in bed still sleepy. A voice that would be there to steady her when she was going through hard times. His words that she'd imagined would croon to her on her birthday and other days when she wanted him to and lips that would kiss her senseless.

"Hey you...” Her voice broke and she held herself from crying again.

"Are you alright?"

"I'm okay. I was just thinking if I should come to your office tomorrow." His office was better. At least she would be able to control herself there. Besides, she couldn't trust herself to wait till weekend. She might change her mind and go on with the marriage plans. She didn't think she was strong enough to wait. If she was alone with Dapo in a restaurant and he kissed her, she might forget reasoning and go on with the wedding.

Oh God I can't believe I'm thinking of ways to break this news to him... to break his heart.

My grace is sufficient for you, for my strength is made perfect in weakness.

"Oh... I was just about to tell you that a friend just got back to me on your application. He took one look at your CV and he believes you're the perfect person for the position. His company is also located in Lekki. It's a reputable company with very good pay, so convenient and they have a training program for about three months. It's the perfect job babe. Close to home, close to me. I can even stop by and steal a few kisses on my way to work." He laughed.

God, this is just too much. How do you expect me to say No to this?

"And he says you can start next week or whenever it’s convenient for you. I told him about the wedding plans and he's assuring me that your training can start now so after the honeymoon, you'll smoothly transition into a full-time employee. God is awesome. I've been praying about this and it worked out even beyond my expectations."

She shook her head covering her mouth as her eyes flooded with tears. "I can't do this."

And she hung up.

Lara looked at her. "Babygirl, are you alright?"

"I'm sorry Lara... I can't go on with the wedding, I can't go on with this anymore." She blurted out.

Lara was petrified. "What do you mean?

"I wish I could explain it..."

"There's nothing to explain Nimi." Lara grabbed her hand and led her to one of the leather sofas in the living room. "I understand what the problem is. It's just wedding jitters. You're having cold feet and it's natural. Let me get you some scotch and you'll be fine. Okay baby?"

Nimi shook her head. "I don't drink... and Lara you need to listen to me. It's not wedding jitters. God doesn't want me to go on with the wedding."

Nimi's phone rang again and she ignored it. Lara sat frozen looking at her and Nimi wondered if she had said the right thing as an awkward silence filled the room.

The phone rang for the fifth time and Lara snatched it from her hands and picked it, placing the phone close to her ear. "Bro Dapo, it's Lara." She said, her countenance darkening. Nimi wondered if her leaving wouldn't delay Lara's salvation further and harden her heart.

She didn't like what she saw in Lara's eyes; betrayal, hurt and disappointment.

Lara would wonder what kind of God gave people things and took it from them. She'd been trying to make her see God's goodness, to see his love. But this looked like the opposite.

"I think you need to come to the house now." Lara looked away from her, the coldness in her voice reminding her of the Lara she knew as her former Boss. "Nimi is saying she can't go on with the wedding because she believes God told her not to which I'm finding really hard to understand."

CHAPTER 34

Nimi kept reaching to wipe her face as Dapo and Lara stared at her after she told them what God wanted her to do. Lara who had been trying to console her now sat facing her, hands on her laps as she watched the drama play before her. Dapo was unable to utter a word when she was done but she was certain she'd seen him blink back tears.

Oh God…don't you see how we love each other? Why are you doing this to us?

Lara suddenly jerked from her seat. "Bro Dapo, are you just going to sit down there and let her narrate some 'commands' an invisible being must have told her? Won't you do something for the woman you love? Won't you fight for her?"

"Lara…" Dapo tried to caution her but his voice broke.

"No… why does your God break people's hearts?" Lara cried with tears rolling down her cheeks and Nimi could only shed more tears. "Why does He let this happen if He's the one that brought you together? I see how you two love each other and I've been praying for something like what you two have. You said He's a God of love… I'm seeing something entirely different here."

"Lara please…" Nimi pleaded.

"No, it's either you tell me you were hallucinating and you two get together and make up right now or count me out of your bullshit of a gospel."

"God is good and he has our best interest at heart." Dapo tried to console his sister but she wasn't having any of it. She snapped at him irritated. Facing Nimi, she spouted. "I can't even believe I allowed you into my home and into my life Nimi. I can't believe I allowed you stay and tell me about a God who loves me when all I can see is definitely not love. It's heart wrenching and horrible! I can't imagine I even prayed to him to work things out between Ikenna and me. If He can do this to you, then He's just what the media calls Him."

Nimi shook her head and tried to reach for Lara but she jerked free.

"Don't touch me." Lara spat.

Lara moved back glancing between Dapo and Nimi and shook her head. "I want you out of my life, out of my home. I want you to leave before my mum returns and you give her a heart attack."

And she ran upstairs.

Dapo raised his head staring at her with a forlorn look on his face and she wished she could reach out to him too.

"You actually think I'm doing this on purpose?"

"What the hell am I supposed to think Nimi?" He shook his head. "We talked about this, but you keep insisting God is telling you to let go of our relationship. Well why hasn't he told me anything? Are you calling God a liar? Instead of you to say you want out of the relationship, but you keep bringing God into it."

Her heart broke. *Father, why haven't you revealed this to him?*

You have become his idol. He won't see anything because you are the only thing he wants to see.

She went to him and knelt before him wanting to plead with him. She saw him struggling with his feelings, but she reached for his hands and held tight.

"Dapo, please look at me…"

He looked straight ahead.

"Baby please look at me."

He finally looked into her face but before Nimi could say anything further, he crushed his lips on hers. She tried pushing him away but he pulled her into his arms and she melted against him. The kiss brought back so many memories and she clung to him wishing the past few hours had only been but a dream. This was how she wanted to be claimed and loved. By this man alone who made her feel like a woman.

He released her and she jerked back from him, gasping for air.

"Don't you see how I make you feel baby? And you want to let this go…" His lips travelled to her chin, nibbling her neck till she realised he was fondling with her buttons as his hands travelled all over her body. "If you think I won't treat you right, give me the chance to prove it to you…"

"Dapo stop." She grew scared on realising lust had taken over her fiancé and he wasn't thinking straight. She could see desire burning in his eyes. This wasn't the man she'd spent months loving. And that was when she realised God was right.

She had become his idol.

"Dapo please…" She reached for his hands still praying for strength.

He suddenly released her, guilt etched on his features. "I'm sorry…"

She shook her head when she saw how sober he looked. She blamed herself for allowing them get carried away the first time they kissed.

What had she unleashed?

He stood up immediately feeling embarrassed. He couldn't look into her eyes. "I have to go home. I can't stay here anymore. One look at you and I'm either hating you or loving you."

She watched him leave and was unable to stop him. Everything was happening in a daze and she didn't know when she rose and headed for Lara's

bedroom. She found Lara zipping her duffel bag. When Lara looked up, she gave her a cold smile and dumped the bag at her feet.

"There you go. I'll ask the driver to drop you at home."

Nimi's heart plummeted into her stomach. She wondered how Lara's love had suddenly turned to hatred within a couple of minutes. She was about to say something when she felt the spirit caution her not to and she dumbly picked her bag and smiled sadly at Lara, her heart shattering.

Her whole world seemed to be coming apart. Yet she was obeying God. It didn't make sense.

"Will it change anything if I tell you I've given my life to Jesus? Cos I'm ready to do anything to make you stay." Lara pleaded and Nimi wondered if she really meant what she said. "It's just to believe that Jesus is the Son of God and I'm a sinner right? I can do that…"

Nimi shook her head. Believing wasn't a mental thought. She knew it was only God that could convict her in such a way that her heart would believe. Lara was only trying to take a fast route which wasn't even close to her salvation.

Nimi found her voice amidst the turbulence within. "It's not a mental decision Lara… you can't come to God yourself. He has to be the One to bring you in."

"Then, I never want to see you again except you change your mind about my brother. But as long as you're adamant on hurting us both, then goodbye to our friendship or whatever it is we had that you chose to throw away."

Nimi didn't look back as she closed the door behind her.



Lara fell to the bed and sobbed soon after she heard the door close and Saheed drove out of the compound. How could Nimi throw something so good away? How could she walk out on two people that loved her to the moon and back?

Didn't she have feelings? Lara had thought packing her bag and throwing it at her would make her change her mind but Nimi picked up her bag like a robot and left.

Was this what God did? Make people miserable? Turn them to robots because of his 'will'? She'd seen Nimi cry like her heart was being ripped apart. She'd sneaked to see if Dapo would fight for his girl which he had done when he kissed her. Lara felt elated, thinking passion would bring Nimi back to her senses. She hadn't gone far when she saw Nimi resist Dapo.

She watched her brother wrestle with his feelings before leaving. She'd never seen him look so wrecked before. Even when he found out about Aisha's baby and her lies with Soji, he hadn't looked this way.

How could you Nimi? How could you? Don't you have a heart? Can't you see how you're hurting my brother?

She saw the girl had a heart alright but her God was making her choose Him over love. *Fantasy over common sense*. Fairytales over reality. A man loved a woman and they were making it so complex. *God said this, God said that.* It was so irritating! She could see Nimi crying and that was when she searched for the next alternative.

She'd thought threatening Nimi about leaving completely would break her and make her reconsider.

She had done that only for Nimi to prove her wrong again.

I don't understand you God, but if you're the one doing this to Nimi, I can never love you. I can never give my life to you.

Never!



Dapo stepped out of the shower as crazy thoughts ran through his mind. He didn't know where to start from. No woman had ever broken him to pieces this

way. He couldn't even pray about it. Why was God doing this to them? Was He trying to achieve something through their break-up which he couldn't achieve another way?

Or had she found someone else?

It wasn't possible. He could see through Nimi's eyes. She wasn't cheating. She loved him. He felt it when he kissed her, saw how she finally gave in before she pulled back. He saw her swollen eyes and face. The beautiful girl whose eyes shone of love when she stared at him was gone. A woman filled with sorrow stared back at him and he wanted to yell at God.

Why are you doing this to her… to us?

God wouldn't do that. God was good. It had to be something else. He chose to believe it was something else other than God. He knew what he heard God tell him about her, all the times God came through for them, even when Lara had stood in the way of their relationship. He could still recall how his family miraculously accepted her into their home not discriminating her background or her status in society.

He would carry out a little investigation and see what was really going on. He would ask Tolani about it. He didn't know what he would do If he found out it was another guy.

Nimi was his woman, no one else's.

Nimi is mine

Dapo froze as God's voice broke through his soul petrifying him. Like a sharp sword piercing his thoughts and dispersing all other thoughts. He sank into the bed, suddenly feeling weak and drained of energy.

Nimi is mine first before anyone else's.

It came again confirming what he'd heard the first time. He got a nudge in his spirit to pick his bible and when he opened it, it was 1Corinthians chapter ten verse twenty-two. He had read it in the morning but had no clue it was in relation to his relationship with Nimi.

Do we provoke the Lord to jealousy? Are we stronger than he?

He sighed heavily, burying his head in his hands. *"*Oh dear Lord, I didn't mean to. But you brought us together. I just couldn't imagine you tearing us apart*."*

You are mine before hers.

"She knows this. We both know this."

Why did you run ahead of me?

How?

You stopped letting me lead the moment you proposed. You've always asked me before taking the next step. You let passion overtake my will.

But does that change anything?

This isn't about you Dapo. The moment it became all about you two, which you've turned this whole relationship into, that moment, my will and purpose took a back seat.

"So what am I going to do now? How do you expect me to move on?" The tears stung but he mustered self control.

No response.

He wanted to pray but couldn't find the strength to do so. He chose to sleep instead. Right now, he wasn't sure he could bear what God was doing to both of them. He couldn't say he was ready to let go of her, but if that was what God wanted, He could have her.

Life would go on.



"At least eat something…" Tolani pleaded with her sister who was picking at the food she should have finished minutes ago. She'd heard her sister crying and praying before sleeping last night. She didn't understand what God was doing and why he was telling her to let go.

Their mother though upset about the sudden news, kept trusting that God had good intentions and something good was going to come out of it.

God was a good God and his ways were good, irrespective of what her feelings or flesh wanted to make her feel.

"I've eaten *na*." Nimi managed a smile but the sadness remained in her eyes.

"I don't want Akin to eat this thing that's why I'm insisting." Tolani laughed trying to cheer her sister up. "Besides, I want you to eat before you leave us in Lagos."

"I still have one whole week madam." She said "Are you in a hurry to push me out of the house?"

"*Haba*… I'm not. I just want you to stuff yourself with my delicacies…"

A knock on the door disrupted their conversation and Tolani stood up to answer the door. She was taken aback when she saw Mrs Olakitan standing at their door. It felt like seeing the wife of the governor of the state standing before her.



Nimi knew something was wrong when Tolani stood at the door for a while without saying anything. Her mum had to call out to her. "Who is at the door, is everything alright?"

They met their surprise when Mrs Kitan strolled in looking around and Tolani hurriedly knelt down, greeting her.

"Good morning ma."

"Good morning dear, how are you?" She smiled softly at Tolani.

"Fine thank you ma."

Nimi quickly rose from the table to greet Mrs Kitan who looked as gorgeous and regal as always. The confidence she'd always seen exuding from

Mrs Kitan seemed to have disappeared. When Lara had sent her packing two days ago, she had expected their mother to come on behalf of both her children.

God had given his verdict. Hers was to obey.

There was nothing she could do about it.

“Good morning Nimi…” Mrs Kitan’s gaze skipped between Nimi and her mum and she smiled at the older woman. “Mrs Adeyemi…”

“Welcome ma.” Mrs Adeyemi responded. “Would you care for something to drink?”

“I’m fine, thank you.” She gave a curt response. “I came to have a word with your daughter. Do you mind if you excuse us?”

“Sure, of course.” Nimi watched her mum smile politely and left with Tolani. Mrs Kitan settled on the couch and Nimi sat facing her. Mrs Kitan watched her closely.

“I need an explanation Nimi and I would like you to be honest with me. Is there anything my son did to deserve this attitude from you?”

Nimi swallowed. If Lara could not understand, how would Mrs Kitan understand? Couldn’t Dapo have explained things to his mum? “Dapo didn’t do anything ma. I-“

“God told you to leave.” Mrs Kitan spat. She looked up and saw the bitterness in the woman’s eyes. “Yes, Lara told me everything. Trust your beau, he won’t say anything. He kept trying to make things look okay when everything is definitely not okay.”

She kept quiet clenching and unclenching her hands.

“Can you hear yourself speak? How do you even sleep at night? You came into our lives and brought us hope just to take it away from us. You saw love and you threw it away. You saw wealth and you threw it all away. You saw friendship and you gave it all up because of what some ‘God’ you can’t see is asking you to do.”

A tear rolled down Nimi’s cheek.

"Let me ask you this young woman, can your God love you the way my son loves you? Can he give you pleasure the way my son will? Can he give you kids? Can he hold you in his arms at night and whisper words of love to you? Will he give you a good house to live in, good food to eat and take you around the world? You better weigh your options well and be realistic. You have something good with my son and I'm here to ask you to reconsider. Many women will beg and die to be in your shoes and here you are acting like a spoilt child."

"That's enough Mrs Olakitan." Nimi turned to see her mother who had walked in on them. She reached to wipe her tears away as her mother stepped out to defend her.

Mrs Kitan fumed. "You have no idea who you're dealing with…"

"Yes I do." Her mother fired back. "I welcomed you into my home because your son is a lovely and respectable young man and loves Nimi. I allowed you in because Nimi loves Dapo and she was crying all through the night battling between her will and God's will. I gave you a chance to talk to her because I felt it would do Nimi good to see the woman who would have been her mother-in-law. But madam, don't come into my home and insult my child. Yes, you have the whole world, you have billions you're willing to squander on all who bow at your feet, but my daughter has chosen to follow God who is the maker of heaven and earth, the one to whom we will all give account to on the last day. Just because she chose to follow God doesn't mean she's stupid or spoilt. If your millions were enough, why did your daughter need Nimi?

"You loved my daughter as long as things were going fine but as soon as she chose to obey God, she became a bad person in your eyes and your daughter threw her out of your house. My daughter is brave and kind and loving. That girl came into your life caring for your daughter and your son and yet you come here insulting her and making her cry. She's cried enough, so if you'll kindly

stop insulting her and let her choose the path set before her. I won't have you saying another word against her."

Mrs Kitan was dumbfounded as she stared at Nimi's mum. Looking back at Nimi, she saw she was crying and inhaled deeply. Not knowing what to do, she stood up and picked her bag. "I'll be taking my leave."

And she was gone.

The house went still. Tolani and Nimi stared at their mother wondering where the boldness had come from.

As if reading their mind, Mrs Adeyemi replied. "I think God was the one working through me because I don't understand what just took over me."

Both sisters laughed and went to hug their mother, crying and laughing together.



Some months after Nimi left, Dapo was miserable and sought for comfort outside God and His word. He felt God had betrayed him and didn't feel like having any conversation with God. There was nothing he could say. His friends had asked about the upcoming wedding, but he just told them things were not working out between himself and Nimi and they'd parted ways.

He started staying back at work long after working hours. He was scared that if he stayed at home alone with his thoughts, he would go crazy and won't stop fantasising on what could have been if he'd married Nimi. If everything had gone as planned, she'd be in his home right now, the two of them alone loving each other. He imagined her in his kitchen as he admired her, wrapping his arms around her while she cooked. They would laugh and bask in their love for each other.

But he was going to be alone again. For years he'd waited for God's will, only for her to leave. He felt like a fool.

He was angry, he was upset and God's silence after that night enraged him more. Yes, he'd gone ahead to propose without God's leading. They'd been carried away, but did that give God any right to take her away from him? He wasn't disputing the fact that she was God's own first, but he just didn't understand the whole drama God was putting him through.

He started craving things he craved before Christ. He knew wild parties, alcohol and sex were things of his past that he couldn't remember indulging in. He needed an avenue to relieve himself but a part of him held back.

He wondered what Nimi was doing at the moment. Was she even thinking about him? About them? Or she was just an obedient child unlike him who was still finding it hard to accept what was left of their supposed life together. He wanted to call her, even if it was just to hear her voice but she'd begged him not to.

God wanted her and there was nothing he could do about it. After all, He was God and God always did as he pleased.

He still went to church, but his mind was far away. He went because it was expected of him. Besides, Pastor Arike was also checking up on him and he didn't want her preaching to him about God's goodness. He'd had enough of that already.

Ikenna was on his tail too.

It was a Friday and he stared at the paperwork on his desk. He'd poured himself into his work the last couple of weeks, but he wasn't finding the peace he craved. His phone rang and wondering who it was, he picked it.

"Hello handsome…"

He recognised the voice immediately. The sultry voice roused him, making him sit up.

"Toke?"

She chuckled. Even that was enough to send thrills through him.

"Wow, so you still recognise my voice. I thought you wouldn't after how many years apart… ten years?"

"Well…uh, there's something they say about exes." He could hear his old habits flowing through his words, but he threw caution to the wind. Maybe she was the release he needed. "They never get out of your system."

"Ohh, I see. Never heard of that." She chuckled again. "How have you been?"

"So-so."

"Aww, what happened to my baby boy?"

"It's not something I would like to talk about." He sighed rubbing his throbbing temples at the thought of Nimi and God.

He needed to get those two out of his system.

"Mum told me about your fiancée when I arrived in Lagos a few days ago. I was contemplating if it was okay to call you but I…"

"I'm glad you called Toke."

He could hear her smile over the phone. "I've missed you Dapo. Remember those nights we couldn't keep our hands off each other? I can make you forget about your ex in one moment."

He knew she could and she was quite blunt about it. Toke had always been that way, boasting about her sexual prowess. It was one of the reasons they had broken up. He'd felt they were both compatible then, especially in the bedroom but with time, he knew he wanted more than that.

Maybe she was what he needed to forget the pain. He could find satisfaction in her arms while it lasted.

But for how long?

"So, I was thinking, it's Friday night and my friend is holding a party on the Island which starts by nine. We could have a few drinks, dance, and make out a little. You were always the great dancer with your hands in the right places."

She brought back clear, obscene, and vivid images of their time together and he couldn't help but indulge in the thoughts a little.

"Send me the address."

The call ended and a few seconds later, he got a text from her with the address and details of the club.

CHAPTER 35

Nimi sank into her bed exhausted after the day's work. Her routine was monotonous due to the nature of her current job but she was getting used to it. She had found a small church as God led her when she looked for a place to worship on her first Sunday. She liked the place and the people welcomed her warmly. She kept up with her obligations in her new church. When there was no service in church, she went home straight from work, back to her empty mini-flat to prepare dinner, spend time with God, study the word, listen to some audio messages and drift off to sleep.

She'd closed early tonight. Kicking off her shoes, she ambled to the fridge to look for leftovers she could warm and eat. Today was one of those days she wasn't in the mood to cook. It was her fourth month in Ondo and she still hadn't made any friends. It took her a while to warm up to people.

God had not told her how long she was going to be here, but she sensed it would be a while. She prayed for strength to remain where God wanted her to be. There were days she couldn't stop the tears from coming when she remembered what could have been if she had ignored God's voice.

Or was it really God's voice? Those words often rose to torment her making her doubt and wish she could turn back and run into Dapo's arms and

the life waiting for her if she changed her mind. The doubts had been crawling in ever since she arrived at her new abode.

But would Dapo receive her? He'd stared at her like she was tearing his heart out. He'd looked betrayed, hurt and angry. She'd told him not to call her but right now, she wished he would, even if it was just to hear him say her name.

She knew he had every right to be upset. All their hopes and dreams she'd cast aside like it didn't mean anything to her. If only he knew how he meant the world to her. But God had seen her heart and wouldn't allow her place an idol before him. Dapo came into her life and she forgot everything else that mattered to her. Even values that she held strongly, she found herself compromising in bits, eager for Dapo to touch her whenever they were together.

She was beginning to understand why some women believed a man could be their all. Dapo loved her and made her want to do things she'd never imagined doing with anyone else. Was it the desire in his eyes or the way he held and kissed her when they were alone? Or the way he grinned anytime she said something that made him laugh? To her, everything about him screamed perfection. He was her perfect prince, the only one she wanted to give herself to, the only one she wanted to become one with. Days she'd dreamed of that happening but here they were, far apart. She was unaware of what he was doing at the moment or if he even missed her.

Would he have found someone to replace her already? Perhaps… it wasn't hard for him. If he needed a girl, he'd get one eager to become his wife since she'd chosen God over him.

Oh God… I'm still trying to understand why you want us apart. This is just too hard…I'm finding it hard to move on. One minute I'm here feeling joyful that I obeyed you and the next minute, I just want to go home, I want to go back to familiar grounds. I want to see my mum and Tolani and Akin. I want

to see Lara because I poured out myself for her, I laboured over her. Will she go back to her vomit? Will she go back to thinking all I've told her are just lies?

The microwave beeped disrupting her thoughts and she pulled out her porridge which was warm enough to eat. She picked a tray and headed for her bed.

She looked around and made up her mind to clean up her apartment by weekend. She'd also been thinking of making new friends. It would be nice to have people stop by to greet her and they would talk, eat and have fun. Her boss was a nice young man. He often offered to drop her at home, and she appreciated his kind gesture. She also liked that he didn't probe into her life too much and minded his business.

When the doubts assaulted her mind, the fact that God had made everything work out accordingly gave her certainty that he had a plan and she just had to keep trusting.

Her phone rang and she picked it. It was Pastor Arike. The woman called her often like her family did and she was glad.

"Sweetheart…"

"Good evening ma."

"Good evening my love, how are you doing today?"

"Tired… just got back from work. I intend sleeping early tonight so I can do my laundry as early as possible and focus on the work I brought home today. How's your end?"

"The kids haven't succeeded in their plan to make their mother land in *Yaba left,* so that's something."

Nimi laughed at Pastor Arike's reference to the psychiatrist hospital at Yaba. "How's Bolu and Bidemi?"

"They're good. I would have put them on the phone but they're asleep. Femi is taking them to amusement park tomorrow, so I told them they'd better behave, or I'll change my mind. That sent them to bed early."

Nimi chuckled. She glanced at her wall clock. It was seven thirty.

"Uh, sweetheart… Dapo dropped into my heart this evening and I was thinking if we could pray for him. I don't know exactly what it is but as I was about calling him, the Spirit wanted me to call you instead."

Nimi frowned. He had been coming to her thoughts recently too, especially today but she felt she was just battling her lovesickness for him. She obviously wasn't paying attention to her spirit enough.

Maybe there was an accident ahead and God wanted him to be safe.

"Sure. I'll pray as I'm led to." She shrugged.

"Have you heard from your mum and siblings?" Pastor Arike changed the topic abruptly.

"Yes, mum called me yesterday and Tolani was planning on coming over to spend time with me when the holiday starts."

"Oh fantastic. Maybe I will speak with Femi so I can come too."

Nimi blinked back tears grateful at how God was already looking out for her when she was just thinking about home few minutes ago.

Thank you Jesus, was all her heart could mumble as they continued their conversation.



Lara couldn't tell anyone the nightmares had returned. As she headed out of the office hoping to beat the Friday traffic, her mind flashed to the parties that would be going down tonight. She knew what happened in clubs on Fridays but she had left that gang ever since Nimi came into her life and changed everything. Besides, getting drunk and making out with a stranger was not something she wanted to indulge in tonight or anytime soon. Ikenna would definitely not follow her into a club and she liked the slow and steady life with

him at the moment. They were still friends, but she often wondered if there was a next step for them and what he meant by God asking him to wait.

The same God that told Nimi to dump Dapo and travel to Ondo.

For the first time since Nimi left, Lara suddenly wished she had gone with Nimi. She thought of calling her to ask about spending time with her in Ondo but Lara's pride held her back. She knew the nightmares were her major reason but another one plagued her at the moment.

Her father had returned to the house and the peace she felt in Nimi's presence was suddenly replaced by fear. The thought of living in the same house with her father frightened her but she had no choice. Even her mother seemed to be walking on eggshells since his return although he travelled often. Lara saw his eyes as he stared at her, as if she'd betrayed him. She wanted to leave the house and travel to Abuja with her mother, but fear held her back. She was sure his eyes would follow her wherever she went.

His eyes looked similar to the one she felt watching her anytime she slept. Sometimes she would struggle to push the men that molested her in the dream away but some days, she wasn't strong enough and they tortured her till she woke.

Should I confront Daddy? Should I demand why he's making me feel guilty about all of this when he's the one who hurt me and used me? He's the one who broke mum's heart but he's making us feel bad.

She shook her head as she headed home. *It would only make it worse. Nimi isn't here and I feel so helpless. I would only be courting danger. He might come into my room and plant something there. The last thing I want is be drugged and spend the rest of my days in a psychiatric hospital.*

Horns blasted and eyes widening in terror, she swerved to the right when she saw a truck before her. It could have smashed her and her car to pieces. She had obviously been wrapped up in her thoughts and wasn't looking at the road.

She heaved a huge sigh of relief as she realised that she'd just escaped a narrow accident.

"Madam, *you wan kill yaself abi…*" Someone said, yelling expletives at her and she realised it was the truck driver. She waved him away like an irritating fly and continued driving at her own pace, looking at the road this time.

Lara… focus. Just focus and get home safely, sit down and think of what to do.



Lara got home and told the maids to make her rice and stew while she headed upstairs to take a shower. She needed to relax and think, she had too many thoughts in her head and right now all she wanted to do was soak herself in her tub with bath salts and have scented candles around her.

Her mind suddenly flashed back to nights with Soji when they'd spent time talking and kissing in the tub and she shook the thought away. She'd spent so many years loving the guy and she wondered if she wouldn't hurt Ikenna with the baggage she would be bringing into their relationship if they were going to have one.

She cringed at the thought. She couldn't stand the thought of being with Soji yet he still invaded her thoughts this way.

A bubble bath would be a good way to relax and de-stress. Stripping off her clothes, she hurriedly prepared her bath and went back to her room searching for something to read to distract her and probably make her drowse off and nap for a few minutes. Her eyes caught a familiar journal and she picked it recognising it as the one Nimi had written verses and notes in.

She opened it and perused the journal wondering how it got to her bed in the first place when she hadn't seen it for days. The girls usually cleaned the

room when she stepped out. They had probably found it under her bed and retrieved it.

The first words that caught her eyes were the ones Nimi had written on the front page.

John 3:16: For God so loved the world, that he sent his only begotten Son, that whosoever believes in Him should not perish but have everlasting life.

Her mind suddenly flashed to a conversation they had weeks ago.

Why would a loving God send his only Son to die for a world full of wicked people? I don't understand how that's love. A loving God wouldn't give his only child out at the mercy of people who don't care and let them trample his name and hurt him mercilessly. Perhaps He just didn't love Jesus enough. If I had a child, I would never do that to him. I would never give him to a world that doesn't even care.

She dropped the book immediately as if something had pricked her. There was something about those words and the flashback that scared her. She dashed into the bathroom as if running from her fears and settled into the bath, closing her eyes and sighing at the huge relief and satisfaction the bath salts provided. All her stress and thoughts seemed to dissolve and she was happy again.

I love you

She blinked and sat up. Those words hadn't come from her. Was someone in the bathroom with her?

"Who's there?" She looked around feeling scared again and shivering in the warm bath.

No one answered.

She shook her head and settled back in the tub. Her mind was obviously playing tricks on her. Or was she going insane? Without warning, her thoughts

drifted to Nimi battling with her feelings for Dapo as she fought hard to choose between God and Dapo.

"Oh Nimi…" Lara sighed unable to hold it in. Talking to herself, she continued. "I miss you so much. Why did you leave us, why did you leave me? Did you not say you loved me? Love doesn't leave … what kind of love is that?"

The type that God had when Jesus took your place on the cross.

She jerked up this time. Swallowing, she looked around again. Something was definitely happening, and it was beyond her imagination. Her heart did the talking this time.

I don't understand. Nimi loved Dapo. I saw how she was hurting inside.

She sacrificed because she loved you and Dapo.

Why?

Because Love sacrifices. Love does not seek its own. Love took your place on a cross and bore the wrath meant for you. Love thought of you above everything else.

She blinked. Was this God's voice?

Did you hurt the way Nimi hurt when you sent your son to die for me on the cross?

So much more.

"Love does not seek its own." She mumbled as understanding dawned on her and she felt convicted within. "Oh God!"

She sobbed, her tears mingling with the bath water. When she looked up, she saw a young girl playing with her princess dolls. She knew this dream so well. She knew the girl, knew what was supposed to happen next. Ikenna would come in but the shadows would swallow him up after a while. The darkness would settle around her and her father would come in to comfort her but he'd start hurting her. Afterwards, she would scream from her nightmares.

But this time the dream was different. Someone came through the door but it wasn't her father. His aura was pure and it cast all the shadows away. She was only able to see his feet wrapped in sandals as he came towards her. When she looked up at him, she was a child again and he had a lovely smile that made all her fears disappear.

"Hello beautiful one." He reached out his hand and she saw holes in them.

She hesitated, curious about the holes in his hands

When she looked up, he nodded. "For you, my love. I gave everything to be with you."

Her eyes pooled and she broke into tears.

"Take my hand."

She placed her hands in his.

He helped her up and wrapped her in his arms. "Come away with me."

She nodded clinging to him as he led her out of her room where the nightmares had begun.

Lara snapped out of the dream and realised she was still in the tub and everything that happened had been a dream within a dream.

Except…

She rose from the tub and threw on her robe, scurrying to her room while taking caution not to slip. Someone had been here and she hadn't been dreaming about it. A sweet and warm fragrance permeated her room and she knew it wasn't any of her perfumes. She hadn't even sprayed anything before using the bathroom.

She looked down and saw the book she'd seen in the dream and she shivered as she remembered the dream.

The holes in his hands…

The smile on his face…

The aura surrounding him…

Come away with me.

She sank into the floor and cried as light flooded her being. “Oh Jesus, yes I believe… I saw the scars. I can see your love for me. Oh Jesus I believe you’re Lord, Oh Jesus… oh God, you’re true.”



Dapo turned off the ignition and felt something tighten in his chest as he stared at Toke. She slid her hand on his thigh unabashedly. She was ready to give him what he wanted but he wanted Nimi.

Not her.

She left you, go on and have fun. It’s just tonight anyway.

His mind flashed to the ring Nimi had returned before she left. He’d hoped she would come back to him but the ring in his office drawer reminded him that she was gone for good.

Toke leaned in to kiss him and he felt more uncomfortable.

Why couldn’t he just have fun in peace? Why was his spirit making him feel this way?

She withdrew and smiled. “I understand that it might be hard for you right now but that’s why we’re here baby. It’s Friday remember?” She caressed his beard with her manicured nails. “You know what, why don’t we go inside, have a few drinks and get on the dance floor. That will lighten you up, trust me.”

He nodded.

“I know you’ve not been into this for a while but don’t worry, that’s why I’m here for you. To give you a good time so you can forget about her.” She coaxed nibbling his earlobe. “It’s me right here and right now baby…”

He inhaled deeply closing his eyes. The alcohol might help out because he was fighting hard to get in the mood to reciprocate Toke’s gestures. Her dress revealed enough to turn him on. His phone rang. He sighed and tried reaching for it but Toke placed her hand on his arm. “Don’t.”

He laughed. “It could be my mum or someone important. Why don’t you go inside and order drinks for us while I answer the call…okay babe?”

She winked and stepped out. He watched her strutting off, wondering if the night could get any worse. He reached for his phone and saw Lara’s caller ID.

“Hey bunny…” He greeted casually before he heard her sobs. “Sweetheart, are you alright?”

“Oh Bro Dapo… please can you come over immediately?” She cried.

“Lara, what’s going on? Where are you? Are you at home?” Agitated, he tried to still his racing heart.

“I’m at home Bro Dapo and I’m very fine. I just can’t hold it in. You won’t believe what just happened… in my wildest dreams I never imagined it would happen this way. I now understand why Nimi left, for me, for us Bro Dapo. Nimi left for me to see the light. Now I understand what she was trying to tell me about God’s love.”

“Lara… what is going?” He asked, perplexed.

“Jesus came to see me!” She cried excitedly on the phone and he froze.

“What?!”

“Oh Bro Dapo, is this how it feels to accept Jesus into your life? Is this how you felt when you did? I can’t believe you’ve been enjoying this much without me.”

Dapo stared at his windshield; and the guilt sank into his soul petrifying him. He thought of what he was about to do and how foolish he had been. His sister was rejoicing to have found Jesus while he was about to misuse the gift and grace he’d been given.

But how? How was it possible? He couldn’t believe his ears. Oh my! His sister was finally alive. He had to go home right now and see her. This was the most amazing news he had heard all week.

He started the car and reversed, driving as fast as he could to see his sister and forgetting Toke whom he'd left at the bar. His sister had found something great, something he'd been praying about for years. Just when he thought God was no longer concerned about them, he came shining his light through.

This time, so that His name alone would be glorified.



Lara's eyes glittered as she shared her encounter with Jesus with Dapo and their mother.

Mrs Kitan was fascinated by the story her daughter was sharing and she could only watch in awe as she struggled to piece it all together.

"Bro Dapo, I am going to read every single word in this bible today! I've wasted too much time. Oh my, I'm so excited. This feels better than wine." Lara laughed. "I can't believe this. My goodness Bro Dapo! God loves me this much, I can't contain it."

"Yes baby…" Dapo replied eyes filled with tears. He had mixed feelings of joy and guilt. Joy for his sister and guilt over his attitude about Nimi's departure and what he would have done with Toke had Lara's call not come through.

"The first time, it was amazing, almost unbelievable, the possibility of someone wiping all your sins away just like that, giving us a clean slate."

She hugged him and began sobbing again. "We are loved, I am loved. I see it clearly now. I've been blind all this while."

He rubbed her back soothingly feeling her joy. He knew his sister could be a drama queen but this was too real to ignore. He could feel how excited she was and hoped the passion for Jesus kept burning and sustained her. He hadn't physically seen Jesus during his own NewBirth experience the way Lara had

done, but he knew the joy that pulsed through his veins when truth dawned on him.

It was unlike any other experience.

Their mother stared at them and she had a sad smile on her face watching them. Dapo sensed how his mother felt about Lara's newfound life. He sensed she was eager to be part of this miraculous turn around happening to his sister.

He prayed inside. *Father, please bring her into your life and your light too, let her see how much you love her and deliver her from any sorrow she might be experiencing which she finds hard to say or share. In Jesus name. Amen.*

"I can't wait to start hearing him speak to me Bro Dapo." Lara chuckled. "You told me he talks to you right… the way Nimi hears him, I can hear him too…oh before we forget, we have to call Nimi…and Ikenna. I bet both of them will be excited to hear the news."

Dapo rested an arm on his sisters' calling her attention to their mother who had tears in her eyes already.

"Mummy… what's wrong? Are you alright?" Lara asked. Reaching out to embrace her mother, she wiped her tears away. "I thought you were happy."

Mrs Kitan nodded. "I am, I've never seen you so joyful before my love and I feel left out not knowing what it feels like…"

"Bro Dapo, we can pray for mummy, can't we? Jesus came for me and he can come for her too. I can sense she wants to be part of this too. She just needs to have faith."

Dapo blinked. How was it possible for his sister who was newly born to begin sensing what he'd sensed earlier?

She's part of God's family now. She has my Holy Spirit in her.

God reminded him of the book of Acts chapter Ten and the story of Cornelius' Newbirth experience and infilling of the HolySpirit afterwards. Suddenly he realised that the presence of God had surrounded them and filled

the house. He couldn't hold it in as he went on his knees and began to pray, from his understanding to tongues and his mother kept crying.

Soon, the cries became louder.

"What is this?!" Mrs Kitan screamed and moved back terrified by something only she could see. "Dapo! Are you the one doing this? Go away from me! Take it away from me. It's too bright and I can't see!! I'm scared it's going to destroy me, it's too much."

"Mummy…" Lara tried to reach for her mother but Mrs Kitan kept moving away screaming and crying.

Her cries grew louder until she collapsed like someone who had been shot. Lara was terrified wondering why their mother was acting like something had possessed her. She ran to check on her while her brother kept praying and wailing in an unknown tongue she couldn't understand.

"Mum?" Lara touched her mother's head and it was warm. She shook her. "Mummy… what's going on, are you alright? Bro Dapo! What's going on?" Lara panicked. She'd never heard her brother praying this way before. It felt strange and surreal. Turning to her mother, she asked. "What were you seeing?"

Her mother kept shaking as tears poured down her cheeks. Her headtie lay unfolded and rumpled on the floor while she panted. "He's real." Her body racked with sobs. "And I couldn't help but see how filthy I am… I have to tell you the truth."

"What truth?"

By the time Lara assisted her mother in gaining composure and settled on the couch, Dapo had stopped praying and he came to join them.

A few seconds later, Mrs Kitan told them everything.



Dapo typed furiously at his computer trying to make up for the work he hadn't been able to do over his exciting and extra-ordinary weekend. He was energised and happy. Life looked beautiful again. His mother and sister were saved… in one weekend. When he would have thrown caution to the wind, God had made it all beautiful and His name alone was glorified. All these years he'd prayed for his family to come into God and they had seen God so much more than he had in his lifetime.

Due to one girl's obedience.

He wanted to call Nimi, if possible fly to Ondo and wrap her in his arms telling her he had been foolish not to see her obedience and sacrifice would lead to something far greater, beyond his imagination. All he had seen when she left him was a God he didn't understand when in fact, God had been looking out for himself and his family. What if she hadn't gone? What if she'd stayed and they had gotten married… he would never have known the truth he knew now. God still had to work on the lust in his soul that had been lurking somewhere which had reared its ugly head during his trials and temptations.

Only God knew how much spiritual infirmities he still had within but he was willing to allow God keep working on him till he became like Jesus.

Nimi's obedience had stirred up all this. If she hadn't obeyed God, Lara and his mum would still be living their old life.

He made a mental note to call her come weekend.

Not yet.

He felt the Spirit admonishing him not to. He obeyed.

"I miss her." He confessed. "And I'm sorry for how foolish I behaved and for turning a gift into something more than what you intended it to be. You'll be my first Lord Jesus, and my last. You are my everything. Forgive me for grieving your spirit. Forgive me for taking your mercy for granted. Forgive me for choosing my own way above yours. Thank you for showing me I still need you to work in me and that you need to eliminate lust in my life. Thank you for

second chances and thank you because I know all things are working for our good. I don't deserve it, but you love me and kept chasing me in my foolishness. Thank you.*"*

He felt the peace overwhelm him once again reminding him of God's never-ending love and mercy. His mind flashed to what his mother had shared with them over the weekend. In all his life, he never knew his parents were capable of diabolic covenants.

When his parents were young, they'd made a blood covenant to keep them together, especially when the witch doctor that had tied them together told them of their future and how her husband would grow wealthy. He would also have many enemies as his wealth grew so if they were tied together, it would secure their love, their lives and those of their children. None of them could leave and even if they had extra marital affairs, they were bound to each other for life. If any of them left the union, the consequences could be fatal.

Mrs Kitan explained she was afraid her husband had made another covenant with their daughter that involved blood as well. It was the reason why she'd been terrified when she found out the truth of Lara's abuse. She told them she'd threatened to leave with Lara but Chief had looked into her eyes that night and she'd seen something dark and sinister in his eyes that weakened and terrified her. It was then she knew he'd delved into deeper things she was not aware of and she got scared of leaving him.

They'd prayed after she accepted Jesus into her life and Dapo assured her that Jesus had stepped in so every form of curse and covenant was broken. Lara and his mum would be staying in his place for a while. His mind had begun working on how to send his mother away from Lagos and get an apartment for her in Abuja.

He'd seen fear in his mother's eyes but he assured her everything would be fine. Christ was in her Spirit and she would keep learning and obeying to

build Christ in her soul. God's covenant with her through Jesus was stronger than his father's or any other individual.

Lara was quitting from their father's company this week and she would be moving in with him till God said otherwise. If his father wanted to query anyone, he would have to go through him. Dapo couldn't imagine the shock on his face when Chief realised that his wife and daughter were gone.

His door barged open and Toke marched toward him while Bibi his secretary followed behind trying to stop her. "Sir, she wouldn't let me take a message…"

He stood up immediately assuring Bibi it was fine. The girl hurriedly left his office. He could see his ex-girlfriend fuming underneath her beautifully painted face. He walked towards her to apologise for leaving her at a club and running off to meet his sister.

He hadn't even called to explain why he left.

"Toke, I'm sorry, I…" Her hand cracked across his face. He bit his lip, enduring the pain. *I guess I deserved that.*

"You stood me up you egoistic jerk! Don't you ever, ever in your messed-up life repeat what you did to me on Friday."

"Yes ma'am."

"Next time I won't…"

"Oh I assure you there won't be a next time." He nodded going back to his seat wishing he could rub off the stinging effect of her hands on his face. "You've had your pound of flesh, you can take your leave now."

She looked surprised. "Won't you apologise?"

"I believe I already tried doing that before you hit me."

She blinked. "I've always known you were a proud one, I just didn't know you had taken it to another level." She rolled her eyes and turned. "I wish you all the best in your miserable life. Just know that when you come begging, I'll show you the door the way you did to me."

She stormed off.

The moment she closed the door behind her, he sighed and rubbed his cheeks.

Father that hurt

And he could only laugh at himself.

CHAPTER 36

Two Years Later

“Love is not passive. It is a deliberate effort for those who have chosen to walk how Jesus walked on earth. For those who desire to grow into Sons and inherit the promises God wants to give his own. Those whom He promised in the book of Revelations chapter three to give an inheritance, for not all can get to the Father’s heart, but those who sacrifice all, lay down their lives and chase Jesus as their ultimate treasure.” Dapo took a swig from his bottled water and continued ministering to the youths seated before him. “I was someone who thought I had an intimate relationship with God till my heart was put to the test. I felt I could stay with God through the good and the bad. But trials came and I was ready to throw away what we had and return to my vomit.

“I was like Peter who denied Jesus. Many of us think we love God till he asks us to obey him or do something we would rather not do. God wants the kind of love that through the good and bad times, you are there with Him, like a marriage covenant, the agape kind. Intimacy bound by blood.

Your life is no longer yours for you have been bought at a price. You live for your saviour, your master who purchased you with His blood. Your choice

belongs to Him alone and you have to keep laying it at his feet everyday. Your will has to be submitted because He gave all of Himself to have all of you.

"Do you think a God who did something so priceless would get something minor in return? No, he's coming for precious stones, those who have been refined. It was a wake-up call for me and I believe it's a call to each of you sitting right here and listening to me. Yes, God has saved in your spirit, but what about your heart? What about your mind? What about your soul? That's the real you God wants to save because your heart can declare love for God one minute and fight against him the next minute. Tell me, if God took something from you today, if He doesn't answer that prayer or asks you to lay your precious treasure, will you turn your back on Him, curse Him and leave or you'll stay and work things out while seeking to lean into His grace and strength?"

Dapo looked around the room filled with young people and his heart was filled with compassion for them. They all stared at him quietly. A young lady in the front row wiped her face as her eyes pooled.

"So I implore you today, you've been saved but God wants to keep saving your heart, your mind and your soul. If we reject this truth, then we miss out on a lot of things and we will never see how much we could take on God's image and likeness within our souls. We can never compare this life to the eternity we will spend with God.

"I want you to pray with me today if you're ready to go into depth with God, for 'deep calls unto deep at the noise of thy waterspouts' as the psalmist declared. David was a man different from Saul and his God chasing heart drew Him to God. He always sought God's face before delving into anything while we can hardly say the same for Saul. For Saul sought something else other than God's heart. We saw how he ended. I pray we will not end up like Saul who was in a haste and ran ahead of God, but we will listen to the One who purchased us with His blood and allow Him guide us into more life in Him."

After the fellowship ministration, Dapo excused himself and went to sit while praying quietly and thanking God for His grace to talk in the midst of the young people at the place he was currently worshipping. In the space of two years, God had led him out of the church he was previously attending to another, where he was unlearning and relearning many things about God. He'd been reluctant to teach for months now as he felt he still had so many things to learn but God had finally led him to do it. Besides the Pastor pleaded with him to pray about it and follow the nudge in his spirit. He'd learned to wait, obey and trust God ever since Nimi left.

He wasn't about to ruin things in haste.

God had given him so much grace that the thought of Nimi was waning compared to the intense passion he used to feel in the past when they were together. He was channelling his passion into God, learning more about him and spreading the great news of how God was raising up refined Sons as the days drew near. The word of God felt like a new book to him once again and he found life as he fed on it. He'd been teaching Lara so many things and Lara was already grasping how to pray and spend time with her bible. He was glad. She fed on it like a hungry babe asking him questions where necessary. His mother wasn't any different.

He hadn't heard from his father in a long time but he didn't stop praying for him. Since the incident, Chief Olakitan seemed unperturbed about his family's disappearance, boasting they would return and it would be his turn to gloat. Dapo prayed God opened his father's eyes to see the truth, repent of his ways and leave his diabolical life behind.

His mind flashed to Lara and the thought of her slow but steady progress brightened up his soul. She'd had a quiet wedding with Ikenna at Port Harcourt some months ago and Dapo called every week to check up on her, if she didn't call first. She updated him on her new life and everything happening around her. He couldn't help seeing her as his sheep although Ikenna prided himself in

caring for her physical, emotional and spiritual needs. He'd gotten a good offer some months ago which propelled them to move back to Portharcourt. Dapo made a mental note to travel to Port Harcourt as soon as he returned from his friend's wedding in Abuja and also thought to check on his mother. His week was booked already, and he had to fly out tomorrow morning.

"I think you should teach the youths often." The reverend smiled at him as they headed outside together after the logistics had packed up, waved their goodbyes and everyone had gone home. "Has God told you anything yet?"

He shook his head smiling at the older man. "Well, I believe when it's time, y'know…"

"And have you prayed about it?"

Dapo laughed. "I believe God will make it known to me when it's right sir. I've learned not to hurry when it comes to spiritual things. Following God's leading is important. It's one thing to nominate myself, it's another thing for God to say this is what he would have me do, the how and when. I really don't want to take any step without his approval. The last time…"

"Ahh… your last relationship and the proposal you told me about…"

Dapo nodded.

"I just know everything will be fine my son, I sense it that God is going to make everything beautiful in His time and I'm glad you're sensitive to His leading."

He nodded. "How's mummy and Cynthia? I didn't see them tonight."

"She had a cold so Cynthia had to stay back and look after her. She'll be fine. I think it's just the stress from her last trip."

"Please extend my greetings to her. I'll call when I get home. I have an early morning flight to Abuja to catch sir."

"Oh…I apologise for keeping you waiting. Safe journey and call me when you get there okay?"

He nodded and waved as he headed to his car. "I will."



Nimi was nervous as she sat at a table with her boss who had invited her for his cousin's wedding. She hardly knew anybody in Abuja but she followed him for courtesy sake. She knew he had a soft spot for her. Within a period of one year, he'd promoted her to be his Personal Assistant and they often worked late together. She knew he had a child from his previous marriage and she already made it clear that she wasn't ready to enter a relationship anytime soon and was standing by her decision. She'd been reluctant to come with him but he'd insisted and told her they would also need to work on a few projects together. After praying about it, the HolySpirit gave her a go ahead and she obliged.

She just had to trust him. She also had peace that all would be fine. Although she sometimes got homesick, she was learning to bask in God's grace. This strengthened her to focus less on her loneliness. Her relationship with God was blooming again, even better than the past. The thought of Dapo flashed through her mind and she shook the thoughts away. She was grateful God had separated them and she couldn't remember how heartbroken she'd felt two years ago.

Her relationship with Dapo had exposed so many things hidden in her heart she'd been unaware of. She'd never known herself to harbour lust, pride and covetousness. Ninety percent of her thoughts had been on Dapo throughout their relationship. She'd dreamt and thought of him everyday. She remembered the nights she would spend dreaming up the names of her unborn babies and so many other thoughts God had told her to put a check on which she'd passively ignored.

Right now, she was glad God was decluttering her soul from all the toxins hidden within. The hours she spent fellowshipping and walking in his will wasn't in vain. She often prayed for the wisdom to live and trust him daily. She

couldn’t spend a day without hearing his voice. Their conversation became longer and frequent and she would worship for hours or be quiet and listen to God sharing his secrets with her.

She was in awe. It was like her obedience transformed and altered something in her heart because even her present relationship with God was more intimate than she’d ever experienced. She knew she’d stepped into a higher phase with God. Even scriptures came alive when she read. She knew her obedience had a part to play in overcoming the temptations that came her way. Scriptures which she couldn’t understand in the past were opening up in a whole new dimension and she would chew from his word till she got filled for the day.

God felt like a precious diamond to her, a rare treasure she had not really seen till she started seeking. She didn’t regret she’d left all to follow Him. He was worth her obedience, her waiting and so much more. Her life was His for sure. Her job was the only thing that took her time but she was fine and fulfilled till whenever God wanted her to return to Lagos.

God had healed her tremendously and she couldn’t recall the tears she cried over Dapo. Looking back, she couldn’t imagine she had struggled to submit her will to God years ago. She almost felt ashamed she’d struggled with God but was consoled by the Holy Spirit.

“Enjoying yourself?” Her boss broke into her thoughts.

“I’m trying.” She shrugged and reached for her bag. She dug in for tissue in her bag and gave a brief nod. “If you’ll excuse me, I have to use the rest-room.”

She stood up to leave.



Dapo planned to leave immediately he got the chance to greet the groom. As he sat at the table, he scrolled through the mails Bibi had forwarded to him earlier. He tried putting his mind on something else as the men sitting around him shared all kinds of jokes. The ladies beside him didn't help the situation either. Some had tried to flirt with him but he'd politely declined and tried as much as possible to divert the conversation.

He sighed and looked up from his phone. A familiar face caught his attention. He kept staring as she rose from her chair and headed to her right.

His heart jumped.

She looks like Nimi.

No, it couldn't be. Nimi was in Ondo, where she'd been for about two years. Why was he suddenly imagining her to be here at this moment, in this place? Feelings he'd thought were dead swam to the surface and his pulse jumped at the possibility of seeing her again. Her smile, her gait, her hair and the way she walked. He could recognise her anyday anytime. The girl in the turquoise lace dress walked the way his ex-fiancée walked and her complexion was still the same.

He heard each person in the world had a double. Could she be Nimi's double?

There was only one way to find out.

Standing up immediately, he tried to follow her and realised she was heading to the rest room. She entered before he had the chance to get a full view of her face. She had the same graceful walk too. Her small lithe frame fitted into a beautiful dress was all it took to make his heart beat wildly in his chest like a lovesick child.

But if it was Nimi, what in the world was she doing here in Abuja? Was she with someone?

Or perhaps she had married and they'd moved here.

He was still wrapped up in his thoughts when the lady stepped out. He mumbled a short prayer, threw caution to the wind and stood in the way, hoping she'd bump into him.

What's the worst that could happen?



Nimi wasn't looking up as she struggled with her bag. The zipper was misbehaving again. She'd resigned to get a new bag a week ago, but she was waiting for the right time to go shopping.

She bumped into someone standing in her way and her bag fell to the floor. She was almost losing her balance when strong hands caught her in time. When she looked up, her heart leaped and she could only stare open mouthed.

"Nimi..."

She was at a loss for words. She shook her head and blinked. She was probably hallucinating.

Was this real?

"Dapo?" She finally found her tongue. "Oh my goodness, Dapo…"

"Nimi…, wow, w-what a pleasant surprise." She heard him stutter and was surprised that he could when he'd always been the composed one. She couldn't help but stare. He hadn't changed much. He'd grown his beard and it suited him. Shaven or unshaven, he looked great as always. Even his Blue Senator traditional attire fitted nicely on broad shoulders. He still had his usual aura around him, exuding confidence in his smile. If she didn't know him, she would have thought him proud. The times spent with him had swept away her first impression of him.

"I'm surprised myself."

He embraced her and she couldn't resist. She hoped he couldn't hear the way her heart beat so loudly against her chest. They were like that for a while

before they parted. Dapo held her at arm's length and his eyes danced around her face.

"You look great." She managed, tears welling up in her eyes. How could it feel so good to see him when she'd moved on, her heart had moved on and she had accepted her fate? He was probably married to some young pretty girl by now. They'd been dating when he was thirty-five. He was thirty-seven already so he must have moved on. Seeing him brought back so many memories she'd thought were long gone.

"And you look good as always." He smiled. He glanced at her finger and she did the same. When she looked up, their gaze locked and she was unable to look away. It was obvious they'd been thinking the same thing.

"What are you doing here? I thought you were in Ondo?"

"The bride is my boss's cousin. He asked me to come along."

"Oh I see…"

"What about you?"

"Uh, friend of the groom. We were classmates in school and I was invited." He nodded, his hands in his pockets and she wondered if he was nervous as she was.

"How's everyone? Lara, Mum…"

He smiled at her and she could tell his smile was pregnant with secrets he was unwilling to reveal at once.

Her heart raced faster.

Dear God… is it what I think it?

"Uh, perhaps we could get away from here and I'll tell you everything. Are you free for lunch tomorrow? Mum stays in Abuja now, I think it would be great if you come with me to see her tomorrow."

She nodded happily and silently wondered if she was too eager for her own good. She hadn't even asked God if the lunch was going to be a good idea and the thought of seeing his mother scared her. She was skeptical about what

the woman would say to her if she set eyes on her. Not that she was ready to come into Dapo's life again, but she could vividly remember the last time Mrs Kitan had lashed out at her. They hadn't parted on friendly terms.

She couldn't believe she was losing all the composure she'd gained in the two years she was away from Dapo. She felt silly for acting like a schoolgirl. She was consoled when God's peace surrounded her.

Father help me.

"Are you staying in a hotel? I could come over."

She blinked. "Excuse me?"

"Wouldn't you like me to come pick you for lunch or you would rather come all the way?"

"Oh…" She swallowed feeling embarrassed. "I'm sorry I didn't… I…"

"It's fine Nimi." He smiled, understanding her predicament. "I'm sure you get asked out a lot and you forgot we had history."

She shook her head. "I wasn't listening. Sorry." She didn't want to tell him her boss had made similar suggestions and that was responsible for her hyperactive imaginations. She looked into his eyes and knew something had changed within him.

She liked the new him.

She thought of him when she was by herself later that night as she stared at the ceiling and touched the left side of her chest. Dapo's smile had melted every resistance she'd spent two years building. What on earth was wrong with her?

I have vowed that this heart would beat for you father, but to be honest, I saw Dapo today and I almost forgot all you've taught me and how your love should be the ultimate. Why do I feel this way? Why did it feel like all my senses just flew out of the window when I looked into his eyes again? I felt so vulnerable. I was so eager to know if he was married or not that I couldn't help checking for a wedding band. Just the thought of him marrying someone else

made me so anxious and sad. Every feeling of loneliness I'd felt in the past returned.

Turning to her side, she closed her eyes. *If it's your will for me to remain this way Daddy, then I ask that after our lunch together tomorrow, I never see him again, I ask that you grant me the grace and strength and help me channel my desires into you but if Dapo and I coming together will glorify you, then let your will be done, help me to love him rightly, teach me not to idolise him but to love him enough to give you glory, for this is your purpose and your will for anyone who desires you. That my life might be pleasing to you and give you glory. In Jesus name. Amen.*

She yawned and pulled the sheets closer as she drifted off in sleep.



Tarry a little longer and make plans for two

Dapo nodded like he understood what God was telling him. He'd made lunch reservations for two tomorrow and perhaps God was confirming his will to have lunch with Nimi. He kept working on his laptop and was reminiscing on a few appointments he would have to make up for when he arrived in Lagos. Bibi had called him a few minutes ago to update him on what he missed on Friday. He wondered when he was going to have a long vacation. He longed to spend a month by himself relaxing by the beach.

It was a long-deserved break.

The thought of Nimi suddenly dropped into his heart and he blinked.

Tarry a little longer and make plans for two

He sat up this time. Make plans for two? How, why? For how long would he tarry or wait?

I don't understand. Lord are you telling me to stay behind in Abuja? I plan to return to Lagos on Monday morning.

No response.

Is this about Nimi?

No response.

He sighed and continued with his work. Perhaps God would make it clear as time went on. He had learned to trust God with his instructions, so he relaxed. There was one thing that made him happy. He sensed his lunch with Nimi would be beautiful and he looked forward to it.



A week after Nimi got back to work at Akure, she couldn't stop thinking back to the lunch she had with Dapo which turned out beautiful, way more beautiful than she had anticipated. The luxurious lunch and dinner they'd had together was the last thing on her mind as she kept replaying the conversation in her heart over and over again. She couldn't get the thought of Lara and Mrs Kitan's salvation out of her mind. It was mind blowing how God had brought great deliverance to the family. Mrs Kitan had been so elated to see her. The change in her was palpable. The aura around her was different too. Mrs Kitan made dinner and they all ate till they were satiated and talked till it was late. It felt like home. God was with them. She could discern his presence in their midst as they laughed and shared together.

The rented apartment Mrs Kitan was living in Abuja was not as large as the Kitans mansion in Lagos but that was nothing compared to the beauty she saw radiating from Mrs Kitan. The past felt forgotten as they reminisced over the incident. The tears Nimi had cried was forgotten and Dapo's anger healed. They all basked in the consequences of Nimi's obedience.

Was God giving his approval? She would be patient to see how things turned out.

There was a way Dapo looked at her and she suspected he knew something, probably something God revealed to him, something he alone was privy to. They talked into the night and she had to remind him she was leaving for Ondo in the morning.

On their flight back, her boss acted cold towards her. Throughout the week, she noticed his demeanour toward her had changed but she didn't let that get to her. She couldn't let anything steal her joy, not even the rumour going on about retrenchment could dampen her spirit.

She thought about calling Lara but felt it would be better to see her in flesh.

She was working on organising her boss's appointments when he stepped out of his office to call her in. He had plans to travel out of Nigeria for a business trip and she prayed he wouldn't involve her this time. She didn't want to travel alone with her boss, especially since he was beginning to let his intentions known.

She stepped into the office and greeted him politely eager to take down any more appointment he needed her to. She glanced around and realised they were not alone. A pretty young girl in high heels and a very short skirt sat cross-legged on one of his chaise lounges in the office. She was probably an acquaintance of his.

"Uh… please have a seat Miss Adeyemi." Kola said with a smile. She glanced from the girl to her boss trying to decipher what was going on.

She immediately sensed something was wrong.

"You've worked for me for about two years now and I believe within that period, you've been of great help to me. You've been efficient, competent and you do your job quite well as my PA, a professional one by the way. Unfortunately, I just don't think we are capable of taking more than what we can handle at the moment. You might have heard, the company is undergoing a

great shift and reformation. I'm sorry I would have to relieve you of your duties."

Her heart dropped.

"But I'll be happy to provide you with a recommendation letter if you need one. I wish I could let you stay but unfortunately, some tough decisions have to be taken. I do hope you understand. I've spoken to the Human Resources and you will be paid your salary for this month."

She found it hard to speak as he handed her the letter. She received it and stared at it, the excitement of Lara's news wearing off and suddenly fear and sadness enveloped her.

Where are you going to stay now? They will need to claim their accommodation too.

"I assume you know the Kitans?"

She looked up then with shock in her eyes, her head spinning. She suddenly knew there was more to this. Had Dapo done this to her or was her boss just being driven by his lust?

"Chief Olakitan… I saw you chatting with his son while we were at Abuja over the weekend. Chief is a very good friend of mine but he doesn't treat his enemies nicely. I saw you with the young man and I put two and two together. I wasn't aware you were the girl who turned his family upside down. If I had known, perhaps things might have been different." His eyes danced around her features before lingering on her chest.

He gave her a poignant smile. "Sometimes good girls finish last. You've got to be smart in a hustling world." She was tempted to cry but she knew the enemy just wanted to find a way to steal her joy and she wouldn't allow it. God was going to turn it out for good. She could feel his peace and joy bubbling within her already.

This was probably her cue to go back to Lagos. She had nothing more to do here anyway. She recalled why God had led her to Ondo in the first place

and managed a smile. After all, she'd prayed for God's will. Perhaps God was letting His will be done by leaving her with the option of going back home.

"Thank you sir."

He looked surprised.

She stood up, wished him the best and left his office to clear her desk. Though she had every reason to feel bad especially with what her boss had just revealed, she was sure everything would be alright.

And she believed. She'd come too far to stop believing and recognising God when he assured her that he had it all in control.



Nimi arrived at the house and was about knocking when the door flew open and Tolani leaped on her squealing. Her mum scurried over to embrace her before she could kneel to greet her. It felt so good to be home again. All the warmth, the joy and life in this place, it suddenly felt like it'd been more than two years she left them for Ondo. Even her siblings looked taller and home smelled of spicy food, herbs and home-made bread. The last time she'd seen her family in flesh was six months ago when they visited her in Ondo.

After settling in, she ate the sumptuous meal made by her mother and cleared the table. A few hours later, she sat cushioned between her mother and Tolani narrating all that had happened, beginning with how she'd seen Dapo and the good news that came with him. She couldn't contain the tears spilling from her eyes as she shared everything with them. Her mum was so excited she literally jumped out of her seat as Nimi told them about Lara and Mrs Kitan's Newbirth experience. Tolani did a little dance and went on listening as they were in awe of what God had done within that period of her obedience and sacrifice.

Before Nimi retired to bed, her mother reached for her hand and smiled. “You came in through that door and you looked like a different woman. I think that’s part of what your boss saw and it incited him to fire you. After a while, not many people can handle a woman who dares to abide in God because your life begins to judge them like Noah’s life of obedience judged those around him during his time. The enemy begins to look for all means to send you packing.

“But God, who owns the universe and does not operate like man has gone before you to show you the path to life. You my darling chose that path to love and to live the day you left all and chose Jesus.”

A tear rolled down Nimi’s cheeks and she reached to wipe it away.

“Your life really challenged me.” Mrs Adeyemi continued. “You had everything at your fingertips, and you had a choice. You chose to let nothing have a hold on you in this world and trusted God when everyone else thought you were foolish. You let God constantly lead you and direct you. I’m proud of you my darling. I’m sure God can look down on your life and say you’re his daughter whom He has found pleasure in.”

“Thank you Mummy.”

“I know there’s still so much ahead, there are still more challenges to come, but I know the One who began a good work in you will bring it to completion. Tolani sees you as her role model. You don’t know how your life has challenged that girl. I see a new hunger in her that I haven’t seen before. Your obedience spurned a whole lot of things and caused a chain reaction which you were probably unaware of but God sees and rewards your obedience. Imagine if Eve had not disobeyed. The same way our obedience produces a reaction, even for generations to come, it is the same way with disobedience. You will keep overcoming because your Lord and saviour overcame.”

“Amen ma.”

“So, I don’t know if this has crossed your mind, but I just have a feeling you need to tell Dapo and let him know you’re back in Lagos for good. You

both parted without knowing this would happen. I believe it's a beginning of great things to come. Just watch and see."

Nimi smiled knowingly. "I sensed it too as we spoke. I just wanted God to lead me."

"You might not know it, but I believe God was the one leading you out of that man's office. When the time is set, God shows up and aligns everything like the master planner that he is."

She nodded. Her spirit confirmed that her mother was speaking the truth. No wonder she'd felt peace and joy within when she was losing her job as a normal person would have been devastated.

Mrs Adeyemi stood up and kissed her daughter's head. "Time to go to bed my darling. God keep you safe and sound."

"I love you mum."

"I love you too.



Nimi tried to calm her racing heart. Every inch towards Lara's new home made her fidget with excitement. She squeezed Dapo's hands tighter and he chuckled. He pulled her close to himself as they walked quietly toward the house. They were courting again and this time it felt so purposeful and beautiful than she'd ever dreamed. It felt as if God had pulled them apart to build again. There was nothing to be scared of anymore and they were more intentional about their lives pleasing God than they wanted to please themselves.

Dapo prayed often with her than he did in the past. She wasn't worried about him leading her in marriage as the priest in the home they would be building together. He was the one God wanted her to submit to. She was amazed by how much God had worked in him and on him. They attended more

spiritually edifying programs and talked about God more often than they talked about themselves when they spent time talking into the night.

They tried to ensure their conversations didn't extend too late into the night and they prayed often. They talked about the number of kids they wanted to have and finances. Nimi wasn't yet settled into a job and they were praying to know what God wanted and if he had plans for her staying home or a nine to five office job.

When they got to the door, Dapo knocked and they heard someone yell. "I'm coming…who's there?"

"Your one and only brother." Dapo signalled for Nimi to hide behind him so he could surprise his sister.

He heard his sister squeal. When she opened the door, he was in awe as he stared at her. The pregnancy bump obviously looked good on her. She was glowing. It was hard to remember the broken girl of the past was the beautiful pregnant woman standing at the door.

"I have a surprise for you."

"I'm getting too old for flowers. Just ask Ikenna." She teased wanting to pull him close for a hug. She stopped short when Nimi peaked at her, grinning from ear to ear behind Dapo.

Lara screamed and Ikenna ran out to see if everything was alright. His eyes widened on seeing Nimi and he smiled. He embraced Dapo before turning to embrace Nimi. Nimi received him happy to be in their lives once again.

Raising her hands to her mouth, Lara pushed her brother aside, embracing her friend for a long time. When they parted, there were tears in her eyes.

"Come in… please come in. My goodness Bro Dapo!" She smacked him with her napkin while grabbing Nimi's hands. "You don't play fair *o*. How can you bring this kind of surprise for me and expect me to remain normal?" She looked behind them, checking for their bags. "I hope you're sleeping over."

"Ondo was good on you o Nimi! Kai! See how you've changed." Ikenna praised. Turning to Dapo, he nudged him. "See how you just springed such a surprise on us. Prophetess Nimi was coming over and you didn't even give us a heads-up to prepare ahead with a red carpet."

Dapo laughed.

"Prophetess bawo?" Nimi chuckled. "Ikenna please don't start."

"Nimi is more than a prophetess o. She's our own special role model, pastor, mummy G.O. All in one." Lara grinned.

Nimi giggled with tears of joy rolling down her cheeks. "Ikenna! You've definitely rubbed off on Lara. Why are you two doing this? I'm nobody *abeg*."

"Alright. We know you're trying to be humble so I will relent on the praise, but I'm assuming that's a yes, you're sleeping over with us." Lara said. "My brother can sleep anywhere he likes but my sweetheart, you're spending the whole weekend with me whether you like it or not. My days! Look at you!"

"And look at you Lara…" Nimi said, looking at her bump as they settled inside.

"It's a girl." Lara shrugged. Reaching for her friend's hand, she glanced at her husband and continued. "There's so much to say, so many places to begin but let me start by saying we've been thinking of naming our baby girl after you for a while now. Nimi will be her second name. I've been praying about it too and God doesn't seem to mind. Infact I could feel Him smiling at the decision."

Nimi looked up at husband and wife in shock and they nodded their approval. Ikenna spoke up. "We talked about it only once but Lara won't stop calling your name whenever she strokes her bump, so I had to give in." He laughed. "We hope she lives up to her godmother and aunt."

"I'm going to tell her the story when she comes out…of how God used you for me, your love and sacrifice will not be forgotten baby." Lara smiled and Dapo joined her. "Look at me, I didn't even entertain my special guest and I'm here blabbing my life out. Can I get you anything? Malt, smoothie, soft

drinks… Ikenna and I were making dinner for only Dapo but I believe the HolySpirit told me we might need to make extra and I'm glad I obeyed."

Nimi was speechless as she watched Lara heading back into the kitchen. In all her years she didn't imagine God would make her life so beautiful, even beyond words. He had surpassed her expectations and even more. It felt like a movie was playing before her and she could only watch in awe.

Dapo's arms rested on her shoulders and she realised this was real afterall. Nimi leaned into him, as the tears kept flowing. Dapo comforted her rubbing her back soothingly. Sliding her hands into his, she looked up into his face and realised there were tears in his eyes as well. The last time they'd been this way, she'd been contemplating on letting go because God wanted her to, but He had only parted them to bring them together. He'd made their relationship so glorious and beautiful, more than she could have imagined, more beautiful than the first. Indeed her latter end was glorious than the former.

Life with Dapo was going to be beautiful and she couldn't wait to spend it with him, this time with God at the centre, forever and always.

Note from the Author

I started writing this story in 2015. I'd been a Christian for as long as I could remember but that year was like a birthing experience into God's love for me. It felt wild, reckless and beautiful all at once. And I knew I had to tell the world about it. I could feel God impressing it upon my heart to do so. And he provided all the resources I needed. Even while I was running a rigorous master's program, I'd sit for hours churning out the story in faith, trusting God for direction in each chapter.

Lara's story started to come alive on the pages, Nimi tagged along and every other character took shape with the help of the HolySpirit. I wasn't aware God could fit in his love, romance, salvation, obedience and truth in one book. But he did it anyway. He's the author of creativity.

In 2019, four years after, God told me I had to work on a Beautiful Wings Sequel.

Readers kept asking about Beautiful Wings Part One, expressing how it blessed them. With God giving me a go-ahead, I compiled it and began a thorough edit on it. It took almost a year to come through, but God provided help.

Writing this story and my waiting process was/is part of my obedience to God. It may have taken you days or even hours to read, but the story took time to develop. All I know is no obedience to God is in vain. Like Nimi's obedience saved Lara and even herself and Dapo, obeying God heals us of infirmities within our souls we know nothing about. It pays to obey God, in the little and big things. Obedience to him shows how much we love him and are willing to

leave the old part of ourselves while longing to be transformed into Christlikeness.

For someone out there who might be going through seasons that seem unbearable, wondering how a loving God would allow you go through trials that make you cry, hang on. I hope Nimi's story helps you to see there's a light at the end of the tunnel. God is the light. God is the salvation our souls long for, where we can find healing, joy, warmth, hope and eternal life.-Psalm 27:1-2

I hope her story gives you the courage to let go and keep obeying God as he makes all things beautiful in His time. I hope you see it as part of your salvation process into Christlikeness in this life and the life to come.

Perhaps you're like Lara. Hurt, abused and misunderstood. You feel you've gone too far for God to keep taking chances on you. But hear this. God has chosen to stay commited to you, regardless of how many times you miss it. As long as you're eager to please Him, he will help you.

God loves you. I don't know how else to explain this. But nobody can love you like He does. Don't settle. God only wishes you good. Don't run away from him. Stop hiding. Stop doubting. Just believe and keep yielding so he can unravel you slowly. And He who began a good work in you will bring it to perfection; for He's a kind God that makes beauty from ashes.

Bloom with Love. Xx!

Beautiful Surrender (2020)

It's been three years of marital bliss between Nimi and Dapo Olakitan. Nimi has everything she could ever want because God gave her more than what she asked for. But when she finds herself battling discontentment within, she can't help the questions rising in her heart. These questions lead her into territories that end in tears and a sought-after redemption.

Lara Amadi nee Olakitan enjoys being married to her childhood sweetheart. After the brutal and traumatizing experience of her past, she gladly welcomes her new life as a gift from God, believing in Christ she's a new creature.

But the nightmares keep invading her dreams and making her doubt her sanity and faithfulness to Ikenna. If accepting Jesus was enough to heal her, why does she still feel broken inside? When the past comes calling, Lara has a choice to run or stay. Staying is risky, staying means she might fall into an old lover's arms. But what if staying was the only way to close the door to the demons of her past?

As both women discover deep and darker parts of themselves, they learn more about a Saviour mighty enough to save them in every season and how they must lean on him, pick up the pieces of their lives and find strength in him alone despite the odds. Only when they discover harmony within can they live out God's plan for their lives.

Beautiful Surrender Excerpt

Nimi's eyes blinked open the moment Dapo's hands draped over her in the early hours of the morning. Her body had grown accustomed to their daily routine and it was no surprise she was awake before the alarm tore through the silence. She stared into space trying not to get exhausted before the day began. She blinked back the tears that had threatened to fall, reminding herself she was praying, not crying.

"Hey baby." Her husband kissed her and she tried to smile when he turned on the light, looking into her eyes. He got distracted when his phone alarm rang.

"Oh my, six a.m already? And I feel like I haven't slept all day." He groaned reaching for the phone and turning it off. Soon the calls and the mails would be rolling in and he would be moving around the house as usual. She would prepare breakfast, pack their lunch boxes before driving off to work.

Their lives were too predictable. Three years in and no child to breastfeed or jump in on them excitedly. No one to bath or dress up. She'd never taken the morning pill, but life was treating her unfairly.

"You could sleep in." She suggested rising from the bed and headed toward the window to pull the curtains, glad such little action could keep her distracted for a minute or less till she got herself together for daily devotion. The last thing she wanted to bore her husband with this early was the absence of a child after three years of trying. They'd been over it many times. It was beginning to become more of a nuisance than a prayer point. God had told them it would come. How long he didn't say. But her goal was to keep pursuing God

as life itself as he'd instructed in Matthew six verse thirty-three, everything else would follow.

But some days, it felt exhausting to keep waiting and longing and hoping. Some days she grew weary and distracted seeing other people's children playing. It was hard to keep her gaze on the lover of her soul while fighting the desire of wanting her own child to feed and love.

"Hmm, maybe I should." He came behind her, sliding his hands around her waist and nuzzling her neck. "Breakfast in bed, make love to my wife, fool around with that waltz dance we tried to do the other night?" He chuckled against her ears, causing a tickling sensation in her belly. Dapo definitely knew his way around her body.

"Or we could try out some of my old DVDs if you want. Watch one of those old classics you love so much."

She smiled trying not to be a killjoy with the sarcastic comment on the tip of her tongue. Intimacy used to be something exciting in her first year of marriage to Dapo, but on some days, she couldn't wait for it to be over. She found it hard to recollect the times they'd been all over each other before marriage and she silently thanked God they'd waited to get married before having sex. Yes, it had been sizzling when they first got around it, but right now it was one of those things she did because they were married.

Besides, their lovemaking hadn't produced a child for three years. Was there any point? Placing a hand on his, she ran a thumb against his fingers softly wishing she could be carefree like him rather than fight the thoughts that were about to mess up her day before it began.

Wasn't he worried? He was going to be forty years old this year and she would be thirty. Time wasn't on their side. Was Dapo going to keep raising

children till he was seventy years old or God knows when? When would he retire if he had children to feed past their teenage years?

"I wish it was that simple."

"Well, what's the worst that could happen? Backlog maybe. I'll work on it tomorrow."

"You're forgetting I'm still an employee not an employer. I don't have the luxury you do."

His hands which were fondling with her nightdress stopped midway. "Good way to kill my vibe babe."

She chuckled. "Sorry love." Turning, she planted a firm kiss on his lips and adjusted her robe over her night dress doing all she could to take his mind away from her body. She wasn't in the mood and if he pressed her, he would find out she was cold and pretending.

"Time for prayers. Your turn this morning." She was too weak to take prayers today. Besides Dapo seemed to do it better than she could. The last thing she needed was her voice to break and betray her while she was praying.

"Really? I thought it was your turn?" He scratched his head in vague confusion. He looked so adorable whenever he acted clueless.

"C'mon babe. We don't have time to argue about this you know that right?"

"Alright, I'll do it. But you owe me one." He winked getting to his knees and clasping his hands together. She joined him to pray and smiled when he pulled her close to himself.

"Father we thank you…"

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About the Author

Itunu Taiwo is a modern-day Christian with Christ-fashioned values. Her passion for Jesus compels her to write unceasingly about him. You can catch her writing poems, stories and life-giving articles on her blog or scribbling God's secrets in her journals. She believes God is a never-ending fountain of words, beauty and inspiration. God is her permanent address, but she temporarily finds shelter on Planet Earth, regardless of the timezones.

To get exclusive updates on new book releases, inspirational content on how to live your best life and more freebies, you are invited to connect with her online at:

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Coming Soon

Beautiful Surrender

(Sequel to Beautiful Wings)

Broken Dreams

(formerly titled Forgiven)