IFE GRACE



LEKKI SISI

A NOVEL

Lekki Sisi

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Lekki Sisi is a work of fiction where real people, events, establishments. organizations appear, they are entirely coincidental. All other elements of the novel are drawn from the author's imaginations

TO MY BLOG FAMILY,
With you I have a tribe.

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CHAPTER 1

My brother, Gbenga, has been on my nerve since I announced I was picking up a job in Lagos and now my mum is sitting on my bed trying to talk me out of leaving Akure. It is the eve of my departure to Lagos. What I really want is to be alone to think on the new life ahead of me.

"Where are you going to?" My brother asked.

I stopped folding my clothes and glared at my brother. It took me so much restraint not to push him out of my room. How many times would he ask me the same question?

"Are you deaf? I said I got a job at Victoria Island."

"Victoria Island? Where's that?"

I hissed. "Ask Google."

Gbenga stormed out of the room and slammed the door after him. Mum took a piece of bitter kola from a bowl in front of her and looked at me.

"You should have answered his question."

"I don't have that time *abeg*. It's only Akure sense he has. How can a sixteen year old boy not know where Victoria Island is in Nigeria. All he knows to do is dance to stupid songs and eat like an elephant."

Why was I so touchy? Was I scared of the new life I was stepping into? Was it just a cover-up because I'd miss my family?

I looked down at my large red box and noticed it was already too full to take in any more clothes and there were still two corporate gowns I wanted to take along. With my palms spread on the heap, I pressed the clothes down and tucked the gowns at the side before pulling the belts to lock down the clothes properly.

"We are going to miss you."

I glanced at my mother. "I'll miss you too. I wish we can go together."

“Tinuke, who will manage the pure water factory? I still cannot walk properly.

I knew it would get to this. My mother would do anything to keep me in Akure. “Mum, Subero has worked with us for years. He can manage the factory. Besides, Yetunde will be done with service in about four to five months and she’ll be back to help at least for a while.”

“But it can’t be the same without you. Look at how well you handled the factory workers after you returned from Kaduna. They know you are a no-nonsense person. Our sales tripled, Tinuke. You are the only one they listen to.”

I pushed my box aside and sat beside my mother. “I can’t be here forever. Mum, you have to get used to not having me around. I promise I’ll send money to you and I’ll make sure I call Subero every week to follow up on the progress of the factory.”

My mum wasn’t satisfied. “Your wedding is supposed to be this year.”

“Mummy! You have to be patient.” I tickled her, eager to see her smiling again but instead she pushed my hand away and picked the last piece of bitter kola from the bowl.

The door opened. Gbenga peered into the room. "Bro Kunle is outside. He wants to see you."

Reluctantly, I stood up from the bed and left the room. Kunle was sitting on a bench in front of the house with a big black bible resting on his knees. I noticed he wore the same white shirt from the previous day. The collar was dirty and his shoes seemed to have gathered all the dust of Akure. He didn’t look at me when I approached the bench. I knew trying to kick off a conversation when Kunle wasn’t ready to talk was a waste of time. I sat beside him and waited.

Finally, he raised his head. “Get me water to drink.”

I shot him an angry glance. Why would he talk to me like that? I wanted to tell him to speak politely to me and treat me like I was a human being but I restrained myself. This was my last day with him. I’d endure his bossy attitude this last time. I stood up and went into the house. I returned with a cold sachet of water.

Kunle hesitated before collecting it. “You have not gone to Lagos yet and already you are disrespecting me. Just look at the way you served me water. Is

there no tray in the house? What kind of wife are you going to become? A mother in Israel who cannot be like Sarah and serve her husband properly?"

I turned my face away, once again relieved that in a few hours, I'd be a bird set free. I remembered the day Kunle proposed to me during my Ordinary National Diploma at the Owo Polytechnic. I had been elated, and the very thought of becoming Kunle's wife brought me so much joy. He was that vibrant fellowship coordinator known all over campus. He organized crusades and programs and it was not uncommon to find him at the back of the fellowship venue groaning in prayers. The sisters in my fellowship treated me specially. Some burned with envy and others adored me. It was obvious they wanted so badly to be in my shoes.

Barely a year into our relationship, I decided to transfer to a university for my B.Sc rather than continue with the higher national diploma. I'd top my class at the end of the OND program and my lecturers were eager to give me every support I would need for a smooth transition. I settled in my heart to study Economics at the University of Ilorin and every night before I fell asleep, I imagined standing on the podium of the university auditorium receiving the an award for the best student in the faculty. The thought of a challenge thrilled me. It would be a first class or nothing. Afterwards, I'd proceed for a Master degree in Business Administration.

Two days before I picked the direct entry form required for admission into the university, Kunle visited me at home. School had closed for the semester and as we sat in my living room, I informed him about my plans.

He flew into a rage. "You will do no such thing!"

I went down on my knees and begged him to give me a chance but he refused. I tried to convince him to see the opportunities opened to me if I got a degree. I'd work very hard to get a first class and apply for a scholarship to do my Master degree overseas. It would be an opportunity to get him out of the country. Kunle said he was not interested in travelling out of Nigeria. The Lord needed him in Akure. We argued back and forth until he stormed out of my house.

Mum had been eavesdropping on our conversation. Immediately he left, she entered the sitting room, upset.

“Tinuke, I didn’t train you to be a disrespectful woman. You shouldn’t raise your voice at your husband. You are not even married to him yet and you are already behaving like this.”

My eyes grew moist. “Mum, I really want to go to the university.”

“But he doesn’t want that for you and you should respect his decision.”

My mother sat beside me. "I forgot to tell you that Kunle and his mother were here last weekend shortly after you left for Aunty Toyin’s place."

I stared at her, surprised. “Why didn’t Kunle tell me? What did they come to do?”

“Tinuke, they are ready to pay your bride price. I told her I wanted you to be done with school first. Finish your higher diploma program and settle down as a proper married woman. Kunle is responsible and you have to learn to respect him. At least he is not like your father.”

There we go again. Will my mother ever forget what my father did to her?

She reclined on the sofa and sighed. “Your father hurt me so badly. After giving him three children, he walked out of our lives without looking back. I did everything for him. I cooked his meals, washed his clothes, popped out babies. I submitted my meagre teacher salary to him every month. Yet he dumped me for Chief Odeyemi’s daughter. As if that was not bad enough, I found out he got her pregnant two years before you were born. How is that kind of man not evil?”

This was the first time I’d hear this part of the story. “You mean I have a step sister?”

Mum either didn’t hear me or she decided to ignore my question. She kept on. “I became a laughing stock. All the years I lived with him, I kept asking when he’d pay my bride price but all I got were empty promises. Tinuke, four men were ready to pay my bride price but I stuck with the idiot because I loved him. I will never forgive him for as long as I live.”

“Where is dad now?” I asked, curious.

She rolled her eyes at me. “I don’t care where he is and I don’t want you looking for him. Whatever Kunle tells you to do, please obey him. He comes from a responsible family and he fears God. That’s the kind of man I’ve been praying to God to give my daughters. If Kunle says he doesn’t want you to go to the university, I’ll have no choice but to support him.”

That night, I cried. I dropped the idea of going to the university and continued with my higher diploma course.

Kunle's demands drained me out. I saw a man who was inconsiderate and selfish. A man who sought only to please himself. I recall the tenth day of a 14 days fast we had, I had fallen ill with malaria. We met at the back of the fellowship hall to break our fast but I was so weak to pray and my legs couldn't hold me. I sat on the floor. Kunle was furious.

"Stand up! Don't be lazy." He pulled me to my feet and held my hands, his sweat splashing over my face. When he took my hands and shook them violently, I wasn't sure I was going to survive the rest of the prayer session. My chest was on fire and my head was drumming hard. When we finished, he gave me a stern glare.

"What is wrong with you? If you are going to be my wife, you have to stop this lackadaisical attitude. When did you become so lukewarm like this? "

I stood there annoyed and close to tears. We've had countless prayer and fasting programs and never for once had I acted this way. At the last vigil, I had shouted until I lost my voice and when we finished, his face had beamed with pride. Why couldn't he just understand this time?

"But I told you I'm not feeling fine."

"Tinuke, ordinary malaria. Shake it off woman. You have to be strong! Be strong!"

My National Youth Service Corps deployment to Kaduna changed my orientation about life completely. I met people who challenged me mentally, and a strong desire to explore untapped grounds filled my heart.

I wanted to stay back in Kaduna at the end of my service year, but mum had been involved in a ghastly motor accident on her way home from work and I was forced to return to Akure to take care of her.

Moving to Lagos would be an escape from a life I had come to detest. I'd be away from Kunle and his demands. I wanted more from life and whatever it took, I was going to enjoy it.

Kunle gave me the empty sachet of pure water. I took it from him and threw it into the refuse bin by the door.

He stared hard at me as I sat at the edge of the bench. “What exactly are you looking for Tinuke? What business do you have in Lagos?”

I kept my gaze on the floor and remained quiet.

Kunle went on. “I have always told you that contentment is great gain. Learn from the apostle Paul. The blessing God has in store for you is here in Akure. If you leave, you’ll lose everything. You do not have my permission to go to Lagos. We will stay here and get married and serve the Lord.”

I played dumb. What was I to say?

“You are the manager of your mother’s pure water factory and my ministry is growing steadily. Very soon, I’ll become the General Overseer of my church and I’ll need you by my side. We have enough to make us comfortable. We’ll marry and give birth to wonderful children. We’ll serve the Lord here. You are not going to Lagos. Is that clear?"

I bowed slightly. “I have heard you sir.”

Kunle stood up and placed his bible under his armpit. "We have a crusade scheduled for next week Friday in Ondo town. I have already mobilized the brethren. Starting from tomorrow, we’ll be commencing a fasting and prayer session for a week. We want all the demonic forces to flee before we get there. Every blood sucking power will die. It is going to be powerful, my dear. So, tomorrow evening, get ready for the prayers."

He slapped me playfully on my back and then he was gone. Gbenga came out of the house and leaned on the wall. “Please don’t tell me you are changing your mind because of that riff-raff that calls himself a man of God.”

“Don’t talk about him like that.”

Gbenga folded his hands. “Aunty Tinuke, please don’t marry that fool.”

I pulled out one of my slippers off my feet and flung it at him. He dodged it and ran away, laughing.

It was almost 10p.m before I finished packing my bags. Mum was in the kitchen frying the fish I’d take along. When I entered the kitchen, I pleaded with her to let me finish up but she refused, limping as she poured pieces of fresh fish into a frying pan of hot oil. I tried to get mum to talk. I knew she wasn’t happy I was leaving, but there was nothing I could do about it. My mind was made up.

For once I was going to live the way I wanted without having it interrupted by one vigil or prayer meeting.



When I got to Lagos the following day, I called my friend Tola to inform her of my arrival. Tola and I had been roommates during my National Youth Service Corps in Kaduna. We had remained close friends for a while but we'd lost contact with each other until I got the job in Lagos. I had searched for her instagram handle and finally gotten back her phone number. When I inform her that I was moving to Lagos, she was very excited and agreed to take me in until I settled into my own apartment.

"Tinuke, I'm on my way to Oshodi now." Tola said, over a phone call. "I'm stuck in traffic. Just be patient. I'll be with you shortly."

I waited at Oshodi motorpark for what seemed like eternity. After an hour of standing, I heaved my heavy box down to the floor and sat on it. Then I placed my handbag on my Ghana-must-go bag and watched the crowd, men and women with exhausted faces, rushing into yellow *danfo* buses.

A man carrying a sack on his back, dumped it beside me. "Madam, abeg you go shift o. We won sell market."

Before I could stand up from the box, another man jumped right in front of me and began to open his sack. His buttocks was right in front of my mouth. Irritated more by the stench that oozed from his buttocks than the intrusion, I dragged my belongings away. Someone pushed me from behind and I would have fallen forward had I not gripped my box for support. I turned to find an elderly woman standing over a tray of dry fish. She hissed and continued arranging the fish.

What is wrong with Lagos people? I thought. Why were they all looking so unhappy? What exactly is their problem?

There was no space to put down my luggage, so I held it by my side and stood, watching out for Tola in every face that passed.

"*New new open here*. Your top here. Your top here. Two two hundred naira. First grade here." A man selling fairly used clothes shouted. He held up a shirt, dropped it on the heap of rumpled clothes and held up another one.

The man who had set his buttocks right in front of my mouth rang a bell. "*One one thousand.* Your shoes here."

A crowd gathered in front of the sack of clothes. They selected shirts and blouses and tried them on without pulling off their clothes. A lady emerged from the back of the crowd and pushed her way to the front, snaking between two women who were admiring a shirt one of them had picked. They almost lost their balance in the process and pounced on her, pushing her away. She apologized quickly but didn't move away from the space she had created for herself right in front of the heap of fairly used clothes. Her hand went to the bottom of the heap and she pulled out a beautiful flowery shirt.

The shoe seller was having a hard time attracting customers. A woman stopped in front of his sack, looked at the shoes briefly and continued walking. He called out to her but she kept going. Two ladies, giggling, bent down and began to check the shoes. One held up a pair of black heels.

"How much you call am?"

"One thousand naira. We just dey open bail."

She hissed. 'This shoe for one thousand naira. You go sell." She dropped the shoe and walked away.

The shoe seller shouted after them. "Come nah. How much you won pay?"

They didn't respond and after a long look at his wares, the seller shouted, "*Eight eight* hundred. *New new* open here!"

My eyes drifted from the sellers to a blue KIA car that had just pulled up in front of a bus with a wooden slab inscribed 'Ife/Ilesha' sitting on the roof. A lady, plump and fair skinned in a black gown and red high heels, got down from the car. I was just wondering where a young beautiful lady could get the money to drive a car like that when her eyes found mine and she waved.

"Tinuke!"

I hesitated for a minute. Recognition flickered in my eyes. "Tola!"

Tola squealed in excitement and ran towards me. We hugged. Her skin was soft and tender and her face glowed. She helped me with my luggage. We dumped it into the boot and got into the car.

I felt a pang of envy as she drove out of the market into the express road. Where did Tola get this car from? Her boyfriend must be rich to have borrowed her his car.

Tola glanced my way briefly before returning her attention to the road. “I’m so happy to see you.”

What would it look like to sit behind the wheels of this car and cruise the streets of Lagos. “Tola, you look so beautiful.”

She smiled. "Na God o. He has been so faithful."

The traffic was building up. A *danfo* bus swerved out of his lane into ours and when Tola slammed the brake, we both jerked forward.

“Jesus! What is wrong with this people? Can you imagine that nonsense? That’s why I hate coming to the mainland.” she shook her head and straightened her hand on the steering.

The traffic brought us to a complete standstill. Tola touched my cheeks. “Chei! I have missed you. We promised to stay in touch but life just pulled us apart. Thank God for this job you got. I can’t wait to hear the gist of everything that has been happening in your life.”

I laughed. "Yeah. So many things to catch up on."

She pointed to the back seat. "There is fried rice and chicken in the back seat. We can get ice-cream on the island. I’m sorry, no homemade meal tonight. I had a busy day.”

It was then I realized I was starving. I reached for the pack and opened it. The chicken took a larger size of the container and the rice was too small it could hardly satisfy a five year old.

This car is really clean.” I said, biting off a chunk of the chicken. “It’s portable too.”

“When my fiancé first brought the car to my house, I loved it immediately. It has served me well.”

I stopped eating and stared at her, stunned. “This is your car?”

She rolled her eyes playfully at me. “Yes. Where did you think I got it from?”

“Wow! I thought you borrowed it to pick me up.” I stared at her in disbelief. “This is really your car?”

Tola tilted her head backwards as she drummed the steering. “Yes girl, this is my baby.”

“Your fiancé must be rich o. He must have spent so much money to get this.”

“Wale didn’t buy this car for me.” Tola said, starting the engine and moving slowly in the traffic. “Every dime came from my pocket. He only helped me to purchase it since I knew close to nothing about cars. It’s not like he didn’t offer to help but I wanted to do this myself. You know, I wanted to pay with my own money.”

“What exactly do you do for a living?" I asked.

Tola reached into her purse and brought out a business card. It read, Bradnet Solutions. Tola’s full name was at the top corner of the card and under the name I saw, ‘Head, Business Developer.’

I wanted to ask more questions but I stopped myself. There would be time for questions later. What I wanted so badly was to take a shower and sleep.

It was almost 11p.m when we got to Tola’s apartment. My eyes widened when the security guard opened the gate, revealing a beautiful duplex.

“Is this where you live?” I pointed at the duplex

Tola shook her head. “No. My apartment is behind.”

The car stopped in front of a small bungalow behind the duplex. Tola turned off the engine and faced me.

“Welcome to Lekki.”

I was already thinking of getting my own apartment. This was the kind of life I wanted. A posh car, an apartment and money to do whatever I wanted.

“How much do you pay for rent?”

“One million naira.”

“What?” I stared at her, shocked. “How many bedrooms?”

Tola opened the door. “Babe, I’m tired jare. Let’s go in and you can see the apartment for yourself.”

Our house in Akure, I mean the one my mother built was thrice the size of Tola's apartment. One bedroom, one kitchen, one living room, one toilet and bathroom, One million naira. This was ridiculous. Still I liked the house. The walls were painted green and the windows had thick colourful drapes. The sofa was soft. The floor tiled. The bathroom was sparkling clean. Water ran everywhere in the house.

When I settled in the living room, I picked the remote from the table and turned on the TV. I kept scrolling from one channel to the other undecided on what channel to stay on.

Oh God, this is what I want, I muttered quietly.

Tola joined me on the sofa. She was wearing a short silky night gown. I almost wanted to ask where she bought it from.

She put her hands around my shoulder. "I'll be going to bed soon. I'll be flying out of Lagos to Abuja with my boss to meet with a client. I should be back home before midnight. Wale will be taking me to the airport tomorrow morning but we can drop you off at your new place of work. Where exactly is it located?"

"Somewhere in Ajah." I said.

"Can I see the address?"

I showed her the mail I had received from the administrative department. Tola read through the message before handing back my phone.

"That's cool. We will drop you off before heading for the airport. I'll advise you turn off that TV and go to bed. You need to rest." She took the remote and turned off the TV.

All I saw when I entered Tola's room were shoes and bags and more shoes and a wardrobe full of clothes. We talked until after midnight and when Tola fell asleep, I returned to the living room and for a long time stood there, too excited to go back to bed. I was going to have my own car, an apartment, and spend money the way I wanted. This is Lagos. I would take out of the wealth it had amassed.

The next morning I stepped out of the house to find a black jeep parked behind Tola's car. A young man came out of the car. I literally froze at the sight

of him. It was like seeing OC Ukeje or Joseph Benjamin- my Nigerian actor crushes- step right out of a movie. Where did Tola get this fine guy from?

"You must be Tinuke." He said, as he shook my hand. "I am Wale. Welcome to Lagos."

His voice was like gentle crystal waters. He had a beautiful accent too-a mix of American and Nigerian. I slapped myself out of fantasy when I heard Tola's voice behind me. Wale stepped away from me to hug Tola.

My beautiful princess. Hope you slept well."

Tola smiled. "Yes I did."

She climbed into the front seat while I settled in the back. As Wale drove out of the compound, Tola leaned towards him.

"Have you met my friend?"

"Of course I have." He glanced at me from the rear mirror.

"I need to properly introduce her."

Tola told him how we had met at the orientation camp and had been posted to the state capital. We rented a room together and hardly stayed from each other. Wale smiled warmly at me again and I smiled back. The discussion shifted to other things. Work. Their colleagues. Wale's siblings. I was almost forgotten at the back seat.

I stared out the window admiring the tall buildings that lined the road and memorizing the names of cars that passed by. How can someone say money is evil? I concluded it was impossible to be sad when you live comfortably in one of the houses on Tola's street and drove a car like that of Wale.

My phone buzzed. I hissed when I saw it was Kunle. I ended the call. Tola looked at me, wondering what was wrong. I forced a smile.

She returned her attention to Wale, who was explaining something to her. Whatever Wale was saying made Tola roar with laughter. I was jealous and couldn't bear the fondness they shared. I got out my ear piece from my bag and with Lauren Diagle's 'I will trust in you' playing on my phone, I returned my attention to the window.

CHAPTER 2

My new place of work, a boutique with tinted glass door, is on the ground floor of a shopping complex. A catering shop stood on the second floor of the building and a jewelry shop on the topmost floor. The complex was already bustling with activities when I got there. A young girl swept the veranda on the second floor while another lady wiped the windows with a brush.

I stopped in front of the boutique. A lady in a black t-shirt and blue jeans came out with a mop bucket.

"Good morning." I said, trying to impress her with a fake british accent.

She smiled and bowed slightly. "Good morning ma'am. You are welcome to Betty's boutique. Please come in and take a look at what we have."

I raised my hand. "I'm not here to buy anything. I have an appointment with the owner of this place."

"She is not here yet. You can come in and wait for her."

She led me into the boutique. We walked past wears lined at different sections. I gasped when I saw the prices of some of the gowns.

Two doors stood at the rear end. We went through one of the doors. Two ladies sat behind a desk staring at the screen of a laptop and talking in whispers. They gave me a curtsy 'good morning' and returned to their tasks. The lady who had brought me to the office led me to an empty chair at a corner of the room and left.

Bored, I scrolled down my facebook newsfeed. Nothing interested me. I swiped to my Instagram app and checked for any update I'd missed.

Few minutes later, the owner arrived and I was led into another office. There was nothing special about this office except that it was more spacious than the first and there was a brown sofa by the window.

The lady behind the table was not who I imagined to meet. She looked like she had just stepped out of her teens, somewhere between twenty and twenty-one. It would be my first time meeting her physically. We had only communicated via phone calls and e-mails.

My first thought was, why should I work for her? I'd be thirty in a couple of months for goodness' sake. When my aunt linked me up with Betty, she never mentioned I was going to be working for a lady this young. If she were my sister, she'd call me 'Aunty Tinuke.'

"Tinuke, why do you want to work for me?" Betty asked, staring at me behind her cute spectacles. 'Beautiful' does not describe her looks but money had sure done a good job to her oblong face.

I was dumbfounded. After the phone interview, she had asked me to resume work. Why didn't she tell me there was another interview I had to prepare for?

She leaned forward. "Relax. Aunty Tope already told me how hardworking you are. She said you helped your mother build the family's pure water business. I admire that. But I still want to know why you want to work here."

I sighed. "I guess-I mean-I believe I will gain experience here."

She smiled. "How much are you willing to be paid?"

I frowned. I had never been asked that kind of question before. "Anything."

"Ten thousand naira?"

Even in my mother's pure water factory, I didn't earn that ridiculous amount. I shook my head. "I meant any reasonable amount."

Betty folded her hands. "Fifty-thousand naira is what we offer our sales representatives."

Sales what? Aunty Tope said the position was for a Boutique Supervisor. What was this girl saying again? "Please what's my position here?"

"Sales representative. You'll sell clothes to customers and give our customers all the support they need in making their choices."

I wanted to walk away from the boutique but the thought of returning to Akure, back to my old life and back to Kunle kept me glued to my seat. “When do I start?”

“Monday. You have the weekend to get yourself ready for your new job. We run shifts here. Seven-thirty to three p.m and three p.m to ten p.m. Saturday inclusive. You’ll also take online orders and follow up on deliveries. If you have any questions, talk to the head of the Sales department.”

I left the boutique sad. How can I be selling clothes? As I stepped out of the building, two ladies got down from a Toyota Camry and walked towards the boutique. I imagined how fat their bank account was and wished I could whisked all their money into mine.

I stood by the road trying to figure out how to find my way back to Tola’s house. I pulled out my phone from my bag and called my friend.

“Hi dear, How was your first day at work?” Tola asked.

“More like an interview. I’m officially resuming on Monday. You won’t believe, I’m going to be selling clothes.”

“Ah! That’s serious. I thought the position was for a Boutique Supervisor. Anyway, all things work together for good. I’m sure you’ll find a better job soon.”

“I really hope so too. Tola, I can’t find my way back to your house.”

“I thought as much. I’ve already contacted my friend Mercy. She lives behind the complex. I’ll call her now. She should be there any minute from now.”

“Thank you Tola. Have a safe trip back home.”

I ended the call and returned to the entrance of the complex. More cars were parked in front of the complex. I memorized the names of the cars and stared long at them.

“Tinuke, If you could own any three of these cars, which would they be?” I asked myself.

Smiling, I pointed at a red KIA. My gaze fell on a Prado and for my third pick, I debated between a white Mercedes and black highlander. I moved away from the cars and it was then I saw a blue Toyota pull into the car park. A pretty lady, petite, got down from the back seat. I immediately sensed she was Tola’s

friend. She brought out her phone and dialed a number, her eyes scanning the park. My phone rang. I waved at her.

"Hi, are you Tinuke?" Fluent accent. Was there a place in Lekki where people took lessons to speak like this?

"Yes, I am. Mercy?"

She nodded and led me to the car. I stared at her mouth all through the ride to Tola's place. Mercy was a walking dictionary and her words flowed seamlessly. I loved the fact that it was easy to talk to her. I could listen to her the whole day and not get bored.

When we got to Tola's residence, she paid the taxi fare and we continued talking as we walked into Tola's flat.

"Mercy, what do you do for a living?" I asked as she served jollof rice into a flat plate.

"I teach." She responded. I took the plate of food from her.

I stared at her, surprised. "That would never have crossed my mind. I thought you worked in one of these big offices with posh chairs and glass doors."

Mercy laughed. "Can I ever work in that kind of environment?"

I rolled my eyes playfully at her. "We are talking about fat salary here."

We carried our food to the living room. Electricity was out and the heat was almost unbearable. Mercy pulled the curtain aside. It made no difference. The air was still. I reached for two hand fans under the center table and gave one to her. We shuffled between fanning ourselves and eating our jollof rice.

"Not everything is about money Tinuke. Even if I'm going to be paid half a million naira in one of the big firms you talk about, I won't exchange it for what I do now. I am at the center of God's will and that's what matters. Teaching those kids give me joy. Now that we are on holidays, I miss them and I can't wait to resume work."

I smiled. "It's because you've not seen a job that pays big money. You can't reject something like that."

Mercy dug her spoon into the food. "When I returned from Switzerland after my masters, I got offers with two foreign agencies. Payment was in dollars."

My eyes widened in surprise. “That’s unbelievable! How could you reject something like that?”

“I know exactly what God wants me to do and I’m simply walking in it. Until God directs my heart to something else, I’m staying right in his purpose.”

To hell with purpose. Money is purpose. “I don’t know what to say.”

We ate our food in silence.



Tola returned that night from her trip with sharwama and lots of spicy suya. How I finished two packs of sharwama after the efo and semovita I prepared that evening surprised me. Mercy didn’t touch any of the things Tola brought.

“It’s late.” Mercy said. “Moreover, I just finished eating two wraps of semovita few hours before you arrived.”

Mercy spent the night with us. I knew when she dropped down the extra mattress and lay a bed sheet but I didn’t know she had returned to the living room. I had been glued to my phone screen watching comedy skits and not until my battery was five percent did I put the phone down.

I checked the time. 1 a.m. I had been on my instagram page for three hours?

Annoyed that I’d wasted so much time, I left for the bathroom. As I came out, I heard Mercy’s voice from the living room. I peeped to find her kneeling in front of the center table, a bible opened in front of her. She was praying in tongues.

I was suddenly agitated. Who did Mercy think she was? All these holier-than-thou sisters who thought they were better than us.

“Rubbish!” I muttered.

She would get tired soon. I’d been there several times, praying all through the night and screaming my lungs out in church with Kunle. What good did it ever bring me?

It suddenly occurred to me that I had never prayed alone for more than five minutes. Kunle had been my fire and now that fire was gone. I suddenly felt empty as I climbed the bed and lay beside Tola who was already fast asleep.

Sunday morning, on my way to church, Kunle called again. I decided to pick his call this time.

"Hello Brother Kunle."

"You know I am the mouthpiece of God. If I say anything, it will come to pass. But because I love you, I'll control myself." Kunle barked.

In another era, I'd have been horrified by those words but I was surprisingly calm.

"Kunle, you should be in church now."

"Did you just call me Kunle?" He shouted.

"Bro Kunle."

Silence.

"Tinuke, Yesterday, in my place of agonizing prayers, God reminded me that together we are going to move mountains and change the world for him. Please, come home and let's serve God together."

God forbid. "I'm fine here. I have started work."

"Can you remember what happened to Judas when the love of money ate him up and he betrayed Jesus? The devil entered into him and he killed himself.´

I was getting pissed. "What are you insinuating?"

"Get back here before it is too late."

"We are done with this relationship. Please don't call my line again."

"When Elijah made a declaration-"

"I have to go now. We are already at the church.'

I hung up. Tola glanced at me and smiled as she pulled into the church carpark.

"Brother Kunle loves you. Tinuke, don't do this to this brother."

I hissed. She laughed and turned off the engine.

As I got down from the car, a black Land Cruiser glittering in the genial sun sped into the church and pulled up beside us. Two slender ladies stepped down. They were every shade classy and strikingly beautiful. One of the ladies

in a blue flowing gown with a colourful fascinator pinned to her hair came around to greet us while the other lady cat-walked into the church with an effortless saunter.

“How are you?’ The lady said as she hugged my friend. Her words sounded like musical sounds. Something like d-m-d.

While she talked to Tola, I couldn’t tear my eyes away from her beautiful skin and her dark wavy hair that flowed down her shoulders. Could that be her real hair? She smiled warmly at me before heading for the auditorium.

I ended up sitting beside her. I felt so small and wished the usher had directed me to another section of the church. Would she notice that the dress I wore was fairly used and that my shoes were peeling off at the side?

Whatever the Pastor was saying didn’t make any sense to me. My eyes were glued to her fingers as she tapped quickly on her ipad, jotting down the scriptures the Pastor was calling out. The back of her palm was so smooth, I longed to caress them against my face. Her earrings glittered and her necklace sat gallantly on her flawless neck.

Poverty was a bastard, I concluded. I was sure she’d never hawked anything in her life or trekked more than a mile. I made up my mind to strike a conversation with her after church. Didn’t I read somewhere that if you want to fly like the eagles, you must flock around them?

At the end of the service, members of the youth group of the church gathered at the gallery for a meeting. I sat with other young adults but this time, I made sure I was far away from those two rich ladies. Wale, my friend’s fiancé, stood in front of us. It was then I realized he was the Youth President.

“Good morning, brothers and sisters. I hope you enjoyed today’s service.” Wale smiled, his gaze moving from one person to another. “I called for this meeting because this is the beginning of a new quarter. We are aware that every quarter comes loaded with new activities and to the glory of God, we accomplished all the plans for the last quarter. For everyone who turned out for the street evangelism last week, the Lord reward your labour of love.”

“Amen.” The youths chorused.

He glanced briefly at a piece of paper in his hand. "We have three activities for this quarter. The special singles meeting with the Senior Pastor

comes up next week Saturday. Then we'll have an outreach to the motherless home. Finally, our annual Youth hangout."

Some of the members whooped. Others clapped.

Wale grinned. "Last year's hangout was wonderful. This year's event will be glorious. Brethren, we need money to carry out these activities. The proposed budget has been distributed among the various cells. Your cell leaders will hint you on the amount allocated for your cell. Where is Bro Sogo, Bro Paul and Sister Dami?"

Two brothers raised their hands. A lady waved.

"Yes, there they are. Please let the cash start rolling in as quickly as possible. Secondly, don't forget our vigil coming up at the end of the month. It's beautiful when we pray together."

Wale cleared his throat and thrust his hands into his pocket. "Guess who we have here with us today?"

Three brothers jumped to their feet and danced in front of a man who had his head bowed slightly, a broad smile on his face. When he stood up, the brothers began to clap in his face.

Wale grinned and gestured to him to come forward. "Let us welcome the latest Ph.D. graduate back to church."

Thunderous claps. Standing ovation. The brothers continued to dance in front of him as he sauntered to the front. When they returned to their seats, Wale hugged Patrick, pulled away, hugged him again before slapping him playfully on his back.

A lady rushed to the front with a chair and placed it behind Patrick. Wale glanced from Patrick to the lady, pretending to be annoyed. Patrick smiled and sat down. He crossed his legs.

Wale faced the lady. "Opeyemi, I've been standing here since and you did not even think to offer your President a seat."

Everyone laughed. The lady apologized and sat down. Tola stood up and carried her chair to the front for her fiancé to sit. The youth clapped and shouted. Wale stopped her. "I was just teasing Ope."

"You must sit down." Tola said.

Wale moved closer to her. “You know I don’t like sitting while making an address.”

Some ladies jumped to their feet shouting "Sit!" The brothers too joined in the chant.

By this time, most of us were laughing with tears in our eyes.

Patrick pulled the chair closer to his. "Presido, sit down."

Wale was not ready to give in. He faced Tola. “Where will you sit?”

“There are more chairs over here!” A sister at the back shouted.

Wale gave up and sat beside Patrick. The two brothers looked at each other for a moment and began to laugh.

I had never been in a church gathering with such warm ambience. It was all strange to me. If Kunle were here, he would be so angry and walk out of the meeting dragging me with him. Afterwards, he’d give me a fifty minutes lecture on ‘The perils of bringing the world into the church.’

Finally, the noise died down and all attention was focused on Patrick. He wasn’t as attractive as Wale. No broad chest, no beards, no piercing eyes but in his ordinariness, something radiated from within that made you want to know him more.

“I’m so happy to be back home." Patrick said. “I missed Nigeria, and I missed the people of God.”

Wale glanced at him. "We are sorry we couldn’t fly over for your convocation."

Patrick crossed his legs. "I clearly understand. I got all your messages on WhatsApp. That was more than enough. Thank you for your support and prayers."

Wale stood up. "Brethren, I present to you Doctor Patrick Asemota.’

Hugs. Handshakes. More laughter.

“There is a welcome party at my father’s residence this evening. You are all invited.” Patrick said, as he returned to his seat.

Wale turned to me. I froze. What was he going to do now?

“We have a new member in our midst.” Wale smiled and waited for me to stand up. I wanted the ground to open and swallow me up. Why did I wear flat shoes? My black high heels would have boosted my confidence. I was nervous

as I introduced myself to the others. When I was done, two ladies raised a song and the others joined in. There were more handshakes, smiles and gradually I relaxed.

And then it happened. I met the man who would later throw me into the mud, roll me over like dough on a chopping board and with a table knife patiently chip the caked mud off my skin and feed each piece to me. He was the right hand man of the devil.

Ranti was the last person to welcome me to the youth group. He stood in front of me and held out his hands. I shook it.

"You are welcome."

In those few seconds, I found myself moved by his appearance. Dark brown eyes framed by well-shaped brows. The irresistible calmness that sat on his beautiful face disturbed me greatly. There was something mysterious about his words, something that got you curious, that made you want to dig and find out what held him together.

"Did you finished from FUTA?" he asked.

I shook my head. He let go of my hand. My eyes followed him to his seat and when he sat down, our eyes locked and he smiled. Who for goodness sake was he?

After we dispersed from the meeting, I didn't see him again. I walked towards Tola's car and it was there I sighted one of the rich ladies I had planned to engage in a conversation with. She smiled when I approached her. Her smile made me relaxed but when I got to her, I was suddenly speechless.

"Hello." She said, the smile still plastered on her face.

I finally found my voice. "I am Tinuke."

She folded her hands. "I know that. You were introduced at the meeting."

"Oh. So nice of you to remember." What else was I supposed to say. "I just got into Lagos."

"That's good. We should hang out sometime. My name is Funmi. Can I have your cell number?"

I didn't expect our first meeting to happen so fast. I punched my number on her phone. The lady she had come to church with was now standing beside her.

"Susan, Meet Tinuke."

"Hi." Susan said and turned to Funmi. "We have to leave for the airport now. My dad will be landing anytime soon."

Funmi hugged me before stepping into the back seat of the jeep. Susan sat beside her and a man, I supposed was their driver sped out of the compound.

I was quiet all the way home. So many thoughts ran through my mind. I wanted my own car and an apartment. But the cost of getting them was too much. How do I get another job that paid so well in a short time?

I faced Tola. "How much did you get this car?"

Tola didn't respond immediately. I thought she didn't hear me and was about asking again.

"1.7 million naira."

My eyes widened. "It's that expensive?"

She ignored me and turned on the stereo before facing the road. I fell into a sour mood.

CHAPTER 3

I was alone in the living room watching a movie when Funmi called. Tola had gone for a church cell meeting but I had stayed back. I didn't come to Lagos to attend series of church activities. I came to make money.

"I'm hanging out with some friends this Friday. Want to come?" Funmi asked.

"Sure." I answered without thinking.

"Ok then. I'll text you the address."

"Thank you." The smile died as quickly as it had come.

I jumped to my feet and ran into the room. What was I going to wear? I opened my box, rummaging through every item in the box. Frustrated at not finding a befitting dress to wear, I sighed and sat on the bed. Why didn't I just tell her I had an engagement scheduled for that day?

"Which kind wahala be this?" I muttered.

The following morning, as we dressed up for work, I decided to ask Tola for some money. "Tola, please can you lend me ten thousand naira."

She pulled out a handbag from the wardrobe and brought out an envelope. There were crispy one thousand notes inside. She counted ten pieces and gave them to me.

"Thank you so much." I hugged her tight. "I promise I'll pay once my salary comes."

At the boutique that morning, new clothes were supplied. My colleagues and I placed price tags on the new arrivals. Fifteen thousand naira. Thirty thousand. Twenty-two thousand. Forty thousand.

How could someone pay so much for a dress?

After work, I decided to check other boutiques for an affordable dress. In one of the boutiques, I saw a lovely cream dress I loved. When I touched it, I knew immediately that I couldn't let it go. The material was soft and fluffy. Then I saw the price tag. Forty thousand naira.

Where do I get that kind of money from? I had only fifteen thousand naira in my account. If I added the money Tola gave me, it still wouldn't be enough to purchase the dress. I really wanted it. I picked up my phone and called my mother.

"Mum, please I need some money. I promise I'll return it once I receive my salary."

She hesitated. "How much are we talking about?"

"Forty thousand naira."

"Ah, where do you want me to see that kind of money? I just finished paying your brother's SSCE fees."

"Just send what you can, please."

She hesitated. "I'll send thirty thousand naira."

"Thank you mum! I love you."

"I love you too. How are you coping with your new job?"

I stepped out of the boutique. "Fine. How's the factory?"

"My dear, Baba Ranti has started his own pure water factory. It's getting more competitive by the day. Sales have been a little slow but we are pushing it. We need another truck."

"Mum, when I get settled properly, I'll send money home."

The next day, I returned to the boutique and bought the cream dress. On my way home, I stopped by a beauty shop to pick a perfume and eye shadow palette. I also got a foundation and some wipes, By the time I left the beauty shop, I remembered I needed a pair of shoes and bag but I had barely 5k left in my account.

How much does a good bag cost? What about a pair of shoes? How do I survive the rest of the month? My heart ached so badly that I had to stop by a Pharmacy on Tola's street to purchase pain killers.

I woke up grumpy the eve of my meeting with Funmi and her friends. I was as broke as hell. I had not fixed my hair. No shoes. No bag. There had to be a way out. These ladies were rich. The last thing I wanted to do was embarrass myself.

Betty's secretary had just handed her a cup of coffee when I entered her office.

"Good morning ma'am." I started. "Please I want to talk to you about something."

She took a sip before placing the cup back on the saucer. "What is it?"

"Things are a little rough for me. Please, can I get a salary advance of twenty thousand naira?"

Betty took the coffee to the sofa and sat down, crossing her legs. I stood there, waiting for her response. True, she was the CEO of the boutique but why the plenty shakara because I needed her help.

"Okay. I'll ask the accountant to pay the money into your account."

"Thank you ma'am."

I returned to my duty post in high spirits. A man entered the boutique with his pregnant wife. I flashed them a smile and led them to the section for pregnant women. She picked five maternity gowns. I did a quick calculation. One hundred and fifty thousand naira. When will a man spoil me like this?

The man left me a tip of five thousand naira. I thanked him and directed my attention to the next customer. My phone buzzed. The salary advance had been paid. I breathed a sigh of relief.

The next customer was a light skinned woman with a sweet smile that left tiny dimple playing at the corner of her mouth. From my assessment, she appeared rich. Who knows, she might leave me a bigger tip. But after an hour of trying on different dresses, she left without buying anything. I was so pissed.

It was time to import frugality into my spending pattern. I sneaked into the lunch room with a pen and notebook and wrote out the things I needed. A pair of shoes and a bag. I had to make my hair too. How much does a weavon cost? Making braids might be cheaper but it would take too much time. I thought about my transport fare for the month. My body cream was almost

finished. I needed beverages too. My joy dissipated as I stared at the list that had swallowed up the little money I had.

On my way home that night, an idea struck me. I grinned. I knew exactly where to get a pair of shoes and a bag without paying a dime.

The apartment was empty when I got in. I went straight to Tola's shoe rack. Thankfully, we wore the same size. I got the right shoe that matched my bag and went over to the wardrobe session that took up Tola's bags.

The door opened and Tola entered the room. I swung around and faced her, holding a pair of shoes and a silver clutch bag.

"Tola, please can I borrow these? I have a very important meeting with some customers tomorrow."

She smiled. "Of course you can. You are free to use any of my belongings."

"Thank you so much." I was relieved that I had only my hair to deal with.

"Wale and Patrick are in the living room. You want to say hi to them?" Tola asked.

We went to the living room together. I particularly enjoyed talking with Patrick except that he mentioned a lot of scriptures even though in a more interesting way and not like Kunle who used bible verses to threaten me. Still, *spirikoko* men were all the same. They enjoyed using scriptures to oppress women and I was so done with men like that. Once you quote scriptures, I run.

When Patrick asked if I'd be free to have lunch with him on Saturday, I came up with an excuse. I didn't want men like him around me. It was only a matter of time before they demanded for submission.



Friday evening, a taxi took me to the meeting place somewhere in Victoria Island. When the taxi stopped in front of the restaurant, I stared at the building, stunned beyond words. The place screamed expensive. Two white men came out of the restaurant, talking and laughing.

"Jesus." I muttered under my breath.

Why did I even agree to come? I could leave now and call Funmi that I had a flu. Had the taxi taken me to the wrong place? I looked at the address Funmi had sent to me. The man was right.

The taxi driver turned to me. “Madam, this is the place.”

“Of course.” I answered, curtly. My palms were sweaty. I paid him and stepped down from the car.

My heart pounded hard. I had just ten thousand naira in my account. Was I supposed to pay for my order? How much would a drink in this place cost? Water shouldn’t be that expensive. I’d have to cover up with a lie. I was invited to a friend’s birthday party and I ate to my fill or my boss treated us to lunch and my stomach can’t take in any more food.

“Tinuke.”

I turned to find Funmi strolling towards me, beaming with smiles. She was dressed in a blue t-shirt and jeans. Susan and another lady walked beside her. They were all casually dressed and immediately I felt I had dressed too much.

“You look beautiful. I like your gown.” Susan said. For a lady who had snubbed me in church, that compliment pleased me. The other lady introduced herself as Ronke.

“Let’s go in.” Funmi said and led us through the sliding glass door that opened up as we approached it.

The interior of the restaurant was breath-taking. Every few feet had fine crystal chandelier hung over iridescent pastel flowers. Business men in black suits sat at a corner sipping wine. A young lebanese man sat across from a black woman, talking in whispers, their meals untouched.

We found an empty table and quickly settled down. I noticed the polished silver cutlery, the tall empty wine glasses and the beautifully folded napkins. There was also a bottle of wine in a metal container of ice. It was so difficult to relax in a place like this when your account screamed red.

The waiter greeted us politely. I stared at the menu and was scared out of my wits. I asked for water. I lied I had eaten so much at a friend’s birthday party.

My stomach rumbled as I watched the others munch chicken steaks and grilled fish. Susan grabbed the bottle of wine and pressed the bell for the waiter.

Funmi faced Susan "I've already ordered for a bottle of sparkling cider."

Susan hissed. "Funmi, not today. A glass of alcohol will not send me to hell."

The waiter arrived and uncorked the bottle. Susan poured wine into her glass and filled Ronke's glass.

"You want some?" Susan said, holding the bottle over the empty glass in front of me.

Funmi stopped her. "She is not interested."

Susan chuckled and placed the bottle on the table. The waiter arrived with the sparkling cider.

After filling our glasses with cider, Funmi faced me. "Tinuke, are you sure you don't want to eat anything?"

I rubbed my stomach. "I'm fine."

Funmi's hands dropped on the table. "For Tinuke's sake, I think we should introduce ourselves."

Ronke shifted in her seat, her enormous hips filling the chair. She glanced at me. "You already know my name. I'm a content creator and lifestyle blogger. I'm engaged to the son of a business tycoon. Money is not my problem, how to spend it is. I just returned from Paris where I did a writing gig for a travel agency. I'm good at what I do. Copywriting, ghost writing-"

Funmi raised her hand. "Enough o. This is not a business meeting."

Ronke laughed. "Abeg allow me to promote my brand. Who knows, Tinuke might bring me the biggest client."

Funmi winked at Susan. "Your turn."

Susan smiled. 'I am the CEO of Sympson Furniture House. We do all kinds of interior decorations and recently I hit a deal with some expatriates from Australia. It's a big project and I'm excited because that's big money coming in. My father is a real estate expert. I'm already thinking of starting up something along that line. There is so much money there, I swear. While I can be nice and sweet, I am equally the devil's advocate. You mess with me and you wish you were never born by the time I'm done with you."

Ronke rolled her eyes at her. "Ah! How can you be proud to say something horrible like that?"

Susan laughed and poured some more wine into her empty cup.

Funmi frowned, her gaze resting on Susan. “Aren’t you taking too much?”

Ronke took the bottle away from Susan. She made a face before putting the cup to her lips.

Funmi turned her gaze away and brought it to rest on me. She smiled. “I don’t have much to say. I’m the last child and the only daughter. My parents and siblings are all in the U.S. I was born there and only came back five years ago to manage one small firm like that.”

Ronke laughed. “Small firm keh. The managing director of a soon to become billion-dollar company is what you call small.”

“Can we meet you?” Susan asked.

I sighed. What was I supposed to say? That my father was an electrician before he dumped my mother for a chief’s daughter? That my mum retired as a primary school teacher and now runs a pure water factory somewhere in Akure? I didn’t like that I had become the focus of attention. But I had to say something.

I cleared my throat and tried not to show that I was nervous. “My name is Tinuke. I work in a fashion house somewhere in Ajah. I’m hoping to learn so much there and then start my own fashion house.”

Fashion house. Boutique. What was the difference?

They nodded their heads and waited to hear more. When I didn’t say anything, they talked about their goals and plans and the trips for the year. I felt sick to my stomach listening to them.

The waitress brought the bill. Funmi took it. “I’m paying.” She said.

I wanted to cry. Why didn’t I just take a risk and enjoyed myself? I’d missed the steak and grilled fish. My stomach growled. I was still very upset after we left the restaurant.

Outside, I was the only one who didn’t come with a car. Funmi offered to drop me at home. I hugged the other ladies and climbed into Funmi’s Ford Ranger. It was a different car from the one I had seen on Sunday.

“Let’s do this again.” Funmi said when we got to Tola’s gate.

I smiled. “Yes we should. I really enjoyed myself. Funmi, thanks for inviting me.”

"You are welcome. My regards to Tola."

I climbed down and waited until she drove off. The sweet aroma of fried rice wafted through my nostrils before I got into the house. I rushed into the kitchen. Tola was adding condiments to the rice.

"How did the meeting with the customers go?"

I felt a pang of guilt for lying to my friend. But I shrugged. "It went well. All I saw today was money. Tola, there is money in this country."

I picked a spoon from the dish rack and scooped a spoonful of fried rice into my mouth. Tola laughed. I was already taking the third spoonful when she snatched the spoon from my hand.

"Go and take off your dress first."

In the room, I sat down and went through the pictures we had taken at the restaurant. I selected three and posted them on my Instagram page.

Caption: ***It was fun hanging out with my friends.***

I waited for my followers to like and comment on the picture.

Nothing.

I pulled off my dress and changed into my nightgown. I grabbed my phone again and checked.

Five likes.

I posted a picture I took with Funmi inside her car. I waited again for responses. When I got none, I refreshed the app.

Ten likes.

I stood up, a feeling of gloom descending over my heart. My phone beeped. I reached for my phone. There was a comment from an old classmate.

Wow! So my boss is your friend.

Another comment. *You look so beautiful in that gown.*

Third comment. *I am coming for those shoes.*

I laughed. The anxiety lifted a little. I kept staring at my phone waiting for more comments.

Tola cleared her throat. I raised my head. She was leaning at the entrance with her hands folded. I laughed and hurried out of the room to the kitchen.

When I was done eating, I cleared the dishes and went back to my phone. I waited until my Instagram page displayed on my screen. I tapped the first set of pictures I had uploaded.

Forty likes.

I had almost two thousand followers on instagram. Why would only forty people like my picture? I tried to suppress the anxiety by playing a game on my phone. Every few minutes, I returned to Instagram checking to see if the number of likes had increased. By 10p.m, I had just gotten sixty five likes. I threw the phone aside and lay on the bed. I felt empty. I decided I wasn't going to check again but few seconds later, my phone was in my hand. I was back on Instagram.

This time, there was a direct message waiting for me. I opened it.

Hello. This is Ranti. We met at the church on Sunday during the youth meeting. Can you remember me?

Curious, I clicked on his profile. He was the guy who had asked if I'd finished from FUTA. The one I had searched for after the meeting.

Yes I remember. How did you find me here?

His response came almost immediately.

Let's just say I did my research well. I can see you had fun this evening.

I chuckled. *Yes I did. Thank you.*

Any plans for tomorrow evening? I'd love to take you out on a date.

I was on the afternoon shift. *I'll be at work till 10.*

That's fine. We can reschedule. Can I have your number please?

I typed my number and hit 'Send'. He sent me his number.

Thank you. Have a beautiful night Tinuke.

Goodnight Ranti.

I returned to his Instagram page and was disappointed to find only three pictures. He didn't wear a ring in any of the pictures. Maybe this was a good sign. It was time to move on and find myself a real man. I stared at the pictures again and into those eyes that held my gaze.

Ranti was all I thought about as I slept that night.

As I checked my Instagram page the next morning, I noticed Tola's face looked sad. Without the usual 'good morning' hug, she went straight to the

wardrobe and pulled out two pairs of suits which she placed on the bed. I'd never seen her that way and I was worried.

"Tola, are you okay?"

She was fuming. "I can't believe you lied to me."

I dropped my phone. "What are you talking about?"

"You are really asking me that? You told me you needed my shoes and my bag because you had a meeting with some customers. Obviously, Funmi and her spoilt brats were the customers."

I didn't know what to say. How did she know? Was she following me on Instagram?

"I'm sorry Tola. I just didn't know how to tell you."

"Where is the 10k you borrowed from me?"

"I promise I'll pay you once I receive my salary."

She shook her head. "Why are you famzing with girls like that? Why can't you just be satisfied with what you have and grow from there? These girls have their lives already laid out for them. You know your background and where you are coming from."

Her words punched me in my stomach. "I don't need a lecture from you on how to run my life. If you want me out of your house, just say so."

"All I'm saying is, be content with what you have for goodness sake."

I raise my hand. "Tola please stop. Okay? Whatever I do with my life is none of your business. I'll be out of your house as soon as I can get a place.'

"I'm not asking you to leave. You can stay here as long you want but I don't see any sense competing with people who can get whatever they want on a silver platter. Besides, they don't even care about you. Anyway, like you said, it's none of my business."

She folded some clothes into a small box. "I have a meeting in Port Harcourt on Monday but I need to go sort out some things before the meeting starts. I'll be leaving this afternoon. Hopefully, I should be back by Thursday."

"Okay.' My response was a little above a whisper.

After Tola left for the airport, I was still seething with anger. What right did she have to judge me? It wasn't her fault, I concluded. She had a fine

apartment, a good man and a posh car. That was enough reason to belittle me. If I wasn't broke, I'd have moved out of her house that day.

Tola sent me a text few minutes after our rancor.

Tinuke, I'm sorry. I shouldn't have used that tone on you. Don't be offended please. Love you.

Work was stressful that afternoon and by the time I returned home at 11p.m, I was worn out. Ranti had called a couple of times. After checking up on Tola to confirm her arrival in Abuja, I returned Ranti's call.

"I'm sorry I was at work when you called."

His voice filled my head. "You sound really tired. Will you be able to make it to church tomorrow?"

"My roommate has travelled and I'm not sure I can find my way to the church. Besides, I don't feel up to it."

"Your roommate, when is she returning?"

"Thursday."

"What if I pick you up tomorrow morning and give you a nice treat.'

I smiled. "That'd be great."

"10a.m?"

"Fine. I'll text you the address."

Ranti came in a white Mitsubishi Pajero. I walked out of the bungalow dressed in a white shirt, jeans and Tola's sneakers. He opened the front door and I slide in.

"You are so beautiful.'" He said. I smiled, feeling his intense gaze on me.

"Thank you. You smell nice."

We talked about everything as we drove out of Lekki. I felt so good. Ranti held my hands and we walked into a restaurant where he asked that I ordered whatever I wanted. The meal was delicious. I ate till my stomach bulged out. I laughed at the tales of his many trips to Europe and America.

I imagined that I was married to Ranti. I'd travel to Dubai and shop in the U.S anytime I wanted. I'd head one of the departments in Ranti's chain of businesses. God indeed answered the very thought of our hearts.

When the waitress cleared the table, Ranti looked at me in a calm manner that made my heart flutter. "Please permit me to spoil you before Tola gets back. I want to lodge you in a hotel and get a driver to take you to work every morning. That way I can get to see you after work every day."

An alarm rang in my head. Weren't we moving too fast? I liked Ranti a lot but I really didn't know much about him. Could I risk opening my heart to him? Could this be the best time to know him better?

"That's a great idea. But I'll have to go back home to get my stuff for the week."

"You don't need that. We'll get everything you need from some of the shops around here. Just make your list."

Few hours later, I was standing in the executive suite of a five-star hotel, too overwhelmed to say anything. Ranti sat on the sofa, watching as my eyes danced around the room.

On the bed were new clothes, under wears and toiletries. Ranti wanted us to have dinner at the hotel's restaurant but I was still heavy from the meal I'd eaten earlier that morning. There were chocolates and fruits on the table and bottles of wine in the fridge.

"Listen, you are entitled to a complimentary breakfast. Just go down to the restaurant in the morning. It's a buffet. You can eat as much as your stomach can accommodate."

If this was a dream, I didn't want to ever wake up from it.

My phone rang. Patrick. I glanced at Ranti, he turned his face to the muted TV featuring Becky Anderson on CNN.

"Hello Patrick."

"I didn't see you in church today."

I was irritated. Were Tola's church people going to be following my every movement? "I returned from work very late yesterday and I was so tired."

"Okay. Hope you are well rested now."

"Yes I am. Thank you."

"Have a beautiful night rest."

I ended the call and kicked excitedly against the soft bed. Ranti laughed. We talked for a while and when it was passed midnight, he stood up to leave.

At the door, he held my hands and gazed into my eyes. Then he slipped an arm around me and pulled me closer. My head was now resting on his chest. His heart was beating very fast. We stayed there for a while and then he pulled away enough to look at my face.

"Tinuke, the way I feel about you is beyond anything in this world. I don't connect with women so easily but with you, it feels like I've known you a long time."

I held him closer and he laughed. Even though we'd just met, I felt like we've been made for each other all along. I didn't care if I lost caution to the wind. I loved him and that was what mattered."

"Can I ask you a question?' his voice sounded choked with desire.

I nodded.

"Have you ever had sex before?"

I stared into his eyes and knew no matter the answer, he would never leave me. It won't hurt to say the truth.

"Yes. But just once when I was in secondary school."

He smiled. "I'll see you tomorrow evening."

I looked into his eyes. "Why do you want to know?"

"Nothing. I'll see you tomorrow.' He pecked me on my cheeks. I didn't want him to leave.

"Tinuke, can we keep this a secret? I broke up a few weeks ago and I don't want the youth members of our church feeling I have quickly moved on."

I told him I understood and I had also ended a relationship recently.

When he left, I stood at the door, wanting to run after him to plead with him to spend the night with me.

CHAPTER 4

Ranti was back the following evening. When he drew me into his arms and kissed me, I thought it was the best experience I'd ever had in my life.

"I want you so much but I don't want to do anything against your will. If you don't want sex, I'll wait until you are ready." He said with his hands wrapped around my waist. Every touch weakened my decision to stay sexually pure until marriage. By the following day, I was already pleading with Ranti to have sex with me.

When he did, I felt guilty. God was not pleased with what I'd done. I had barely known Ranti and yet I had allowed him into my life so easily. Yet I found my way into his arms every weekend. He was all I thought of at work and in church. He was the drug I needed to survive. I didn't just desire him. I needed him. Somehow, I managed to keep my secret affair away from Tola.

Ranti paid money into my account weekly. Money was no longer a concern. Once every month, I sent money to my mum. I got new shoes, bags, clothes and at a point there was barely any space for my boxes in Tola's room. Ranti suggested I move into another apartment.

The eve before my appointment with some of the real estate agents recommended by Ranti, I was at work when my menstrual cramps began. I had taken two cups of ice-cream and eaten many bars of chocolates that morning. By the time I got to work for my afternoon shift, I was in serious pains.

I staggered into the rest room and threw up. Too tired to walk, I lay on the floor, groaning in pain. One of my colleagues saw me and ran to call the head of the sales department. She drove me home.

On the bed, I cringed in pain. It was as if nails were hammered into my abdomen. I tried to drink the coffee my boss had prepared for me, but it was difficult to hold the cup.

I know I should be glad the cramps weren't as worse as when I was on campus. Then, I was a regular visitor to the school clinic where I was admitted and placed on drips. One time, the intense pain started the morning of my first paper and as usual, I was rushed to the clinic. I wrote that exam later in the evening on the hospital bed.

Results were released the following semester and I still had the best result.

Kazeem, a guy whom I was in a fierce competition with for the first place, had been furious. He knew I'd been admitted and thought that for once he'd finally be able to boast of beating me to the first place. What seemed like baseless rants ended up as a letter to the Rector. I was accused of screwing with lecturers for grades. Kazeem threatened to take the issue up with the media houses if the Rector did not get me expelled.

It was clear the accusation was pointless. Apart from the fact that he had no evidence, there was absolutely no way I could have slept with every lecturer on campus since I emerged the best in almost all my courses. Still, I was mad at him and I confronted him one afternoon after classes.

"Kazeem, you know this allegation is false. What are you going to gain by doing this?"

"Nonsense!" Kazeem shouted, his face red. "You think we don't know what you do? In every course, you score the highest mark and you think it is normal? You know the Rector, he is a no-nonsense person. It is over for you Tinuke. Get the hell out of this campus."

Investigations were carried out. Results showed that I had been falsely accused. Even after he apologized, Kazeem didn't get it easy with the lecturers who made his life on campus a living hell. You don't mess with lecturers in my school. You enter their black book and you suffer for it.

I felt better when I woke up some hours later. The entrance door opened. I figured Tola must have returned from work. Before I slept, I had locked the door and pulled out the key so it'd be easy for her to get in.

I heard voices in the sitting room. The room door was slightly opened. Tola was crying. I stood up to go to the living room but stopped at the entrance when I heard a male voice.

"Tola, please let's fight this together."

"Wale, I am tired. I don't know if I can do this anymore."

"We've come too far already. You can't just let go of what we have built for years." That was clearly Wale's voice.

"You don't get it. Your family is not in support of this relationship. Your sister called me twice today and said I should leave you or else she'll deal with me. She said she'd rather be dead than have us walk down the aisle together. My mum is not comfortable with the way things are going. Wale, we've been battling this for five years."

"I'm still trying to get my mother's support. Please be patient with me."

"Your mum? She hates me!" Tola responded.

"Stop talking like this. I know she can be difficult. But please let's fight this together."

"I'm tired of fighting. By now I should have been settled in my husband's house with two kids. But I'm here fighting lost battles.' Tola sighed. 'Wale, please leave, I want to be alone."

After few seconds, I heard the door open and bang shut. Tola walked into the room, surprised to see me sitting on the bed. Her face was smeared with tears.

"I didn't know you were back. Is your shift over so soon?"

I shook my head. "I wasn't feeling too well so I had to come home. What's going on, Tola? If you want to talk, I'm here."

She was close to tears again. Her lips shivered as she sat beside me.

"Wale's father is occultic."

My eyes widened. "What!"

She stared at her fingers. "Not just his father, but his mum and two sisters. Wale's elder brother got born-again on campus and renounced the fraternity his father had put them all into. He was disowned immediately. At that time Wale was still in primary school. When Wale got admission into the university too, in his first year, he met Christ and refused to go home. He ended up staying with

his brother all through his school days. His brother had gone ahead to marry years after his parents refused to accept the lady. His uncles were cool with his decision to marry her and stood by him."

"Are they still together?" I asked.

"Yes, they've been married twelve years and they are doing great. They have three kids. My real fear is this, when Wale was born he was offered to whatever gods the fraternity served.'

My hands flew to my chest. "This is a serious issue."

Tola looked away. "Wale's father is somewhere at the top of the whole fraternity thing and he really wants one of his sons to take over when he dies. But now his two sons have accepted Christ and the man is angry. He is doing everything to get Wale back. Three months into our relationship, his elder sister called to inform him that they'd found a wife for him. She is the daughter of one of the fraternity members."

"Tola, when did you know about Wale's family background?"

"Few weeks after I said yes to Wale."

"And you stayed?"

"Yes, because I knew what God told me about him. I was sure."

I tried to stay calm. "Tola, why do you want to put yourself in this kind of wahala? Back in Akure, I was involved in many cases like this. A woman ran mad when she stepped on her mother-in-law's toes. The woman was a confirmed *aje*. I have seen what these witches can do. They don't have mercy at all. Do you want to fight spiritual battles all your life?"

Tola shook her head. "I'm just confused."

"There is nothing to be confused about. This is God saying, run for your life! My neigbour is almost going insane. Nothing he touches prospers. His life has been a mess because of the ancestral powers controlling him. I'm begging you. Leave Wale. I know it's difficult but that's the best option right now.

He has been sacrificed to the gods and to tell you the truth even his born-again status cannot save him from it. I'm just being sincere with you. If you go ahead and marry him, they will come and block you at the juncture of pregnancy.

I have heard where a woman who everybody thought couldn't walk had all along being sitting on her daughter-in-law's womb for years. It was after she died that the woman finally conceived. After ten years. Abeg o, don't drag yourself into the camp of the enemy."

"Tinuke, thank you so much."

Tola didn't listen to me. She was back chatting and laughing with Wale and I was so angry and decided I wasn't going to interfere again. I had done my best as a friend. I just wished she was aware of the war coming right at her.

Exactly a week later, around 2a.m, I woke up to find Tola screaming and kicking at the empty air. She was fighting for breath, as if life was seeping out of her. Fear gripped me.

"Tola! Tola wake up!"

She landed on the floor with a loud thump.

"Tola, wake up!"

Her eyes flew opened. She got up and staggered towards the door. Midway, she bumped into the wardrobe and grabbed the handle of the wardrobe to steady herself.

"Thank you Jesus." Tola muttered, panting heavily.

"What happened?" I asked.

Tola settled on the edge of the bed. "I had an attack. An old woman chased me. I fell while running. She grabbed my neck and tried to strangle me." she paused. "Her face changed to Wale's sister. She released me and kicked me in my buttocks. I fell and roll away from her."

"Tola! Why are you doing this to yourself? Leave Wale for God's sake."

Tola grabbed the blanket, pulled it around her shoulders and curled into a shivering ball. She was shaking terribly. I sat beside her, wondering what to do.

"Let's pray." I said, finally.

We went on our knees. I'd gone for several deliverance sessions with Kunle and I felt capable of handling spiritual matters like this. I'd seen a mad woman charge at Kunle and immediately he gave a word of command, she fell, slithering like a snake. Once I had followed Kunle to a shrine where the priest blew white powder on his face, muttering words of incantations in a loud

baritone voice. The priest had been shocked to see my ex standing there, untouched. He had accepted Christ that day.

"Oh Lord my God," I started. "Every incantation and padlock used by witches to keep Tola in captivity, expire by fire in Jesus name."

"Amen!" Tola responded.

"Any power calling Tola's destiny into destruction, die in the name of Jesus!'

"Amen!"

"All the evil altars, all the demonic dogs, all the satanic police officers assigned to ruin Tola's life, let the fire of the Holy Ghost consume them right now!"

"Amen!"

"Your word says, for every battle of the warrior is with confused noise, and garments rolled in blood but this shall be with burning and fuel of fire. Let blood roll right now in the camp of the wicked people in the name of Jesus!'

Tola didn't say Amen.

"I ask, oh Lord-"

In a flash, I saw myself on the bed with Ranti. The words I planned to say disappeared.

If you don't shut up your mouth, legions of demons will enter into your body and destroy you.

My heart fainted. I sighed.

"Thank you Father because you have answered. In Jesus name we pray."

"Amen."

Tola thanked me and left for the living room. I sat on my bed, shaken by the thoughts that had jarred my mind.

I am not going to sleep with Ranti anymore, I vowed. I will wait until our wedding night.

"Oh God, forgive me. Please don't allow demons into my body. I promise, I'll keep myself until I get married." I prayed aloud.

From the bedroom, I heard Tola's voice on the phone. Few minutes later, I slept off.

The next morning, Wale, Patrick and Mercy came to the house. The bedroom door was slightly opened. I stood at the entrance watching them and listening to their discussion. Wale was furious as he paced the living room.

He turned to the others. “I can’t take this anymore. What exactly do they want from me? For goodness sake I have told my father I am not interested in their fraternity! What else do they want?”

Patrick stood beside his friend. “The weapons of our warfare are not carnal but mighty through God to the pulling down of strongholds. Wale, we don’t fight spiritual battles with physical weapons.”

I almost hissed. What is wrong with these brothers? Any small thing, Bible. What is their problem gan?

Wale sighed. “I’m just tired.”

“We can’t give up now.” Mercy said. “Sincerely, we’ve been taking this matter with levity for years now. I think it’s time to get into serious prayers. We have to make some crazy declarations and remind ourselves of our position in Christ.”

She stood up. ‘Wait a second, why does it seem like the devil has an upper hand in this situation. Didn’t Jesus destroy the power of the devil on the cross? We need to stop cowering in fear. Enough of the devil messing with our minds. We pick our shield of faith and destroy all the wiles of the devil.”

Tola stood up from where she sat and stepped in front of her fiancé who was already close to tears.

“Sweetheart, when I told you I was led to marry you, I meant every word and I still do. We will fight this together. Yesterday, while I was asking God questions after the incident, God comforted me with Romans 8 verse 33. You know how I love the New living Translation.”

He maintained a steady gaze on Tola as she locked hands with his. “Wale, if God be for us, who can ever be against us. Who dare accuse us whom God has chosen for his own? No one! For God has given us a right standing with himself. Who will dare condemn us? No one. For Christ Jesus died for us and

was raised to life for us, and he is sitting in the place of honour at God's right hand."

Mercy clapped her hand. "Glory! He has translated us from the kingdom of darkness to the kingdom of his dear Son!"

Patrick switched to tongues. "Blotting out the handwriting of ordinances that was against us, which was contrary to us, and took it out of the way, nailing it to his cross. Having spoiled principalities and powers, he made a show of them openly triumphing over them in it."

Tola fell to her knees. "Yes, we are going to pray from a place of victory. The power of the enemy has already been destroyed on the cross. We'll exercise the authority Christ has given to us."

Wale joined her in the center of the room. They held her hands as they prayed. Mercy and Patrick moved from one spot to the other, praying in tongues.

"No weapon formed against us shall prosper. Every tongue that has risen against us, we condemn this moment. This is our heritage oh Lord!"

"In the name of Jesus, we bring to naught the devices of the enemy. We are the redeemed of the Lord. Who dare stands against God's elect."

"We overcame by the blood of the lamb and by the word of our testimony. We bear the mark of the Lord Jesus Christ. Yes! We claim our victory in Christ. We are the sons of God. We have overcome!"

"Greater is he that is in us than he that is in the world. Concerning Wale and Tola, every mountain be rolled away in the name of Jesus. At the name of Jesus, every knee must bow!"

I felt left out. For reasons I couldn't exactly figure out, I just didn't fit in and I wasn't comfortable staying in the room either. I dressed up and left quietly.

My phone beeped as I stepped out of gate. Credit alert. Ranti had sent a hundred and fifty thousand naira to my account. I smiled and scrolled down my call history for his number. He picked on the second ring.

"Hello sweetheart." His voice still made me quake.

"I saw what you sent. Thank you. Where are you?"

"I'm at the hotel room waiting for you."

I stopped. "I thought you said we were going to see another apartment this morning."

"Can't I have some time with my baby first? I've already told the agent to expect us this afternoon. Please hurry. I'm dying to see you."

I swallowed hard. Why was it so hard to stick to my decision not to have sex with Ranti until we got married? I wanted him badly. The thoughts of being in his arms again made me quiver.

In the taxi that took me to the hotel, I thought of so many things at once. I was going to tell Ranti how I felt about the relationship. I needed to know his plans for us. Even though he had not officially proposed, it was clear what we wanted for our lives but I wanted to hear those words from Ranti's lips. I wanted him to say, 'Tinuke, will you marry me?' It was time we got serious about making plans for our future.

I rushed ahead to the future. Wedding dress. Our apartment. Our kids. Trips to Dubai and France. Everything looked perfect. Right in the taxi, I wrote out a list of the things I'd need for my wedding. I was excited already.

Ranti opened the door even before I knocked.

"Oh my baby! I have missed you." He pulled me into the room and kissed me. When he led me to the bed, I stopped him. He stared at me, puzzled.

"We have to talk."

Ranti frowned. "Can't it wait? Babe please."

I shook my head. "It can't wait." He uttered a foul word and sat on the bed. I sat beside him and crossed my leg.

"What is it?" Ranti was clearly upset.

"Let's talk about us. Where's this relationship leading to?"

"What the hell are you talking about?"

"Our relationship, where is it heading to?"

Ranti sat beside me and held my hands. "Baby, I love you and that's what matters."

"You have not answered my question. I know you love me but I want to know what plans you have for us."

"Plans?"

"Yes, marriage. A woman at thirty-one should be in her husband's house. Why waste precious time? You don't even have to propose. I get that you love

me and want to spend the rest of your life with me. Just go ahead and put a ring to my finger.

He let go of my hands. “Aren’t we are moving too fast?”

I sighed. “Ranti, what are we waiting for? You have a good job, you are comfortable, and we’ve been together for a while now. We love each other.”

He pulled me to my feet. “Can we talk about this later?”

I stared at him, annoyed. When he tried to kiss me, I pushed him away. He exhaled and left my side. He returned with my favourite chocolates.

“I brought this for you. If you want some more money, just tell me, I’ll send it.”

I pushed the chocolates away. “Not everything is about money. Ranti, I want to settle down. I can’t keep living like this.”

“But I said we will talk about it later. My ex is still seething over the fact that I walked away from her. I just need a little time Tinuke.”

He pulled me closer, his hands sliding from my shoulder to my back. I jerked free and grabbed my bag. What is wrong with men? Couldn’t he see that I was not interested in having sex with him?

“If you don’t want me to touch you, fine. Let’s go see the real estate agent. She sent me pictures of the apartment. You will love it.” Ranti smiled.

I stared at him. I was talking about getting married and Ranti still had the guts to raise the issue of getting my own apartment. If he really wanted to marry me, we should be talking about our apartment. I wondered why he always had an excuse when I asked to see where he lived. Why does he insist we meet at the hotel instead of his house at VI?

“I want to be alone.” I walked out of the room.

“Tinuke!” he called out. I didn’t respond.

I went to the hotel’s swimming pool and sat on one of the chairs in the pool’s deck. I stared at the shimmering water, trying to get my thoughts together amidst the sight of a couple laid out on inflatable mattresses and some ladies sitting on the deck with their feet in the water. I was confused and worried. I loved Ranti so much but his actions were making me doubt his love for me.

Should I leave him now? That would be risky. He was working on a juicy offer for me. I needed another job badly. I couldn’t afford to go broke especially

now that Betty was still owing our salary for three months. How would I survive? I'd wait until I land a new job and move to my apartment and then dump him.

I chuckled at my thoughts. Can I ever break free from Ranti? Two months away from Ranti had almost driven me insane.

My phone rang. It was a call from my sister. I didn't want to pick at first but I welcomed the distraction.

"Yetunde."

"Tinuke, there is something I want to tell you."

I waited. When she didn't say anything, I immediately became worried. Yetunde was now in Akure, helping mum in the pure water factory. Had something happened to mum? She had gone to the hospital several times for check-up especially when the excruciating pain on her leg began.

"Yetunde, what's going on? Is mum okay?"

She sighed. "Yes, she is. Tinuke, I'm going to look for Dad."

"*Oro radarada wo loun so.* I don't understand you."

"Don't you miss dad?"

"You mean the man that walked out of our lives when we needed him? No I don't."

"I miss him Tinuke."

"For God's sake, you were five when he left. How can you miss someone you barely know? Please kick those thoughts aside and let's talk about something reasonable. How's the factory?"

"The factory is going on well. Thanks for that cash. We finally got a new truck. Tinuke, the more I pray, the stronger I feel the urge to search for dad. I think God wants me to reconnect with him."

"How do you even want to go about it? That man has never called mum since he walked out on us. Obviously, he doesn't care one bit. Anyway, I wish you luck on your wild goose chase. When you finally meet him, tell him I hate him for making our lives horrible."

Yetunde sighed. "But can't you see God's faithfulness in our lives? You have a very good job. Mum's factory is doing pretty well. We can boast of our own family house. I was the best graduating student in my faculty. You came out with an outstanding result."

I shook my head. “How could you quickly forget the days we hawked plantain in the hot sun on the streets of Akure. Remember those days when we had nothing to eat. We went into farms to steal vegetables. Have you forgotten how Baba Aduke threw us out of that one room apartment when mum couldn’t pay up the rent? Mum cried. We had to sleep in church for several months. Yetunde, I don’t forget things easily and it is one reason I don’t want to ever go back to that life. I really pray you find Dad so I can prove to him that what he left us for, I now have in abundance.”

“The life of a man does not consist of the abundance of the things he possesses.” Yetunde responded.

“*Mo fi olorun be e*, don’t quote scriptures at me. Where was God when Dad left and we had to suffer? Aburo, I’ll talk to you later. I have to go to work soon.”

I got to the boutique that afternoon to find three of my colleagues standing outside, their faces drawn. One of them was crying.

I stopped in front of them. “What’s going on?”

“Madam fired us.”

I stood back. “Why?”

“She said there is no money to pay us. Imagine that, and she didn’t even pay us the money she owed us. What kind of wickedness is that?”

The lady who had been crying wiped the tears from her eyes. “Where do I start from? I am running a course in Unilag and I’m yet to pay my school fees.”

I didn’t know the right words to say to comfort them. “You’ll find another job. Be hopeful.”

For the umpteenth time, I was glad I had a back-up. Ranti. With him, I didn’t have to worry about money.

More sales girls walked out of the boutique angrily and I was wondering if Betty had decided to shut down the boutique. I hurried in to find out what was wrong and bumped into Chioma, the head of sales. She pulled me behind a section of clothes.

Betty has fired all the sales and marketing girls. Just two of us are left.”

I looked at her puzzled. “What?”

She nodded. “According to her, we are to handle the sales and marketing for now. She promised to pay our arrears by the end of the month.”

I was angry. “How are we supposed to handle sales and marketing. We’ll sell clothes, handle the ads and take deliveries. For heavens sake, how’s that possible?’

Chioma shrugged. “We will survive. Let’s get to work.” She pointed to a customer who’d just entered. “Go attend to that customer and let me see to the online deliveries.”

I was fagged out before the end of the working day. This was enough sign that it was time to leave. I’d have to call Ranti and plead with him to get me another job as quickly as possible.

The following week, I returned to the boutique from delivering some dresses to a customer and found about five young girls in the lunch room. I discovered they’d been newly employed. We had a quick staff meeting that morning and when we finished, I went to look for Chioma. She was talking to the new employees and assigning responsibilities to them. Later, she joined me in the store room where I was taking an inventory of the new supplies.

“How much do you think Betty agreed to pay those girls?” I asked as soon as Chioma entered the store.

“Twenty thousand naira. That was the info I got from the HR. Alice showed me their employment letters on Saturday.’

I opened my mouth. ‘Twenty what? That’s crazy.”

“I’m telling you. You know most of the ladies here were B.Sc holders but she instructed Alice to select only OND holders. Yesterday when you accompanied Betty to Ikeja, about fifty of them showed up at the boutique. We picked just five.”

Betty appeared behind us. ‘I don’t expect any of my employees to gossip during work hours. There is work to do. That’s why I pay you!”

I was irritated and I made no effort to hide it. I turned my eyes away and continued with my work.

“I’m very sorry ma’am.” Chioma said and walked out. Betty entered the store.

“Tinuke.”

I raised my head but didn't stand up. She folded her hands as she stood in front of me.

"For the next two weeks, at the end of your shift, you are going to spend one hour with the new staff, training them on how things are done here. I've designed the training module. I'll mail it to you before the end of today."

I waited to hear the extra pay I'd earn for the training but my madam cat-walked out of the store. I called Ranti.

"Hello dear."

"I take it you are no longer mad at me." Ranti said.

I hesitated. "No I'm not."

"Thank you. I love you Tinuke."

"Ranti how far that job. Anything yet?"

"Very soon. I've spoken to someone and she promised to give me feedback by the end of the week."

I sighed. 'Thank you."

"By the way I have a surprise for you."

My eyes lightened up. "Really, what is it?"

"It'll no longer be a surprise if I tell you. I'm at Abuja right now for a meeting. I should be back by Saturday. You'll see it after church on Sunday."

"I can't wait!" I screamed excitedly. I raised my head to find Betty standing by the entrance, glaring at me. "Ranti, I have to go."

Betty rolled her eyes at me and left. I smiled. There was no way Betty could fire me. I'd brought in more money than she'd ever made since she set up the boutique. Most of Ranti's friends and colleagues had brought their side chicks to the boutique.



I returned from work tired and pissed. Betty had refused to pay us our salary. She'd pleaded to settle us the following week. What annoyed me was that we had a lot of sales that month and I wondered why we still had to be deprived of our salary.

Anyway, I got home and was surprised to see Tola's car parked in front of the house. It was just 5:30p.m and it was unusual to find her home that early. Then I remembered she was on leave.

I opened the door and right there in the living room was my ex, Kunle, sipping a drink and chewing cookies.

I stood there shocked. He put down the can of malt he was holding on a tray and stood up. Tola came out of the kitchen grinning.

"I've been trying your line for almost an hour now. I wanted to tell you about Kunle's arrival." Tola said, after she hugged me.

"Hello Tinuke." Kunle said.

I moved away from the door and stood behind the sofa. Kunle wasn't looking bad at all. He wore a white shirt which looked fitted on him and his trousers weren't as big as I knew them to be. He looked really good even though his jaw was still tense and his eyes serious.

"Hello Bro Kunle."

"I'll leave you guys to talk." Tola said and left the living room.

I came around to sit on the sofa, still stunned for words.

"Tinuke, you have changed."

"How did you get here?" I asked, curious.

"Let's say your mum was willing to help me save whatever pieces of our relationship was left. She gave me your friend's number and here I am."

I turned to Kunle. "What exactly do you want?"

Kunle chuckled, his eyes fixed on the phone I was holding. "You now use an iPhone. You are a big girl now."

His eyes moved slowly from the crown of my head to my feet. "But Tinuke, you have changed. Look at what you have on your head. Is it a wig or you fixed it to your hair? You now use make-up and shave your eyebrows. You paint your nails too? Where are those long skirts that covered your legs? Where is the holy sister that stood with me in fasting and prayers? Where is my Tinuke?"

I let out two quick breath. "Did you come all the way from Akure to say this?"

His countenance deepened. I could see he was trying to stay calm. “I thought I’d be able to talk you into coming back to Akure to continue what we started. I was ready to pay your bride price without any delay but I can see that there is nothing left of my Tinuke. She is already on her way to hell.”

My heart darkened as at his words. I was on my way to hell. I was clearly irredeemable. If Kunle knew about my relationship with Ranti, he’d hate me for life.

Kunle stood up. “I’m going back to Akure to tell them what I have seen. I charge you to repent and turn from your evil ways. When Lot’s wife turned back, she became a pillar of salt. She was lost forever. A word is enough for the wise.”

I sat there long after he walked out of the house. Tola came out with a tray of hot moi-moi.

“Food is ready.” She stopped when she saw the empty space where Kunle had been.

“What happened? Where is he?”

“He has gone.” I said and left for the bedroom.

Restless, I packed my toiletries and some dresses and informed Tola I’d be lodging in a hotel. I told her I had some thinking to do. As I left that evening, I felt like a hole had been carved out of my heart with a hot iron rod. I felt empty. Kunle’s visit had affected me more than I thought. He always did that with his words. It was the reason I’d stayed with him even when I was tired of the relationship.

Settled in the hotel room, I ordered for wine. I wanted something that’d pushed down my sorrow. The only time I had taken alcohol were few sips with Ranti.

There is nothing wrong with Alcohol, Ranti would say. What the bible kicks against is drunkenness.

Kunle’s words came back. I was doomed for hell. A place I’d cry and weep forever. I’d always known that God hated me. It was clear now that I’ll always be on his bad side.

I woke up to find myself on the bathroom floor, holding a half-filled bottle of wine. I staggered towards the sink and splashed water on my face. The

feeling of void returned. I lay on the bed and reached for my phone. There was a message from Patrick.

Tinuke, I don't know what's going on in your life right now but I sense in my heart to tell you that God loves you more than you can imagine. He is missing you and wants to fellowship with you.

I hissed and reached for the bottle and gulped down the remaining content. I called in sick and stayed on the bed the rest of the day. I wished Ranti was there to make me feel better.

CHAPTER 5

Ranti called me on Saturday night when he returned from Abuja. He couldn't wait to see me in church the following day. I was excited too. I missed the times we spent together. I missed sharing my heart with him. Ranti was a great listener and patient with me when I shouted at him or act naughty. He was intelligent and taught me many things about life and business. He was just the man I needed in my life.

Mercy slept over at the house and followed us to church that Sunday morning. She was a member of the church but had left for another assembly six months ago. Even though she had been away for a while she knew everything that went on in her former church.

"Bro Ranti must be a proud father. I saw the picture of Monica's beautiful baby. He looks like the father." Mercy said, as Tola sped out of the house.

I sat up when I heard Ranti's name. Which Ranti were they talking about?

Tola hissed. "I don't know why Monica had to end up with a man like that. She deserves someone better than that player. I still believe he married her for her money."

Mercy shook her head. "The last time she called me, she was crying on the phone. I was close to tears myself. I wish she was back in the country. I miss her."

Tola sighed. "We warned her. I showed her pictures of some of the ladies he'd slept with. She didn't believe me.

Mercy shrugged. "I'm happy for her. I believe the arrival of her new baby will distract her from all the plenty wahala. But I miss her."

I couldn't hold back my curiosity. "Please which Bro Ranti are you talking about?"

"You may not know him. He drives a white Mitsubishi Pajero. He is tall and keeps an afro. He looks calm." Mercy responded.

"Calm koh, calm ni."

My heart pounded. What's his surname?"

"Fabunmi."

My heart stopped and then it started beating very fast. "Are you saying he is married?'

"Yes.' Tola answered. "He married our friend. They've been married six years."

I was ready to explode. Ranti was married? Had he been deceiving me all along?

Tears stung my eyes. My body was hot with rage. Everything became clear. I understood why he had been avoiding the subject of marriage. I understood why he didn't want me to see his apartment. While his wife was pregnant, Ranti was frolicking with me, his side chick.

Just when I thought I'd finally met my man.

Ranti deceived me!

From where I sat in church, I saw him sitting with his bible opened on his laps. He gave me a quick glance. I stared at him, my eyes fixed on his back.

You Monster, You messed with the wrong girl!



Ranti picked me up in front of Circle Mall. He gave me a warm hug and planted a kiss on my cheeks.

"Are you ready for the surprise?"

I forced a smile. "Sure."

He squeezed my shoulder and gave me a box of dark chocolates "Are you okay? You don't look happy."

"I'm just a little tired." I said.

As we drove out of the mall, he gave me details of how his trip had gone. The deals he struck. The millions he'd made. The new clients he met.

I pretended to listen but all I could do was stare at the man I thought I loved. Only hatred was left in my heart for him. I was a wounded lion roaring in pain. My dream of a perfect marriage gone. My hopes shattered.

I will rise above this, I muttered underneath my breath.

This was where I differed from other women. I had no time for self-pity. I was strong and nothing could keep me down.

All men are scum, I concluded. The very thought of marriage irritated me. It was time to focus on my career and build a great life for myself.

"Did you hear what I just said?" Ranti was staring at me.

"Oh…sorry, I was distracted."

Ranti looked worried. "Baby, are you sure you are okay?"

I nodded and stared out the window. I wanted to grab the steering from him and swerve the car off the road. I wanted him to feel the same pain I felt at his betrayal.

We entered a beautiful estate in Lekki Phase I. Ranti stopped in front of a beautiful bungalow painted white.

"Here we are." Ranti said and got down from the car.

There was a clean Mercedes Benz shaded by a blue umbrella in front of the two-bedroom apartment. I walked into the apartment and stood in the living room.

Beautiful décor. Posh sofas. Tiled floors.

Ranti reached into his pocket and brought out a bunch of keys. He held them out to me. "The key to the house and the car. I've paid the rent for two years."

I stared at the keys in my hand. Wasn't this what I wanted?

"Thank you Ranti. I really appreciate this."

Ranti held my hand and led me to the sofa. I resisted when he pulled me to his laps.

"Tinuke, please sit. There is something I want to tell you."

I remained standing. "Say what you want to say. I'm fine this way."

He clenched his fist and stared at the ground. "Tinuke, I lied to you and I am so ashamed of myself. I am married."

My face went hot. So it was true. Hearing him confirm my fears broke my heart completely. When I had decided to confront Ranti about the news, I'd thought he would laugh and say, 'married keh? Who's feeding you that nonsense?'

I thought he'd prove to me that there were two Ranti Fabunmi in the church and the married person was the other Ranti.

I lost it at that moment. I grabbed his suit and shook him. "You deceived me! You are a wicked and cruel man. I regret the day I ever met you."

Ranti started crying. I mean heart-wrenching sobs. The tears poured down his face and for a moment, I stood there confused of what to make about his reactions.

He reached for my chin with trembling hands. "I'm so sorry. Tinuke, please forgive me. I'd wanted to tell you from the moment we met, but I was scared you'd leave me. I didn't know how I was going to survive without you."

In my life, I'd never seen a man cry. It was strange to me. I sat beside him and tried to calm him down.

He sighed. "I'm sorry you had to see me this way. I can be emotional when it comes to matters of the heart."

He pulled me closer, running his hand over my tear-stained face. "I can't live without you Tinuke. Please forgive me."

"I forgive you Ranti but what am I going to do with this news. You are married."

Ranti wiped his tears with a clean handkerchief. "I'm not in love with the woman I married. Our marriage is just one of convenience and every day I am tortured by the fact that I'd have to spend the rest of my life with her. Tinuke, I wished I'd met you earlier.'

When he gazed into my eyes, my wall of defence crumbled down like a pack of cards. My anger dissipated. I felt sorry for him.

He stood up and went to the window. "I'm going to file for a divorce. Right now I don't care anymore. I want the woman I love with every breath of my being."

He walked back to where I sat. "I have found that in you Tinuke. You are everything I've prayed for in my six years of marriage. I know you may not

want me anymore and I understand that. But please don't ever forget that I love you and it was you who made my life meaningful."

He brought out a piece of folded paper from the inner pocket of his suit and gave it to me. I opened it. It was an employment letter. I had been offered a job as a corporate finance analyst with a pay of two hundred thousand naira.

I stared at the letter, stunned beyond words. When I raised my head, Ranti was walking out of the living room. I stood up.

"Where are you going to?"

There was a doleful look on his face. "I'm not sure you'll still want to have anything to do with me."

I went to him and wrapped my hands around his waist. There was no way I could leave him. Ranti needed me

He kissed my forehead. "Oh Tinuke, Thank you so much. I love you."

We made out that Sunday afternoon. Later in the evening, I rolled off the bed while he was still asleep and sat on a high chair by the window. What had I gotten myself into? How will my mum feel when I tell her I'm getting married to a divorced man? Was it even right?

I tapped on the google search engine page and typed out some topics that came to my head.

Can a believer marry a divorcee?

Do marriages with divorcees work?

A single lady marrying a divorced man.

Stories of successful marriages with divorcees.

"What are you doing?"

I froze. Ranti came to stand in front of me, wearing only a pair of boxers. I quickly closed the page I had opened. He pulled me to my feet and kissed me.

"What do you say we drive round town in your new car?"

I smiled. "I'll say, Yes."

I had driven mum's rickety car back in Akure and sitting behind the wheels of the car Ranti got for me felt like heaven. I shouted in excitement as we left the compound.

We drove round town, making a few stops to buy chicken and ice-cream. It was fun cruising the island on a sunny Sunday evening. We drove to my new place of work.

"Wow!" I exclaimed.

The office was located on the second floor of a four storey building covered with glass windows. I felt a surge of adrenaline course through my body.

I hugged Ranti again and thanked him for getting the job for me. I wondered what to say to Tola if she inquired where I'd gotten the car from.



Patrick smiled warmly when I stepped into the house. I immediately felt dirty. I couldn't explain why I felt that way every time I saw him. Even though I knew it was a harmless smile, it seemed like he was mocking me. I greeted them curtly and entered the room.

"Are you seeing Bro Ranti?"

I turned sharply. Tola was standing at the entrance of the room. Had my sins be found out?

"No."

"One of the women in church said there was a day she saw you coming out of a hotel with him."

I chuckled. "Hotel? How's that possible. What will I be doing with a man in a hotel?"

Tola left the room without saying another word. I sat down, thinking about what my friend had said. I had to be careful. Now that I had my apartment, there would be no need to meet Ranti at a hotel

That night, as we got ready to sleep, I told Tola I had gotten another job. She jumped to her feet and hugged me.

"Halleluyah! You see why it's important to be patient. God is faithful. I'm so happy for you. How much is the pay?"

"Two hundred thousand naira for a start and the job comes with an official car and apartment."

Tola's eyes widened. "Wow! I can't believe this. An apartment came with your new job. What kind of firm in Nigeria does that?"

I smiled. "Actually, the apartment belongs to the CEO and the person who lived there has been transferred to another branch. The M.D said I could move in there." Lies. When did I become so good at telling lies.

"This is wonderful. I'm so happy for you. We have to celebrate this."

"I'm moving out this weekend."

Tola looked sad. "So fast? But you need to furnish the place and get everything set."

"The apartment is already furnished. All I have to take in there are my boxes."

Tola hugged me again and rocked me from side to side. "I am so happy but I'll miss sleeping on this bed with you."

I tickled Tola. "I'll be coming around to see you on weekends. You won't feel it one bit."

I dropped my resignation letter at the boutique the following morning. Alice, the HR officer was shocked when I handed the letter to her.

"You are supposed to either return the salary for the month or give us a month in lieu of notice. You can't just leave like that. It's not right."

I opened my wallet and counted crispy one thousand naira notes. I gave her fifty thousand naira and walked out of her office in my heels and stunning short gown.

Chioma was arranging a section of the boutique when I walked up to her.

"I'm leaving."

She spun around, "What did you say?"

"I got another job. I'm resuming today."

She looked at me with downcast eyes. "Congratulations. I wish you the best."

I hugged her. "Chioma, give me some time, I'll find a way to get you out of this place."

She nodded. "Thank you."

I walked out of the boutique, relieved that this phase of my life was over.

CHAPTER 6

Fidson Corporate Solutions is a software company that develops financial markets trading software, provides integrated business solutions among many other functions. The permanent office located in Abuja is run by the CEO while his daughter manages the Lagos branch.

That morning I was led into the Branch Manager's office. On a glossy table was a slab with the name 'Shade Owolabi.' While the B.M talked on the phone, I stood in front of the table, waiting for her to end the call.

She motioned for me to sit. Her look said one word. Disgust.

I perched the edge of the chair and kept my gaze on her. Obviously, she didn't like me but that was not my business. The moment I stepped into the office complex, I knew this was where I wanted to build my career.

"The Adelajas are one of our biggest clients. As you are aware, the billionare's daughter married Ranti who recommended you. We'll do what we can to keep their money rolling in here even if it means taking you in. By the way, what exactly is your relationship with Ranti?"

I was lost for words. I opened my mouth to say something but she raised her hand.

"Never mind. It's none of my business." She opened her laptop and began to type furiously on the keyboard. "I've told Ranti, I'm not taking any more of his side chics. They are all dull and lazy. They disappeared when they couldn't cope with the grueling work we do here. Let's see how long you will last."

Since she wasn't talking to me directly, I didn't respond. Tears pricked my eyes. I reminded myself how smart and intelligent I was. When I returned from youth service, the pure water factory was running at a loss. But by the time

I left, we had bought our own truck and moved to our permanent factory site. It was also during that time that we roofed and painted the family house.

I will work so hard Shade will be reluctant to let me go. Ranti may have brought me this far but I possessed the grit to get me rooted in my career.

Without looking at me, she said, "The HR will show you your table."

When I remained seated, she glared at me, "What are you still waiting for?"

I stood up and thanked her. At the door, she called me back.

"I hope you don't run to Ranti to tell him I was rude to you."

I left the office quietly.

Francis, my immediate boss, treated me differently. He was much older, somewhere in his fifties. He was a very intelligent man who had worked with top multinationals.

His smile made me relaxed and much later, I'd discover that he'd been brought in from the headquarters to head the Finance department and that the B.M relied so much on his expertise. He was a great listener and encouraged us to think outside the box. But he drove us to work.

There were days we stayed back late into the night, poring over proposals, sorting out investment opportunities and brainstorming on operation strategies. I enjoyed every bit of it.

Francis was always impressed with my presentations and that drove me to work more. Several nights, I stayed awake going over financial reports, monitoring metrics, tracking and researching on general corporate finance matters.

I couldn't have asked for a better gift of a lovely two bedroom flat. Each room had its own bath and air-conditioner. The living room was a large terrace. There was a kitchen and a dining room.

I converted one of the rooms to my work space. In that room was a polished table over a thick Russian carpet. Two white shelves with books stood on one side of the room and a leopard-skinned sofa on the other side.

Ranti came one night while I was working on an investment report for my boss. I wanted it ready for a client before the meeting set for 10a.m. I'd just

finished collating the figures for the report when the door of my home office opened and he stepped in.

I was annoyed that he had not informed me about coming over. I wondered how he got in. Then I remembered he got the house for me and must have had a spare key.

He rubbed my shoulders. “I didn’t get this job to overwork yourself. You have to relax. Is Shade giving you any problem?”

I was irritated. Couldn’t he just leave me alone and allow me finish my work?

He pulled my hand. “Let’s go into the bedroom.”

“Ranti, not tonight. I’m busy. I have to get this work completed tonight.”

His hand tightened on my arm. I tried pulling away. A glance at his face left chills in my spine.

I stood up quietly and followed him to the bedroom. As he led me to the bed, I thought of how I was going to get rid of him. I had found a new love. My job. It was time to dump Ranti for good.

My phone rang just as Ranti began to undress me.

Tola.

I pushed his hand away and picked up the call.

“Tinuke, you won’t believe it. Wale’s mother called me this evening. She said so many nice things to me. I am so surprised.”

“Wow! This is interesting.” I sighed. As Tola kept talking, I was thinking of a way to get Ranti out of my house.

“I’m so excited right now. Look at how God is answering our prayers. She promised to convince Wale’s father to allow us have the wedding before the end of this year. Tinuke. I’ll call you back. Wale is on the other line.”

When she ended the call, I pretended I was still talking to her. “You are coming right away? Why can’t you make it tomorrow?” I paused. “Oh my God! You are close by?”

I stared at Ranti, bewildered. “Tola is on her way.”

Ranti jumped out of the bed and grabbed his trousers. He quickly put it on and ran out of the house holding his shoes. When I heard his car speed out of the

compound, I laughed until my stomach ached. Relieved, I returned to continue with my work.

I had spent six months at Fidson Corporate Solutions when one beautiful morning, the B.M walked into Francis office and was surprised to see me sitting at his table, sipping coffee. I was with him in his office, working on a report on his laptop.

Shade exhaled. “Francis, the meeting is for 10. We have to leave now.”

Francis reclined against the chair. “Tinuke will be handling the presentation.’

My mouth flew opened. I looked from Francis to the B.M loss for words.

Shade’s face was hot. “No way! Francis, we can’t lose this deal.”

“Of course I know.” Francis responded.

“This is not happening. If you had mentioned Paul or Efosa, I might have considered any of them but not this-” She stopped. “I have to call Dad. We can’t lose this deal.”

She stormed out of the office. I stared at Francis. He continued to sip his coffee.

“Sir, please I can’t do this. I think you should go.”

“Yes you can. I’ve watched you handle presentations with great skill and dexterity. Besides, you wrote the proposal.”

“Sir-”

One glance from Francis and I knew it was useless arguing with him. I left his office and returned with the folder containing the proposal and other documents required for the agreement.

His phone rang. For some seconds, Francis listened to whatever the person was saying on the other line. I guessed it was the CEO. Shade’s father.

“Sir, I trust her absolutely to handle this. She can do it.” He paused and listened. “Yes sir. Thank you sir.”

When he ended the call, he smiled at me.

“Go and show them the stuff you are made of.”

In the car, Shade was still seething with anger. Nervous, I studied the proposal and went over the figures in the report. My heart raced. What if I messed up? What if I made a mistake?

The meeting went better than I thought. We landed the deal.

When we got out of the meeting and walked back to the car park, Shade asked that I joined her at the back seat. She looked at me and smiled.

"You are smart after all."

Her attitude towards me changed after that day.



Ranti was back the following weekend, this time with a small box. I was tired of the guy. I had brought work home but Ranti wouldn't let me touch it. I was so upset. Sex didn't appeal to me any longer. While I was in bed with him, I thought of financial assets, new clients to meet, deals to land.

` One Monday morning as I dressed up for work, Ranti sat on the bed watching me.

"I regret getting this job for you. You have become cold towards me. I think you love your job more than you love me."

I continued to brush my hair. I prayed silently that he would be angry and call off the relationship. Maybe this was the right time to tell him how I really felt.

"Ranti, have you finalized the divorce?"

"Not yet. Is that the reason for the attitude you've been putting up lately?"

I glanced at him and returned my attention to the mirror. "I feel you can work things out with your wife. You know, marriage comes with its baggage. Love is a decision, don't you think?"

He climbed down slowly from the bed and stood behind me. "Are you tired of me already?"

I sighed. "I just feel-"

He reached for my chin. "Don't mess with me. Now, get back on the bed."

I stared at him from the mirror. "What?"

He smiled. "I want your clothes off."

Even though I was scared of the strange man behind me, I maintained my courage.

"You are joking right? I'm running late for work. This report must get to my boss' table by 8a.m."

I stood up to go but he blocked my path.

"Ranti, you are in my way. Please let's do this when I get back from work."

He held my hand but I struggled to get free. A blow landed on the side of my face. Blood gushed out of my nose. I stared at Ranti.

He caressed my face with his fingers and kissed my forehead. "When I ask you to do something, you obey. You know I don't like it when you are stubborn. Now get on the bed."

I flared up. "How dare you hit me? Yes I am tired of you. Thank you for helping me get the job, the car and the apartment. But can you just let me breathe? What even happened to you Ranti? No more trips? No business clients? Don't you have work to do this morning? It's Monday for goodness sake. I don't have time for this nonsense."

I grabbed my bag from the chair and was heading out when he pulled me back with his strong hands and hit me twice. I fell with my head hitting the floor. Another blow landed on my face. He dragged me to the bed and raped me. I screamed in pain. When he was done, he spat on my face and left the room.

My phone rang while I tended to the bruises on my face. I refused to answer it. Instead I ran into the shower and stayed there for a long time.

When I finally got out, my phone was still ringing. I looked at the caller ID. My mum.

The tears trickled down my face again. She had called at the right time when I needed to hear some comforting words.

"Hello mum." I said, quietly.

"Tinuke, why are you doing this to yourself? A good man came to ask for your hand in marriage and you pushed him away. Where do you think you'll get a man like Kunle? Ehn! Now the guy has paid the bride price for another woman. *Omo yi! O ni pa mi o*. Every power standing against your marital fulfilment will die. At your age, I had finished giving birth. I-"

I cut the call and sent a message to my boss that I was ill. If I had to get to work the following day without eyebrows being raised about my bruised face, I had to get to the hospital fast.

This was all my fault, I thought as I drove to the hospital. When he got me the apartment and wanted to leave, I should have allowed him go. It would have been a perfect time to discard the beast. I thought of moving back to Tola's place but I decided it was not a good idea.

I'll change the lock of the entrance, I concluded. That way, he'll not be able to get in. All I wanted to do was run very far away from Ranti. Little did I know that my worst days were yet to come.

CHAPTER 7

Shade called me into her office few weeks after the horrible incident with Ranti. She wanted us to celebrate a deal we had pulled off. Shade and I had become very close and I was now comfortable around her.

Francis entered the office while Shade filled the two wine cups on her table.

"Francis, come and join us. We're celebrating." Shade said.

Francis turned down the offer. "Enjoy yourselves Ladies. I was just on my way out and thought to stop by and say, "We did it!"

"Yes, we did it!" Shade shouted in excitement. I chuckled and opened the box of pizza she had ordered.

"Good night." Francis said and left the office

As we ate in silence, Shade suddenly wiped her oily palms on a hand towel and reached for the side of my face that was still swollen even though I'd tried so hard to conceal it.

"Ranti did this to you right?"

I looked at her and smiled sadly.

"When are you going to get away from that monster?" She said. "Why are you still with him for goodness sake? You are not married to him and you are going through pains like this. Babe, leave that guy abeg."

I chewed in silence.

"Are you an only child?" Shade asked, stretching out on the settee.

I shook my head. "I have a brother and a sister."

"I wish I had a sibling. Sometimes it feels lonely being an only child."

I smiled. "At least you have a dad who always calls you. My father left us when I was six."

Shade refilled her glass. “I can’t imagine not having my dad around. He is everything to me. But I understand. That’s life. We don’t always get what we want.”

“Why don’t you have a picture of your father in this office?”

Shade chuckled. “You mean you’ve not seen the picture of the CEO? Tinuke, you need glasses. Look around.”

My eyes moved slowly from one part of the office to the other. It stopped at the picture frame hanging close to a mural. I stood up and walked over to the picture frame.

“I can’t believe I’m just seeing this.”

Shade chuckled. “If you are looking for any form of resemblance, you won’t find it there. I took after my mum.”

I froze.

I know Shade’s father. Yes I know him!

I tried to pull up memories that connected us together but nothing came forth. Yet, deep in my heart, I knew we had met. I went down memory lane but came up blank.

Shade was on a call and it gave me time to reach into my deepest memories to fish out where in my past we had met.

I know him, I repeated. I know this man in a very personal way.

“Tinuke, my dad wants to speak with you.” Shade said, holding out her phone to me.

I moved away from the photo frame and took the phone from her. The voice on the other line was cheerful and warm.

“I’m so happy to finally speak to you sir.” I said.

“Shade has said so much about you and what you’ve done for the company. I can’t wait to meet you in person.”

“Thank you sir.” I said quietly.

“I have a handsome reward for you when I come around. Keep up the good job.”

“Yes sir.”

I handed the phone back to Shade. She laughed so heartily and I felt a tingle of sadness. Yetunde said she was on a search for my father. Would she find him? What if he still didn't want anything to do with us?

When Shade ended the call, I told her I had to leave. I had completely forgotten that I'd asked the carpenter to change the locks to the entrance of my apartment. It was when I checked my phone that I saw the calls I'd missed.

"Tinuke, you can move in with me. I live alone in a duplex and many times it gets boring. It'll be good to have you around."

"I'll think about it." I said and hugged her.

"Goodnight." Shade said.

When I left her office, I called the carpenter but he didn't answer my call. If he had changed the door locks, why didn't he bring the keys to my office? Was it possible that he didn't show up at the house at all?

I drove into the compound and was surprised to find the light in the living room turned on. Two reasons crossed my mind. The carpenter was still around waiting for me. I forgot to switch off the light before leaving for work in the morning.

I dialed the carpenter's number again as I opened the entrance door. He answered this time.

"Tobi, sorry *jare.* I had a busy day and missed your calls. Why is the door to my living room opened and where are my new keys?'

"Aunty Tinuke, I gave the keys to your husband."

"What!"

"Yes Aunty. I gave the key to that man I always see when I come for repairs. He said you told him to collect the keys."

I looked around the house for signs of Ranti. "Oh my God! Tobi!"

My heart was pounding hard. Ranti was going to skin me alive tonight. I jumped when Ranti walked out of the kitchen carrying a tray of hot pepper soup. He winked at me as he placed the tray on the dining table.

"Welcome darling." He said and sauntered towards me. I couldn't hide my frustration this time. He kissed me before leading me to the dining table. On the table were scented candles and lots of food. Cheese cakes. Lasagne. Sausage casserole. Smoked salmon. Shrimps. Meat loaf muffins.

I stared at the different meals on the table. Ranti had gone for meals he knew I couldn't resist.

He rested his hands on my shoulders. "I made the pepper soup, but I ordered the rest."

I chuckled. "Of course I know you ordered them."

He wrapped his hands around my waist but I pulled his hand away suddenly annoyed that he was feeling comfortable with me. How did he expect me to quickly forget the blows that had landed on my face?

"Tinuke, I'm sorry for the way I treated you in the past. Please forgive me."

I gazed into his eyes. There were tears again. Was he really repentant?

"I love you very much." He kissed my palm.

Again, I believed him. I knew I shouldn't but I did. I settled down and dug into the meals before me. Ranti laughed and shared some funny stories with me. It was like old times again. I deliberately pushed the fear aside and enjoyed every moment with him. When we were done eating, he chased me to the room and took me to bed.

Ranti's monstrous nature resurfaced again when I got out of the shower that night and changed into a nightie Shade had bought for me on my birthday. He was staring at the ceiling. I sat on the bed wondering what was on his mind.

"Tinuke, don't ever try what you did today." He pulled a bunch of keys from the bedside drawer and got out two keys before handling me the rest.

I sighed. "I'm sorry."

"Let me show you something." He opened his phone and scrolled to his picture gallery. He tapped on a video.

"Ranti, what is this?"

I felt like I had been punched in my stomach. Why would Ranti take a video of us having sex? He'd blurred out his face but mine was visible. Anger burnt in my eyes

"Why would you do something like that?"

He shrugged. "I knew you were going to try to break the bond we have."

"Ranti, please, if you really love me, you will delete that video."

"It is my love for you that made me do it in the first place." The smile disappeared from his face. "Don't ever think of leaving me. I'll post this on Youtube and on any social media platform I can lay my hands on. I will pay for ads to have this video fly and when I'm done spreading this, trust me, every man will despise you. Baby, I have nothing to lose. You will lose everything."

Ranti tuck the phone under his pillow and faced the wall. I sat there trembling, wondering when I would be free to live my own life. I left for the living room and sat there in the darkness, crying.

God, I didn't bargain for this. Are you even there?

I had no one to talk to. I felt lonely and frustrated. I wanted a drink badly. I found my way to the kitchen cabinet but it was empty. The bottles were gone. Nothing was in the fridge either except for some cans of Hollandia. I took two cans out and returned to the living room.

I felt a nudge to call Patrick. It was late already and I decided against it. I scrolled to my WhatsApp page, praying Tola would be online and I'd be able to talk to her. Would she even listen to me?

Ranti made me convince Tola that I had moved to another part of town so she could stop visiting. Whenever she called to find out my new place of residence, I had an excuse ready. She stopped calling me at some point.

Tola was offline. I scrolled down to Patrick's contact. He was online.

I hesitated, wondering if it was proper to chat with him at midnight. What will I say? He might not even respond.

Hello Patrick

I waited.

Typing

My heart pumped with hope. Patrick was typing a response.

Tinuke how are you?

Help me Patrick. I'm dying! *I am fine and you?*

I'm okay. I'm just about going to bed. Why are you still awake?

I closed my eyes for a moment, pushing back the pain already making its way up to my throat.

Patrick

Yes, Tinuke.

Please don't stop praying for me.

I have never stopped praying for you Tinuke. You want me to call you?

No, please don't. I can't talk right now.

Tinuke, Romans 10:13. For anyone who calls on the name of the Lord shall be saved.

Thank you Patrick.

The bedroom door opened. The light came on. Ranti was standing at the entrance.

"What are you doing alone in the dark? Come into the room now."

Like a dog answering his master's call, I stood up and followed Ranti back to bed. He pulled him close and patted my hair gently. I knew right there that I was never going to get away from him.



Ranti stopped taking his usual business trips. I left him at home and got back to meet him either staring at his laptop or cooking in the kitchen. It got me bothered. What happened to his chains of businesses? Why wasn't he meeting clients? I feared that something was wrong.

"Can I borrow some money from you?" Ranti asked one day as I got ready for work.

I didn't even ask him how much he wanted. I was more than glad to give him considering all he had done for me. I scribbled down the details he needed and left for work.

5p.m that evening, I was working on a report when my phone beeped. Alert. I went to my inbox. My heart fainted.

Bank alert.

1,000 naira.

Ranti emptied my account? I was boiling hot as I dialed his number. The line didn't go through. Shade entered my office. She was about to say something but stopped when she saw the look on my face.

"Let's go to my office."

I stood up and followed her out. I didn't even wait for her to close the door before exploding.

"Ranti withdrew all my money. Who does that? 1.2 million naira. He transferred everything to another account. What is wrong with this man?"

"You gave him your token and all the information he needed for that transfer right?"

"How was I supposed to know he would clear my account? Shade I have only a thousand naira left in that account. Even the one thousand naira. I cannot withdraw."

"Tinuke, calm down."

I stood there, vibrating. "Oh my God. This man is driving me crazy!" I let out a breath. "I should keep my personal affairs away from the office. I'm sorry for my outburst."

"It's fine. We are friends, aren't we?"

I nodded. "Thank you. Was there something you wanted to talk to me about?"

"Yeah. We'll be leaving for Canada in a couple of months. The trip is going to span for two weeks. There is an assignment dad wants you to be involved in. All expenses will be covered."

My eyes widened. I covered my mouth in surprise. "Oh my God! I can't believe this."

"So we have to get our travelling documents ready as soon as possible. By the way, you are spending the weekend with me and I will not take a No for an answer."

"I'll love to. But I need to pick up some things from the house first."

"That's fine. I'll give you the address. Tinuke, if you want salary advance, I could ask the accountant to send cash to you."

"I still have some money in my other account. Thank you Shade."

Before the close of work, Yetunde called to inform me she was in Lagos and wanted me to pick her up at Oshodi. It meant my plans with Shade for the weekend would be disrupted. I called Yetunde on my way out of the office.

"Why didn't you tell me you were coming today? I'd have left the island earlier. This is not Akure where I can just brisk in and out whenever I want."

"I'm sorry. I didn't expect the interview to be so soon. I just saw the mail early this morning."

"What interview?" I asked.

"I'll gist you when we see."

The traffic to Oshodi was crazy. For three hours, I was stuck on the third mainland bridge. By the time I picked up Yetunde from the park, it was already dark.

Oshodi brought back memories. The men with their fairly used wares, the fish seller who had pushed me while I was trying to move my box to a more comfortable position, the hullabaloo that frequented the motor parks. How time flies. It's been three years.

Yetunde was bringing me up to date on the factory affairs when Ranti strolled into my apartment. His face turned white when he saw Yetunde sitting beside me on the sofa. He had warned me never to bring in any visitor.

For a moment, our eyes lock and all I could read from his expression was, 'How dare you disobey my order?' My anger met his. I was still boiling from the money he had taken from my account that afternoon. But I knew I couldn't confront him in front of my sister.

"Ranti, meet my sister, Yetunde."

"I know you." Yetunde said, staring at him. Ranti recoiled.

He laughed dryly. "This is a small world. It's possible we have met somewhere."

"You finished from FUTA?" Yetunde asked.

Obviously, he wasn't comfortable with the line of conversation. "Yes, that was a while ago. You attended FUTA too?"

My sister nodded, her gaze fixed on Ranti.

"Nice meeting you." Ranti said and faced me. "I'll see you some other time."

When he left, Yetunde jumped to her feet. "What is this guy doing in your house?"

"Calm down babe. He's just a friend."

Yetunde clapped her hand. "I can't believe this. Do you remember my friend, Gloria? The one we went to see after she gave birth."

"I know Gloria. She dropped out of school when she found out she was pregnant."

"That was the guy that ruined her life. He was always coming to our school after he graduated. He'd take us out for lunch and leave us lots of gifts. Gloria fell for him. He left her when she told him she was carrying his baby. She even discovered he was married."

I sat there and pretended I didn't know Ranti was capable of such evil. I shook my head remembering how I had cursed the man who'd put Gloria in a family way.

"Please stay away from that man. Don't let him come here at all. I think he has mental issues."

"Yetunde, stay with me here in Lagos, please."

"If I get the job, I'll definitely stay here with you. But I have to return after the interview tomorrow. Mum needs me at the factory."

"One week, please. There is food. TV. Air-conditioner. You'll be very comfortable here. Please, don't go tomorrow."

"I have to, Tinuke. Mum needs me."

I sighed. "Okay. If you say so. How is your search for dad going?'

"I'm still on it. I know very soon, I'll find him."

Yetunde showed me a picture that ruined my evening. Kunle was standing on an altar in a suit that looked more like a coat. Beside him was a light skinned lady with two dark lines drawn across her cheeks. For several seconds, I stared at the picture.

"Kunle is married?"

"Yes o. Last weekend. You know the lady right?"

I looked at the picture closely. "She was in our fellowship back on campus. What does she do for a living?"

"I don't know."

I wanted to take my eyes off the picture but I couldn't. This was supposed to be my wedding. But here I was, stuck with a maniac not knowing if I'd ever be free. I felt very sad. Yetunde got up and said she was going to bed. I told her I'd join her soon.

I couldn't get Kunle out of my head. I remembered the day he proposed after we returned from the fellowship's annual evangelism outreach. It was the happiest day of my life. I didn't sleep well that night out of much excitement.

Those days in school, Kunle never said he loved me, still I read those words in his expressions. He could take out his eyes for me but you see those three words, 'I love you,' they never crossed his lips. He was hard and tough, always wanting things done his way, yet I'd gladly chose him over Ranti.

I entered the room, exhausted. Yetunde was sitting on the bed, flipping through a magazine.

"I thought you said you wanted to sleep."

Yetunde raised her head "I was waiting for you. Tinuke, I saw a box full of male clothes in your wardrobe."

My eyes widened in shock. I had completely forgotten about Ranti's box.

I went to the wardrobe, figuring out what lie to tell. I turned to my sister. "How do I say this? Ok. I didn't rent this apartment. It belongs to the company where I work and one of the staff lived here before he was transferred to another branch. He is yet to pick up the rest of his things."

My sister sighed in relief. "I was scared. The first person that came to my mind was Ranti."

I pushed her head playfully. "How can you allow such horrible thoughts into your head?"

Yetunde laughed and left for the bathroom. "Your house makes sense *abeg*. When last did I take a shower bath?"

I laughed. "You see why you have to leave Akure and move in here with me."



I got to work on Monday in high spirit. Over the weekend, I had completed an analysis of a financial report for Shade and I was really happy. But somewhere in my heart, I was afraid that something would ruin my joy that day. I pushed aside the negative thought and dropped my bag on my table before heading for her office.

Cynthia, Shade's secretary stopped me. "I don't think you should go in there. One lady came into the office this morning with the B.M. She was ranting right from the staircase."

"Okay. Can you tell her I am done with the report for Branco Oil."

"Sure." Cynthia responded.

As I turned to go, the door opened and a tall, slender woman, came out. Her lantern jaw, high cheekbones, thick lips gave her a very masculine look. She stopped when she saw me.

"Yes. This face. I saw the pictures. You are the woman Ranti has been messing up with."

My heart pounded. My sin had finally found me out. Shade stood behind her, helpless. This was no doubt the billionaire's daughter, Monica.

She hissed. "Of course, you have what he wants. Big butts. Fine skin. Pretty face." She turned sharply to Shade. "I swear Shade, if you don't get this slut out of this company, I'm going to ask my father to pull out every damn project we have here."

She stopped in front of me. "Listen, you whore. The apartment you live in belongs to my father. It is part of the properties that stupid man stole from me. I want you out of that house and tell Ranti, I'm back. I'm going to make his life a living hell."

She let her gaze rest on Shade. "I'm not kidding. I want her out of here."

She slammed the door and was gone. I still couldn't move. Was this a dream? What exactly was going on? Shade gestured that I join her in her office. She began to pace around.

"I didn't know Monica had divorced her husband a while ago. Nobody told me about it. I thought they were still married when Ranti came to my office asking me to take you in. That fool played me."

"But she just gave birth not too long ago. How come?"

Shade stopped and held the edge of her table. "Obviously, the child is for someone else."

"But my friends said, the child looks like the father."

Shade slumped into her chair. "I don't know and I don't care about the complicated life of spoilt brats like her."

"I came to tell you that the report is ready." I pushed the document towards her. She didn't look at it.

"Tinuke, you are a very diligent and hardworking woman. You've been a great friend too. But I have to let you go."

My heart stopped for a moment. This was not fair. I'd worked hard to get to where I was. "You are joking right?"

Shade stood up. "Listen, don't take this personally. It's a hard decision for me. Before Monica handed over the financial investments of one of her father's businesses to us, we were running at a loss. Somehow, some other persons got to the big clients before we did. Among all the branches my father opened, I was bringing in the least profit. It was so bad that Dad had to send Francis to help me. I wanted to make my father proud and I was able to achieve that when we had that deal with Monica.'

I had to convince Shade to keep me. I belonged here. "Shade, I get that you don't want to lose the big funds from Monica's father. But look at how far we have gone in two years. We can do well without them. We just need to know the right buttons to press."

Shade shook her head. "You can't understand how much I want to please my father. I don't like this job Tinuke. Corporate finance has never been my thing. Do you know how my heart cries every time I watch outreaches organized by some of these NGOs? Tinuke, from my teenage days, I've dreamt of starting an orphanage. I want to travel from one country to another, distributing relief materials. But I can't do what I want. I'm the only child and my father needs me here."

Her eyes were filled with tears as she spoke. "I need Monica's financial investments if I have to keep this branch running. They leave and I'm back to square zero."

Tears filled my eyes. I had no job, no house, no future. I was finished.

"It's okay Shade. I understand."

"I'll ask the accountant to pay your full salary into your account."

"I don't need your money. I'll be fine."

"Tinuke." Shade called softly but I hurried out knowing if I stayed any longer, I'd break down in tears.

CHAPTER 8

For several minutes, I drove aimlessly on the island. Where would start from? No house. No job. Maybe this car would be taken away from me too. It was time to return to Akure with my tail between my legs.

I drove towards the mainland with no destination in mind. When I had driven for what seemed like hours, I stopped at a bar and the only thing I thought of was getting drunk to death. I didn't want to wake up from this nightmare again.

I flung my heels to the back seat and pulled out a pair of loafers from under my seat before climbing out of the car.

Two men with pot-bellies sat at a table outside the bar. They kept staring at me as I walked in. It was obvious that I didn't look anything like a regular customer. This was evidenced by the way one of the waitresses in a skimpy dress that revealed flabby thighs rushed to attend to me. She was looking at my hair and I wondered if she could tell I'd gotten the human hair for almost three hundred thousand naira. She looked from my shoes to my dress and then she grinned.

"Aunty what do you want?"

"Just give me beer." I settled into one of the plastic chairs. She brought a big bottle of chilled stout and placed it before me. I raised the bottle to my mouth and took a long gulp and by the time I'd look down, five more bottles were before me. The waitress was sure helping me get drunk fast.

Can I ever block out the pain of the abuse I suffered from Ranti? Can I forget the look of disgust on Monica's face when she bashed me in front of Shade's office? Can I forgive Shade for throwing me out of a job I'd poured myself into?

I opened the second bottle.

Call Patrick.

Why should I call him? I didn't deserve his attention. Patrick was clean. I was filthy.

As I raised the bottle to my lips, someone snatched it out of my hand. It was one of the pot-bellied men I'd seen outside.

"Give me the bottle!" I shouted.

"Lady, this is not the solution."

"How's that your business?" My tears were mixed with mucus slipping out of my nose. The man pulled out a clean white handkerchief from his pocket and gave it to me. I blew my nose into it.

The waitress who had served me the drinks was clearly annoyed. "Oga Chinedu, leave the girl *na*? Make she drink if she want."

He turned towards her. "Shut up! Wetin concern you. You wicked. You see woman like this enter your bar dey cry like small pickin, you come put five bottles of big stout for her front. You no well."

The waitress hissed and returned to the inner room, murmuring. "Nonsense. Person go just come spoil person business. I go tell my Oga when him come."

Oga Chinedu faced me. "Who should I call to pick you up?"

I blew my nose into the handkerchief again. "Patrick."

He took my iPhone from the table, but was suddenly lost on how to operate it. I helped him out and scrolled down my contact list to Patrick's number. As he dialed, I reached for the bottle again but he grabbed my hand. Frustrated, I placed my head on the table.

"Hello, Mr Patrick." Oga Chinedu said, in a thick ibo accent. "Abeg come to ipaja and pick this fine girl up. She is in a beer parlour."

Chinedu tapped me. "He want to speak to you."

I took the phone from him. "Hello Patrick."

Patrick sounded hysterical. "Tinuke! What are you doing in a beer parlour in Ipaja?"

"Patrick, just come please."

"I'm at Abule Egba. I'll be there in a jiffy. Give the phone to the man."

Chinedu gave descriptions to the bar before giving me back the phone.

"Wey that girl." Chinedu shouted in pidgin. "Bring pepper soup come for her and come carry the nonsense wey you put for her front."

Some of the men in the bar clapped and hailed Oga Chinedu. The pepper soup arrived and he insisted on feeding me. When I took a closer look at the man, I saw he was elderly with white hair on his beards and some on his head. As he fed me, he told me jokes that made me laugh and I wondered if he had any daughter like me.

Patrick arrived just as the waitress cleared the second plate of pepper soup and the untouched drinks. I ran into his arms. He didn't push me away or hurry me out of a place I knew Patrick would never be comfortable sitting in.

Patrick shook Oga Chinedu's hand. "Thank you so much for calling me."

Oga Chinedu laughed. "Na my pickin. What else would I have done?'

I paid for the pepper soup and drink and when we got outside I took out all the cash in my wallet and gave Oga Chinedu. He rejected it reluctantly but took it when I pressed. His eyes widened when he saw the heavy one thousand notes I had placed in his palm.

Sitting beside Patrick, I wondered what he'd think about me. I wondered if calling him had been a good idea.

"You this girl, how did you get to ipaja? This is unbelievable."

"Where is your car?" I asked.

"I left it at my friend's place. I figured you drove down here. I'll pick it up tomorrow."

"I didn't know you come around here."

He smiled. "Iyana-paja axis is my base. I've not been here for a while but when my name came out for the lecturing position at the University of Ibadan, I had to come see my friend who works there."

"Oh, I thought you were already working with a private university."

"I was just an adhoc staff. This is full time." He hesitated. "So you want to tell me what happened?" He glanced briefly at me.

I started from the beginning. How I wanted to have my own car and a job. How I met Ranti the same day Patrick returned to church after his Ph.D.

I told him about the car, my job and the apartment Ranti got for me. I told him how Ranti had abused me anytime I refused to have sex with him. I narrated the incident that had happened that morning. I opened up completely to Patrick. I didn't care if he'd hate me later. I just wanted to get it all out. I was tired of hiding.

Patrick didn't say anything for a while as we approached the island.

"Have you made up your mind what you want to do? You don't have a job anymore."

I let out a breath. "I have to return to Akure. That's the only option now. There is nothing left for me here in Lagos. But I want to book a hotel room for some days and pull myself together before that happens. Can you take me home so I can pick up my box before heading for the hotel?"

He gave me a quick glance. "That's fine."

He parked outside my apartment and followed me in. I shivered when I saw Ranti standing at the entrance, hands akimbo. I sensed he must have got wind of his wife's arrival.

I was afraid to go in. I locked hands with Patrick.

"Hello Ranti." Patrick said. Ranti just maintained his gaze on me. I wanted to run away. When Ranti moved towards me, I retreated.

"Patrick, let's go." I said and began to move away. Ranti rushed towards me and tried to strangle me. A blow landed on Ranti's cheek. He let me go and charged at Patrick. Patrick dodged two blows but Ranti was coming at him very fast.

"Tinuke, run!"

I ran out to call for help and it was then I saw a car pull up in front of the house. Monica came out with two men. A police van stopped behind Monica's car. I ran back into the house. A blow had just landed on Patrick's face. I screamed.

"That's him!" Monica shouted.

Ranti looked up and saw two men running towards him. He dashed for the apartment but the men reached him before he had a chance to lock them out.

"Patrick!" Monica shouted and rushed to his side. He was bleeding from his nose. The men handcuffed Ranti's wrists.

"I'm fine." Patrick said, cleaning his nose with a hand towel Monica had given him.

Monica stood in front of Ranti. "Your days are over fool!"

Ranti spat on the floor. "Stupid woman. Still as ugly as I met you. You know it. Nobody wants you because you are ugly and shapeless. I was the man who accepted you for who you are. Even after the divorce, you pleaded for me to come. My strength birthed your third child.'

Monica flew into a rage. "You have no power over me anymore! I will see to it that you rot in jail!"

Ranti grinned. "You need me Monica, and no matter how much you deny it, I will forever be the man who gave you a reason to live."

"Take this mad man away and his whore!"

Two police officers moved quickly towards me. Patrick was alarmed.

"Monica, she is with me."

"I'm sorry I can't let her go. Do you know how much funds Ranti embezzled from my father's company? She is an accomplice. I'm sorry but she has to go too.

Monica turned deaf ears to Patrick's plea. I was led into the police van.

Patrick followed me to the police station. He held my hand in front of the counter as we waited for a police officer to lead me to the cell.

"Tinuke, I'm going to get you out of this mess. I promise." His voice was shaky.

I nodded, tears trickling down my face. He let go of my hand. I followed the police officer down a corridor. We got to the female cell and he opened the gate. I entered. He locked the cell and left.



There were four other women in the cell with me that day. Their faces were hard. Anger was what I saw in their eyes, not fear. They stared blankly at me while I settled in a corner of the room.

With my back against the wall, I wept.

Anyone who calls on the name of the Lord shall be saved.

Who had mentioned that scripture to me recently?

Patrick. I remember! The night Ranti showed me the sex video, I had chatted Patrick up on WhatsApp and he had quoted that verse.

I sighed. “God, are you there? I don’t know who else to turn to. I’m tired of my life. I’m so tired. I don’t care about money. Please help me.”

Anyone who calls on the name of the Lord shall be saved.

I went on my knees and bowed my face to the ground. “Jesus, I come to the cross where you shed your blood for my sins. Please have mercy on me. Oh God, I am weak and tired and fed up. I want you Lord.”

Tears formed a small pool on the floor in front of me. “Jesus, please.”

I went flat on the floor and stayed still. I remained there for a long time and slept off. When I opened my eyes, everywhere was dark. I sat up, wondering what the time was.

“You are awake.” A gentle voice whispered beside me.

Since it was dark, I couldn’t see which of the inmates was talking to me. But I felt a presence.

“Yes I am.” I responded.

“I’m going to die.” The woman said.

How do you respond to such an emphatic statement?

“Why would you say that?”

“I was arrested few hours before you got here. I poisoned my husband.”

“Why?” I asked.

“He’d been cheating on me since we got married. For years, I internalized the pain but I just couldn’t bear it anymore when he announced he was bringing in another wife. He said I was of no use to him since I couldn’t give him a child. As always, I smiled when he said that. I have never been known for emotional outbursts. I always remained unruffled, no matter how hard you try to upset me. But inside, I was a volcano ready to erupt. My husband looked at me one day and said, ‘doesn’t anything get to you?’ I wish he could hear my cry of frustration. Anyway, the morning he was supposed to pay the bride price for his new bride, I poisoned him.”

I sighed. “Is he in the hospital now?”

“He is dead.”

I gasped. “Oh no!”

“I was the suspect since I served him breakfast that morning. Yet it was difficult to pin it on me because my in-laws were around that day bustling about the kitchen in preparation for the ceremony. I denied having anything to do with it. I told them I only served my husband the food handed over to me from the kitchen.”

“But it was you who poisoned him?”

“Yes I did. Although I have lots of witnesses ready to prove that I wasn’t capable of committing such a crime, my mother-in-law believes I did it. She was the one who got me arrested.”

My head was as dark as the place I was. What advice was I supposed to give in this situation?

“Tomorrow when my lawyer arrives, I’m going to tell him I’ll plead guilty to the crime. I know my husband’s ghost will chase me to an early grave even if the judge acquits me.”

I reached into the darkness for her trembling hands and I could tell that she was crying. Her head fell on my shoulders. She wept uncontrollably. I wept with her too. We were two women doused in pain by choices we had made.

I imagined how for many years, she had held back the pain and told no one about her feelings but here she was, letting it all out.

After a long time she stopped crying. I wished I could see her face.

“I am Tinuke.” I said.

She sniffed. “Adunni.”

“How do you feel now?” I asked.

She chuckled. “I feel better. Thank you.”

“Adunni, there is only one person you can trust at this point in your life. I’m not promising that by having faith in this person, you’ll escape the consequences of your action but I can assure you that he’ll never leave you nor forsake you. For everyone who believes in him, where we are right now is just a transit to a better life. A life where there’ll be no pain or sorrow.”

“Please Tinuke, lead me to him. I want that same peace I saw on your face yesterday. If he’ll accept me, I’ll gladly follow him.”

I got a new convert that day. We talked about a lot of things and I shared a few scriptures I could remember off the top of my head.

"I feel so peaceful."

I laughed. "I know the feeling." Where had this confidence come from? How did I minister to someone when I was in a mess myself?

"Adunni, the devil will come at you. He'll bring guilt and make you feel like Jesus is not with you. Don't listen to his lies. Resist him and he will flee from you. You have a father you can talk to. He'll always listen."

"Tinuke, thank you." She said, calmly. We lay on the floor holding each other's hand and slept off.

It was the voice of a police officer that woke me up the next morning. I opened my eyes and turned to see Adunni lying beside me. Her eyes were opened. She smiled at me.

"I talked to God this morning. He said he'll never leave me. Thank you for leading me to Christ."

I couldn't stop staring at Adunni. She had a very sweet face and it was just impossible to believe that someone like her could think anything murderous.

A police officer appeared in front of our cell. "Who is Tinuke!"

I sat up. "That'll be me."

The police officer unlocked the gate. "You are free to go. Oya come out."

Adunni and I stood up, facing each other. I wish I could whisk her out of the cell. We hugged. When I pulled away, there were tears in my eyes. She had tears in hers too.

"I'll be praying for you."

She nodded. "Thank you."

I waved her goodbye and left with the police officer.

At the counter, Patrick was chatting with one of the officers while Monica and Tola stood towards the entrance. Tola's hands were across Monica's shoulders as they talked.

When Patrick raised his head and saw me, he moved away from the counter and pulled me into his arms. Tola shouted for joy and ran towards me. Monica just stood at the entrance, watching us. Patrick thanked the officers and we left the station.

Outside, three cars were parked. I recognized one of the cars as Funmi's Ford Ranger. It was the one she had taken me in after a dinner we had with her friends. I wondered where Ronke and Susan were now. How long had it been since I went to that church?

Wale, Mercy, Funmi and a woman I've not met stood beside one of the cars. They were all excited to see me and that left me puzzled.

Wale led me to the woman, the only face strange to me. "Tinuke, this is my wonderful sister-in-law."

"We call her Mimi." Patrick added.

Her smile was beautiful. There was something about her that immediately drew me to her.

"Since she married my brother, his life has not remained the same. My brother is now very soft and gentle." Wale pointed out.

Tola clapped her hands. "You should see Mimi dishing out word of knowledge. I want to be like Mimi when I grow up."

Funmi's hand hung around Tola's waist. She was laughing so hard it made me wonder the story behind her sudden friendship with Tola.

Mimi shook her head. "Don't listen to them. I'm just God's daughter as you are." She hugged me. "I'm happy to finally meet you."

Having all these people around me after what had happened embarrassed me. It would have been easier to deal with disgust and irritation but not this show of affection.

"There is an extra room in my house, if you need a place to stay." Mimi said.

I smiled, wondering how she knew I was battling with where to go from there.

"My house is opened too. But Mercy now lives with me. We can still manage together, if it's fine with you."

They waited for me to make a decision. Monica stood quietly by her car talking with Mercy. I asked to speak alone with Monica.

"I'm sorry for the pain I caused you by hooking up with your husband. I was stupid and foolish. I hope you find a place in your heart to forgive me."

Monica folded her hands. “Ex-husband.” She moved closer. “Did he ever hit you?”

I nodded. “Several times. He did worse than that. He made a sex video of us and threatened he’d upload it if I left him.”

Monica sighed. “I saw it coming even while we were dating but I was just too dumb to call off the relationship. I struggled with my body image and Ranti made me feel like a woman. It was so difficult to let him go. After the divorce, I went through depression that almost killed me. I had no friend in the States that I could confide in and I was too ashamed to talk to my friends here. I pleaded with Ranti to come over. I wanted him so bad. He came and hurt me again. I was pregnant when I saw your pictures on his phone. I just went crazy.”

I sighed. “I’m really sorry Monica.”

“He made me feel I was ugly and he was the only one who could accept me. I believed him. I needed him. I gave him whatever he wanted. He lived off me Tinuke. Thank God I reached out to a Christian psychiatrist. I don’t want to bore you with my horrible past. I just want to say I don’t have anything against you. You can continue to live in the apartment as long as you want.”

I shook my head. “I can’t stay there anymore. Too many painful memories.”

“I understand.”

Monica stretched out her hand. “It’s nice meeting you Tinuke.”

I took it. “Same here.”

As I returned to join the others, I knew exactly the next step God would want me to take.

Mimi.

I perceived there were things God wanted me to learn from her. I needed discipleship so badly. I needed a hand to guide me along this Christian journey.

“I’m going with Mimi.” I announced. Mimi smiled and opened the front door of her car for me. I climbed in.

“So you are abandoning me for Mimi.” Tola said, pretending to be angry.

I laughed and blew her a kiss.

“We are hanging out next week Friday. You wanna come?” Funmi said.

Funmi and hangout. I smiled. “I’m not sure. But I’ll get back to you.”

Patrick leaned on the car window. “You are not moving back to Akure again.”

“Patrick, I still might. It was a mistake coming to Lagos in the first place.”

Mimi placed her hand over mine. “We take it one step at a time. We follow Christ as He leads.”

Patrick moved away as Mimi drove out of the compound. I had many questions to ask this woman. Why had she come with the others? Had God sent her to take me in? The only time I’d heard about her was when Wale narrated how his brother had waited years with her to get his father’s consent.

I didn’t know where the next phase of my life would lead me to, but like Mimi said, my responsibility was to follow Christ daily.

Mimi turned on the stereo and I relaxed against the headrest. A song was playing. I remembered hearing that song when I was still in Tola’s house. It only made sense to me that day. I asked Mimi to turn on the volume a little more.

You are a good, good Father,
It’s who you are, it’s who you are,
And I am loved by you
It’s who I am, it’s who I am.

Those words left me teary. I felt God’s love in ways I’d never known and right there with my eyes closed, I prayed for Adunni. I asked God to reveal his love in the cell and see her through the trial.



I was right. Moving into Mimi’s house was the best decision I made. It was like starting my Christian walk from the scratch.

What had I been learning all those years?

Mimi opened my eyes to an understanding of the grace I had received. I learnt scriptures on my identity in Christ and the victory I had through Christ’s finished works. I began to see in many ways what it meant to know God.

For hours, Mimi sat with me in the dining room as we flipped from one epistle of Paul to another. I looked forward to morning devotions. Bro Femi, Mimi's husband, made the scriptures so easy to understand.

Even when I followed Mimi to her shop every day, the scriptures weren't far from our lips. Within three months, I had grown in the realities of Christ so much that I decided I didn't want to have anything to do with business. I wanted to be a missionary sold out to God's work. If it meant that I go hungry for days and stay out in the open, I was ready.

The thought of trekking from one village to another preaching the gospel and living in one hut with no electricity thrilled me. I wanted to run with this message. I wanted to be sold out to it.

One morning, as I prepared to go with Mimi to the shop, she entered my room.

"You have a visitor."

I raised my head. "Who?"

"Monica and one other lady."

"Thank you ma. I'll go see them once I'm done dressing up."

As Mimi turned to go, she stopped. "Tinuke, you are a very smart woman. Within the short time you got here, I've learnt so much about business than anywhere else. I think it's time for you to step out and do something bigger. You can't remain a staff in my shop forever."

I slide my feet into my sandals. "Who has time to be chasing the things of the world? Mimi, I'm thinking of signing up for full time missions. There is a short-term training coming up next month and I hope to attend. After that I'll join a mission body and get posted to a village to serve."

Mimi folded her hands, her gaze fixed on me. "Who gave you that instruction? The Lord or your flesh?"

I looked at Mimi, confused. "How can my flesh give out an instruction to suffer for the kingdom? You taught me that the flesh does not like the things of God. Mimi, there are men and women out there who live in shacks and barely have anything to eat. I need to be there with them. I want to be a village evangelist."

"It's a good cause." Mimi said, "But my question still remains, who is calling you to do this. Remember our study of the epistles? At the beginning of almost every book, Paul pointed out with all conviction from whom he received his call. If this is an instruction from God, then go ahead. I just don't want you going to the extreme because of your past experiences. We stay exactly where God wants us to be."

After Mimi left the room, I stood there, pondering over her words. Even if God had not expressly said anything to me, as long as my desire was not wrong, God should be fine with it. It was this thought I battled with as I left the room to attend to my visitors.

Shade was sitting with Monica when I entered the living room. Her eyes were filled with pain.

"Good to see you again." Monica said, after giving me a side hug. "Look who I brought here to see you."

I turned towards Shade. "Hello Shade."

"Tinuke I'm so sorry for the way I treated you. Please forgive me."

I smiled and motioned for her to sit. "Shade, if God could forgive me my sins, who am I to hold anything against you?"

Shade moved to the space beside me. "I've been trying to reach you for months now. Tinuke, we need you back at the firm. Most of the clients have been asking after you. Some of them have refused to do any business with us now that you are away."

"What of Francis. We both know he's way better than I am."

Shade sighed. "Francis has gone. He left for Paris shortly after you were fired. I need you Tinuke. Come and head the finance department. You'll receive double of what you earned as at the time you left."

I chuckled. I wish Shade knew that money held no place in my heart anymore.

"Shade, things has changed in the past few months. I'm sorry I cannot come back."

Shade sighed. "Okay. Can I at least have your new line?"

We exchanged numbers. As we walked out of the house, Shade turned, "I hope you change your mind."

"I'm not sure about that." I said. I was happy with my new life. What I wanted was to be in a village amidst children in threadbare clothes and women fetching water into calabashes from the stream.

CHAPTER 9

Later that evening, Patrick picked me up and we drove to an eatery around Admiralty road. After we ordered our meals, I told him of my plans to attend a training for missionaries, he didn't say anything.

We talked about other things. The two bedroom apartment he had just rented in Ibadan. His experience with the students in his class. His invitation to speak at the Ibadan Varsity Christian Union (IVCU) service. My daily experiences at Mimi's shop. The ideas I'd given to Mimi to expand the shop. We spoke for hours.

At a point, Patrick looked at me and said,

"See the way your eyes lightened up when you talk about business. Are you sure God is calling you to be a missionary?"

"Yes. You and Mimi cannot stop me." I started singing.

I have decided to follow Jesus
I have decided to follow Jesus
I have decided to follow Jesus
No turning back, no turning back.

Patrick laughed. "Alright."

We were interrupted by a staff of the eatery. They wanted to close up. It was then we realized we had been sitting down there for hours.

Instead of driving home, we sat in the car and talked. When Patrick started the engine, another gist came on and he turned it off and we talked some more. We went on like that for about an hour.

"You'll be leaving Lagos for Ibadan tomorrow?" I asked, as we drove towards V.I where Mimi's house was located.

Patrick nodded his head as he reached for a bottle of water. “I’ll be very busy for the next two weeks.”

“So you won’t come to Lagos at all?”

He shook his head. “Nope.” He winked at me. “Are you going to miss me?”

Of course I would miss him but I was too shy to admit it. “Who will miss you? Go joor.”

Patrick laughed. His eyes fell on the car clock. “Oh my God! It’s 11pm.”

My eyes widened. How did we stay out so late. I brought out my phone. “Oh no! Mimi has called me several times.”

When we got to the gate, it was locked. I had never stayed out this late before.

“Patrick, what do we do?”

Patrick dialed Mimi’s number.

“Hello.” I could hear her voice over the loudspeaker.

“Good evening ma. Please we are at the gate.” Patrick said.

“Ok.” She ended the call.

When Mimi opened the gate, I couldn’t tell if she was upset with me but when I saw her husband standing beside her, my heart fainted. Mimi might not say much but you see Bro Femi, he does not take nonsense.

“Patrick, look at the time you are bringing Tinuke back home.”

Patrick prostrated. “I’m very sorry sir. It won’t happen again.”

“Don’t try it again. Good night.”

I walked quietly into the house like a teenage girl preparing to be spanked. How did time fly so quickly? Patrick had been away from Lagos for almost a month and it felt like we hadn’t seen in years.

As I changed into my nightgown, Mimi entered the room.

“Tinuke, I don’t want you to think we are treating you like a child. You are an adult and even though you are under our roof, you are old enough to make your decisions. We are not in any way trying to be forceful. We just want both of you to be careful. We must not be ignorant of the devices of the devil.”

I nodded. “I’m sorry for staying out so late. It won’t happen again.”

She hugged me. “Goodnight dear.”

"Goodnight ma." I responded.

Yetunde called very early the following morning. She had found my father. I held my phone to my ears and for several seconds, I was stunned beyond words.

"Tinuke, are you there?" Yetunde asked when I didn't respond

"Oh-Yes. How did you find him?"

"I was in the kitchen preparing breakfast when I heard mum on the phone. She was talking so low I could hardly hear her. But from her tone, I sensed something was up. Out of curiosity, I went towards the window and eavesdropped on her conversation. I figured it was dad because she kept saying, 'No, you cannot see them. Where were you, when I suffered to take care of them?' When she ended the call and went into the bathroom, I took her phone and copied out the number."

"Yetunde!"

"Tinuke, I called him. Immediately I heard his voice, I knew I was talking to my father. I introduced myself. He was so happy. We talked for almost thirty minutes."

"Where was mum?"

"She had gone for prayer meeting. Dad said he has been trying to reach us."

"I don't believe him."

"I don't care what you believe. He is in Lagos and I'll be leaving Akure this morning to spend some time with him."

My heart beat quickened. "Dad is in Lagos?"

"Yes. He asked after you. I told him you were working in Lagos. Tinuke, let's go and see him."

I hissed. "You and who? I'm on mummy's side. I don't have any business with him."

After the call, I sat back on the bed, picturing how my father looked like. Had he been in Lagos all these years? I was just six when he left and I had just a blurred picture of him. Two years before he finally left us, he was hardly home but I remembered that the times he came home, he and mum always quarreled.

Mimi's kids were getting ready for school while I sat in the living room working on an organogram for Mimi's business. Mimi sold baby clothes but wanted to diversify to other baby products. We had worked on some ideas together and already we were seeing results.

Bro Femi came out of the room with a small box. He looked at me. "Has your friend called you to share the news?"

I looked at Bro Femi puzzled. "What news?"

"My father has finally given his consent. Wale and Tola's wedding can now hold."

"Halleluyah!" I clapped in excitement. "I have to call her."

Mimi came out of the kitchen, brushing her long wavy hair. "Sweetheart, let's go. You don't want to miss your flight."

He stood up. His son, Jerry, one of the most introverted boys I've ever met, took his box to the car. His sister, a complete opposite, had her hands wrapped around her father's waist. She was jumping and shouting, "Daddy, don't go!"

"Pray for me." Bro Femi said to me. "I'm travelling to Calabar to see my father. He's been admitted in the hospital and wants to see me. I hope to minister Christ to him. Please, pray that his heart will be opened to the gospel."

"Amen." I responded.

"Will you be able to make it to the shop today?" Mimi asked.

"I should once I'm done with this."

When they left, I had this urge to pray. I dropped my pen on the table and bowed my head. The moment I did, I saw myself back in Fidson Corporate Solutions. But this time, I was sitting in Shade's chair, talking to some of the staff. I opened my eyes.

"God, what's this?" I uttered aloud.

When I closed my eyes again and began to pray in tongues, I was again in a boardroom, talking to stakeholders. The picture disappeared and next I saw myself talking to men in suits and women in high-heel shoes. They all had laptops in front of them. It faded into a large room with hundreds of women standing up as I mounted the podium. Behind me was written in large prints. 'The Business Woman under God.'

I opened my eyes again and picked up a bible from the dining table. I flipped to the verse Patrick and I had read together the night before returned.

I will guide you along the best pathway for your life. I will advise you and watch over you.

"Lord, show me what you really want me to do. I surrender to your will."

I got dressed to join Mimi at the shop. When I reached to put my phone into my handbag, I noticed Tola had called me several times. I was about to call her back when my phone rang.

Shade.

I stared at the phone, battling whether or not to pick the call. I let it ring. It stopped and few seconds began to ring again.

"Hello Shade."

"Tinuke, my father wants to see you."

My eyes widened. "Your father is in Lagos?"

"Yes he came in two days ago. He wants to meet with you. Please Tinuke don't say no. Even if you don't want your job back, just come and see him."

"Where is this meeting taking place?" I asked.

"Can you come to my house this evening? I can come and pick you up."

"Don't worry, just send the address. I'll find my way there."

"Thank you so much Tinuke. Dad is so eager to meet you."

Since I'd given out the car Ranti bought for me, I had to call for a taxi to take me to Shade's house somewhere in Lekki. She meet me at the gate when I called to inform her that I had arrived.

"You mean you stay here alone?" I asked as we walked to the front door. The duplex was gigantic.

Shade smiled, her hand locked into mine. "You see why I insisted you join me here. Anyway, I have a housekeeper, a chef and some cleaners living with me."

"That's better. I'm not sure I can sleep alone in this kind of place."

When we got to the entrance, Shade stopped and faced me. "I've missed you so much."

"I missed you too." I said.

We hugged. She held my hand and we walked into the biggest sitting room I've seen in my life.

A man was reading newspaper when I entered.

That must be Shade's father, I thought.

By the left was a flight of stairs that led to only God knows where.

"Dad, she is here." Shade said, excitedly.

He put down the newspaper and stood up. He looked more handsome than I'd seen him in the picture in Shade's office.

Again, the face. The familiarity. The connection.

Shade's father began to sing.

Omo o, ke i pe d'agba

Omo o, ke i pe d'agba

Kekere, jojolo, mo feran re

Omo o ke i pe d'agba

Omo o ke i pe d'agba

Like a thunderbolt, my head exploded with hidden memories.

This is my father!

"Dad." I muttered.

I saw him holding me and dancing in front of our house singing this song. I remembered that whenever he return from his long trip, I'd beg him to sing the song to me. He'd put me on his shoulders and whirl me around singing.

I turned to Shade. "This is your father?"

Shade looked confused. "Dad, you know Tinuke?"

Footsteps hurried down the stairs. I looked towards that direction and there was my sister descending down the stairs. Was I dreaming?

"Tinuke!" She stared at me surprised.

Jesus, what's going on? I grabbed the edge of the sofa for support.

"Dad, your daughter finally made it here." Yetunde said, excitedly.

Shade looked from my father to me. "What's going on here? Tinuke is also my step sister? Dad, say something."

My father nodded and sat down. I was up on my feet and heading for the door. Yetunde called my name but I didn't answer. Shade blocked my path.

"Tinuke, I'm as shocked as you are. Please don't leave. Let's talk this as a family."

I felt like slapping her right there. How dare she refer to us as family? She enjoyed the privilege of having a father while I missed having him in my growing years. Was Shade not the child my father had with the Chief's daughter, a secret he'd kept away from us? All the while I was pursuing a life of comfort, ending up with a maniac and landing in police custody, she lived comfortably in this big house.

How ironic it was that I'd been chased out of a company owned by my father.

"Shade, please let go of my hand. I have some thinking to do."

I stormed out of the house.

I don't have a father, I repeated several times, anger burning through every part of my body.



Mimi was attending to a customer when I entered the shop and went straight to her office. I turned on her laptop and began to work on a market survey collation for different baby products.

"Are you okay?" Mimi sat on the armrest of the sofa, her palm gently rubbing my back. I nodded but didn't look up.

I could hear cries of babies from a distance. Mimi left the office when one of the sales girls called for her attention.

She was back an hour later while I tapped hard on the keyboard searching for more ideas to invent even though I couldn't find anything. Mimi moved the laptop away from the table but I stared at the place where the laptop had been.

"Spill." Mimi said.

I folded my hands and stared at the floor. "I met my father today."

"Mimi gasped. "Oh, that's interesting. How did that happen?"

"Remember Shade, the lady I said fired me because Monica wanted me out of that company?"

"Yes I remember. She came to the house asking that you take up the job again."

I nodded. "Today, I discovered that my estranged father is the owner of the company. Shade is my step-sister."

Mimi opened her mouth wide. "This is incredible! So you've been working for your father?"

I stood up, fuming. "Mimi, that's not even what is driving me nuts. It is the fact that I gave my body to a man who got a job for me in a company that I would rightly have been part of without his help. I am angry at myself at the way my life turned out. If I had stayed back at the boutique, Yetunde would have found dad and I'd have just left the boutique honorably for my father's company. The things I chased would have come without going through those horrible experiences."

Mimi stood in front of me and placed her hands on my shoulders. "Tinuke, you cannot change the past."

"But it doesn't change the fact that I was stupid. I am just a disgusting and useless-"

Mimi clapped her hands in my face. "Stop talking that way! What is wrong with you? Who doesn't have a past?"

Tears tickled down my face. "Mimi, you don't understand. Ranti dealt mercilessly with me. There was a day he threw a chair at me and it went straight to my chest. I thought I would die that day. Almost every week, I went to work with bruises on my face. Monica embarrassed me in front of the big mouthed Cynthia. Obviously, everybody in that office knows that I was Ranti's chic. I lost my dignity, my reputation, everything. Yet all the while, my father had access to all the things I so badly wanted."

"You have to forgive yourself. Leave the past where it belongs Tinuke. You've been handed a new slate."

I wiped the tears with the back of my hand. "I have to go back to Akure. Coming to Lagos was a mistake. Please can I get paracetamol?"

Mimi left the office and returned with a bottle of water and a sachet of paracetamol. I popped open two tablets from the sachet and swallowed them.

When I was done, I placed my head on the table. Memories of my childhood returned. My father putting me to sleep. Me sneaking to the door of my parent's room as they argued fiercely. My mother crying after my father walked out of the house nights after their arguments, Dad telling me stories of princes in big houses while Yetunde slept on his laps.

Why does life have to be so difficult?

We rode home in silence after work. As we got close to the house, a text message from Patrick entered my phone.

I thought I'd wait to say this until I see you but I can't just hold this anymore. I love you Tinuke. When I think about you and the times we spent together, my heart wells up with joy.

I stared at the message. Patrick loves me? How was I supposed to respond to that? I love you too? Patrick was my best friend, but couldn't we just stay that way? Love was complicated. Men were quick to say words they didn't mean. You give them your heart and their real nature shows up.

"I think the girls are around." Mimi said as she drove into the compound. Tola's car was parked in the compound. Funmi's car stood beside hers. I exhaled. I didn't feel like talking to anyone. Why did they have to come today of all days?

When we entered, the living room was empty but I heard voices from my room. Mimi opened the door to my room and right there on my bed sat Tola, Funmi and Mercy giggling like little kids. There was a wedding gown spread out on one side of the bed.

We hugged. I tried to push aside my depressing thoughts and join the flow.

Mimi held up the gown. "Our beautiful wedding gown has arrived. This is so beautiful."

Tola laughed. "Thank you ma. I can't believe I'm getting married!"

"Yes o! Finally!" Funmi exclaimed.

"Mimi, can I wear it for you to see. Wale insist I show the gown to you."

Mimi smiled. "I love it already. But of course, I'd love to see how it looks on you."

Tola looked radiant in that gown and a pang of jealousy hit my chest. She deserves it, I concluded. While she stayed chaste, I was busy spreading my legs for a man who made me his sex slave.

I don't deserve a good man, I reminded myself. I imagined Patrick proposing to Mercy. They'll do well together, I thought.

"Tinuke, you are quiet." Mercy said.

"Oh." I exclaimed and went to my friend who was standing in front of the mirror. I stood behind her.

"You are beautiful. Wale is so fortunate to have a beautiful damsel like you." I whispered into my friend's ears.

"Thank you." Tola smiled.

When I retired to bed that night. I read Patrick's message again and replied.

Patrick, please can we stay away from each other for a while. Thanks

He called immediately but I allowed it ring, unable to bring myself to speak with him. He called the next day. I ignored his calls.

A week later, I woke up with a strong desire to talk to Patrick. I was missing him badly.

I had a conversation with myself as I paced the room that morning.

"Tinuke, what is wrong with you. Where is this feeling for Patrick coming from? Haven't you learnt your lesson? Affliction shall not rise a third time! Receive sense please."

But the feelings wouldn't go away. As I washed the dishes later that evening, Mimi dropped a dirty tray on the sink.

"How are you feeling today?" she asked.

"I'm not fine! I'm still trying to put the past behind me and now I'm having feelings for Patrick. Mimi, can you see that something is wrong with me?"

Mimi laughed. "Patrick."

I stared at her. "Mimi. I'm saying something serious here and you are laughing. It's not fair."

She placed her hand on my shoulders. "While I was praying for you this morning, the Lord gave me a word for you."

I stopped washing and fixed my gaze on Mimi. I wanted so badly to have someone be God's mouthpiece.

"For all who have entered into God's rest have ceased from his own works even as God did from his. Tinuke, enjoy the rest God has provided. You are stressing yourself out. My dear sister, stop fighting whatever God is doing. Surrender."

I sighed deeply and walked out of the kitchen.

Patrick came to Mimi's house that weekend. We had just finished our morning devotion and Bro Femi was narrating his visit to his father and how he had stubbornly rejected the Christ. The knock took us by surprise. What could anyone be looking for so early on a Saturday morning?

"Patrick, it's not even 8a.m yet. Is everything alright?" Bro Femi said as he let Patrick in. My heart pounded in my chest. Patrick wore a serious expression on his face. I turned my eyes away when he glanced my way.

"Good morning sir. I'm sorry to show up unannounced. I came to see Tinuke."

At the mention of my name, my heart jumped but I kept my gaze on Mimi's husband. He looked at Patrick and then at me.

"Tinuke, why are you staring at me?" Bro Femi said. "Patrick came to see you and you are looking at me as if you've never seen me before."

When I still would not look at Patrick, he stood up. 'Two of you, just go and settle your issues. I'm going to my room."

Mimi tapped my shoulder after her husband disappeared into the room. "Go and get dressed."

I went in to take my bath. I must confess, seeing Patrick stirred up the feelings I'd been trying to bury. It was as if something leaped out of my stomach at the sight of him.

Patrick didn't say anything as we left the house but when we got into the car, he pinch my arm and I couldn't hold back the laughter. He kept pinching me even when I told him to stop. I reached for his ear and tried to twist it and threatened to bite him. He stopped and made a face at me.

We hugged. He gave me another pinch on my cheek before starting the car. He said he was upset that I'd not picked his call since he sent that message. All I thought of was how much I'd missed him.

"Tinuke, I'm sorry I sent such a heavy message via text." Patrick said as we settled on one of the slabs in Tara Gardens.

"I meant every word I said in that message. I want to spend the rest of my life with you."

"But Patrick, why? You know my history, you know everything about me. Why will you choose me?"

He took my hands. "Because I love you."

"I still don't understand."

"Do you have feelings for me? I mean, do you feel the same way I feel for you?"

I sighed. "Patrick, I-"

"No explanations. Just answer my question."

I hesitated. "Yes. I do. But I'm afraid."

He pondered on my statement and frowned. "You are afraid of me?"

I wasn't comfortable with the line of our discussion. "Patrick, please can we talk about something else."

He shook his head. "We are talking about this now. If we are going to have a beautiful family, we must learn never to sweep any issue under the carpet. Communication is how we'll roll in this relationship."

I rolled my eyes. "I've not accepted your proposal, have I?"

"Tinuke, why are you afraid?"

"I'm scared you will change to something horrible. I know you are a good person. I just don't know how to process a beautiful future with a man. I feel like men will shed love and affection for cruelty once they get what they want."

"Ranti has really messed with your mind."

"Patrick, I'm sorry."

He reached for my hand across the table. "Talk to God about my proposal. He is your father. I'll respect whatever response you give to me. If you want me to give you breathing space to figure this out, I'll be glad to do so."

"Thank you Patrick. You are so different. If the response is negative, we'll still friends right?"

He smiled. "Definitely."

We left the restaurant early in the evening. Patrick had set his alarm for 6p.m. The last thing we wanted was a repeat of the last incident when we got reprimanded for returning late.

On our way back home, I narrated the meeting I had with my father. I told Patrick how I felt and all the thoughts running through my head. It was so easy pouring my heart to Patrick. When we pulled in front of Mimi's house, he faced me.

"Tinuke, you are a beautiful and strong woman. You don't look any bit what you've been through. You have to believe that as you walk in the Spirit, the Lord will guide you every step of the way. If you don't believe, you won't see any healing in your emotions. The Holy Spirit has shed his love abroad in your heart but you must consciously respond to his love. When that happens, forgiveness will be easy. Right now, you need to forgive yourself and forgive dad."

My heart cut at those words. "Patrick pray with me, please."

Patrick held my hands. He asked God to place in me such love that goes beyond knowledge. He prayed for the grace to forgive. He asked God to heal my emotions and set my feet on solid ground.

As we held hands and walked into Mimi's house, Patrick talked about his students and the little group that met at his house for bible study but I wasn't listening. I just kept staring at him convinced he was the most handsome man on the earth. I wanted to say, 'Yes, I'll marry you.' but somewhere in my heart, fear roared.

Wale was in the living room with his brother when we entered. Tola came out of the kitchen holding a food warmer. Mimi followed with a tray. When Tola dropped the warmer on the dining table, she came around to hug me.

"Where have you been since morning?" Tola said in a low voice.

I chuckled. "I've been out with Patrick."

Tola cleared her throat. "Ehn, somebody should start talking o. I will not like it if I just stumble on a wedding card, Tinuke weds Patrick. I will not take it

easy with you. Later, you will tell me, we are just friends when something is going on underneath."

I covered her mouth. "Keep quiet joor."

When I glanced at Patrick, he smiled. It was obvious he heard. He turned to greet Mimi who was now walking towards the men."

"You are staying for dinner." Mimi announced to Patrick.

Patrick laughed. "I'd be glad to stay for dinner ma'am. What bachelor will not grab free food?"

I followed Tola into the kitchen. The aroma made my stomach churn. Tola dished out the edikaikong soup while I served fried goat meat.

The discussion over dinner wasn't what I expected. It left me flushed a little.

"I remember how Mojisola and I almost had sex before our wedding night." Bro Femi started. I noticed our beloved brothers, Wale and Patrick, sat up with their ears opened. I smiled and chewed the meat in my mouth.

"Is Mimi also Mojisola?" I whispered to Tola.

Tola nodded. "Mimi is just a nickname we call her."

"Okay." I said and turned my face to Bro Femi who was still talking.

"Moji was already getting frustrated because my dad refused consenting to our union." Bro Femi continued. "He was angry because I'd chosen to follow Christ instead of joining their fraternity. When Moji didn't pick my calls, I was so scared of losing her. I went to her house. She was crying and I had to hold her. Her head fell to my shoulder and my body did gbim! gbim!"

Wale coughed. Tola and I sighed. Patrick was listening with rapt attention. I wanted to hit Patrick on his back and say, 'Kilode, you too like gist.'

"So what happened?" Patrick asked.

The couple looked at each other and smiled. Bro Femi winked at his wife who continued from where Bro Femi stopped.

"I knew if I raised my head from his shoulder, we were going to kiss and that could lead us to something we didn't plan for. We were so vulnerable at that point. So I let my head stay on his shoulder."

Bro Femi shook his head. "Mehn, Emotions are strong. I actually lifted her head from my shoulder and if not for the child that screamed from behind

her window, I'm not sure we'd have had the strength to keep our hands off each other."

Mimi fed her husband a piece of dry fish. I imagined doing same to Patrick.

"The temptation was stronger because I lived in a face-me-i-face-you house. My chair, bed and everything were in one room." Mimi said.

Wale laughed. "Ah! see temptation."

Patrick glanced at me before returning his attention to Bro Femi. That look said, 'are you listening? We have to be very careful.'

Mimi continued. "The second time we got really close to having sex, we were at Femi's place." Mimi said. "I felt since he had a living room, we would be more conscious. But Femi likes to play ehn. Forget the stern look he carries around, my husband can play. But on this day, we just ended up playing and tickling each other and an alarm rang in my head when I felt his hand unbuttoning my shirt. We were right on Femi's rug in the living room."

Bro Femi shook his head. "I was so angry with myself that day. That was not the first time Moji would come to my house. I'd been able to control myself."

Mimi smiled. "That day we decided we were going to only meet in public places. If I had to be in his house, there must be a third party."

None of us said anything for a long time. It was as if silence was part of the conversation.

Femi turned to Wale. "Now is the time to be more careful. There is a possibility for you to think you can handle sexual temptation because your wedding is close. The devil never rests. Be at alert." Bro Femi turned the other way where Patrick and I sat.

"If you discover that every time you are alone together, it's difficult to keep your hands away off each other, avoid places where you can easily be tempted. Don't wait until emotions are on fire before making deliberate decisions."

"A word is enough for the wise." Mimi added. "Let's finish our meal."

Bro Femi swerved into other discussions while I concentrated on my meal. When I raised my head, Patrick was staring at me. I felt heat flood my entire body he steadied his gaze with mine.



I called Yetunde that night after I showered. We had not spoken since I walked out of Shade's house.

"I thought you were never going to talk to me again." Yetunde said.

"Why shouldn't I? I just needed time to process the news."

"I'll be travelling to Akure tomorrow."

"You mean you've been in Lagos all this while?"

"Yes. Tinuke, mum's in the hospital. The doctor is saying they'll have to amputate her leg."

I sat down, shocked. "But they operated on that leg after the accident. What happened again?"

"We don't understand. Dad has booked an appointment with a doctor here in Lagos. An ambulance will be going to Akure to pick mummy tomorrow. But I'll be going in a separate car with Dad's driver. Can we go together?"

I hesitated. "Sure. But why didn't mum tell me this when I called her last week?"

Yetunde ignored my question. "Tinuke. I really wish you could get to know Dad, he's a wonderful man."

"Does Mum know that you have met him?"

"Not yet."

We left for Akure early the following morning. Yetunde and I sat at the back seat of a white Mercedes-Benz while the ambulance sped in front of us. It'd be my first time back in Akure since I came into Lagos. The thought of going back to Akure left me with mixed feelings.

At the hospital, mum was wheeled out and carried into the ambulance. Before the paramedics shut the van, she smiled at me and said, "Thank you for taking care of me, Tinuke."

Mum obviously thought I paid for the treatment. When I looked at Yetunde, she just shrugged.

"I'm going with mum." Gbenga announced.

He dipped his hand into my bag and pulled out my purse before I could protest. He got out four thousand naira notes from my purse and jumped into the ambulance.

"I'll be staying back in Akure for some days." I said to Yetunde after the ambulance disappeared out of sight.

Yetunde moved towards the Mercedes-benz. "I'll have to leave now. I need to be with mum at the hospital."

I nodded. "I understand."

The house was empty when I walked in later that day. The worn out sofas were still spread out in the living room. But the dining chairs had been replaced. There was a new Nexus deep freezer close to the entrance of the kitchen.

My old room was sparkling clean. The bed was made. Clothes neatly arranged in the wardrobe. Books piled up on the table. Yetunde was still the neat freak I'd always known her to be.

I placed my knapsack on the bed and brought out my laptop. I played music, listened to sermons and prayed. I read scriptures, jotted down the things God was saying to me. It was interesting being away from the buzz of Lagos.

I stayed on the bed for a long time and by the time I stood up from the bed, it was almost midnight.

I was hungry and went into the kitchen to look for what to eat. There was nothing. I opened the freezer. Nothing interested me. I shut it close and returned to the room. I had brought some chocolates and cans of malt. I settled for those while I listened to another sermon. It wasn't until 3a.m that I was able to catch some sleep.

I saw Kunle the following evening on my way to the factory. I was about crossing the road when someone called my name. I turned and there was Kunle standing with a woman whose round stomach was slightly showing behind her long gown.

This must be his wife, I thought. I had seen her from the wedding picture Yetunde showed me.

"Brother Kunle." I said, kneeling slightly. I knew how Kunle liked it when I greeted him that way.

He grinned and quickly put his hand around the woman's waist. Why he did that, I can't say. But I was not moved.

"I didn't know you are around." Kunle said.

"I came in yesterday. This is your wife?"

He nodded and kissed the woman on her cheek. She smiled and snuggled closer to him. "Yes this is my beautiful wife."

I was sincerely happy for him. "Nice."

The woman stood there like a robot. She didn't say, 'Hello Tinuke.' or 'Good afternoon.' I wasn't surprised anyway. Back at school, she had always been very introverted, and you'd rarely notice her at the fellowship.

Kunle leaned close to his wife. "Go inside the church and wait for me."

She smiled and left. Kunle thrust his hand into his pocket.

"Look at what you missed, Tinuke. This was supposed to be your life." He pointed at the building behind him. It was an uncompleted two storey building but the ground floor had been plastered and in front of the building was written, FIRE FOR FIRE DELIVERANCE AND MIRACLE CHURCH.'

"My church is growing. We are almost done completing the building. I wish you listened to me, Tinuke. We would have done wonders for the Lord together."

"Bro Kunle, I'm happy for you. This is what you always wanted."

"When are you getting married?"

"Soon."

We were now walking towards my house. I'd changed my mind about going to the factory and was returning home. Right there, I realized that I couldn't stay in Akure. This was not where God wanted me to be.

I miss Lagos. I miss sitting in a board meeting and pulling out ideas. I miss sitting with clients, talking about their issues and proffering solutions. I suddenly felt nostalgic about returning to Lagos.

"Who's the brother?" He asked. The very thought of Patrick made me smile.

"He is a lecturer at the University of Ibadan and he is passionate about God."

The smile disappeared from Kunle's face. When we got to the house, I stood in front of him.

"Kunle, you are the first man I ever loved. Thank you for your sacrifices."

Kunle sighed. "I still love you Tinuke. You are the only woman who makes my heart beat so fast."

I laughed. "Brother Kunle, so you can say the word, love. This is interesting."

He grinned. "That was the first thing my wife complained about. But why are women so weak? What does the word "I love you" add to your life? I've told her she won't hear that word from my mouth again. I can't stand weak women. It's the reason I miss you. You can endure under any pressure. We were made for each other Tinuke."

I smiled. "Life happens Bro Kunle. I'm glad you are pursing God's call. I wish you all the best."

He stood there staring at me. I didn't know what else to say. I could see pain in his eyes. But I knew even if I wasn't in love with Patrick, I still would not settle with Kunle.

Our thinking pattern, ideologies, outlook to life, dreams, goals differ greatly. We were like parallel lines, like oil and water.

Kunle turned away without saying goodbye. I watched him go, his shoulders slumped. He turned to look at me before continuing down the street. I knew right there that it would be a long time before we met again.

CHAPTER 10

I got a message from my father on the eve of my departure from Akure.
Tinuke, I want to take you out on a date. Tomorrow. Yellow Spice Restaurant. 6p.m.

I pondered whether or not to accept the invite and finally decided to see him. Mum's operation had been successful but the doctor had instructed she stayed back in the hospital. I was glad she didn't have to amputate the leg again.

Dad was in the restaurant when I got there. He looked so cute in a black jacket and jeans. After we ordered, Dad leaned forward, his eyes boring into mine.

"I miss my daughter."

The anger I felt towards him for abandoning us had disappeared. I was upset that I wasn't angry anymore. Why couldn't I rant the way I did when I first saw him. Why can't I just walk out and show dad how angry I was? Why should I just forgive him?

For God is working in you, giving you the desire and the power to do what pleases him.

I sighed and pushed my fork around my salad.

I had so many questions to ask my father. "Why did you leave us?"

He hesitated. "I was in love with Funke long before I met your mum."

"Who's Funke? Shade's mum?"

He nodded. "We went to different schools but we found a way to see each other even though her father didn't approve of our relationship. When I graduated from secondary school, I took up apprenticeship with an electrician because there was no money to proceed to the university. Funke was in SS2 then and we still met every afternoon."

My father stopped to catch his breath. “When Funke left secondary school, she got admission into the University of Ibadan and her parents moved to the north. I proceeded to the Federal Polytechnic, ile oluji.”

“Was that where you met mum?”

“Yes. Your mum lived in the same compound with me. She always brought food to my room. She liked me a lot but Funke was all I thought about. Twice every month, I travelled to see Funke in school. Until one day, her father walked into her apartment and right there I was on her bed in boxers. They got police to arrest me. I was flogged so badly. I returned to my school and decided it was over with Funke. That was how your mother and I got intimate. She moved into my room that semester.”

Why didn’t mum tell me the full story of what happened between her and my dad. “But mum never got to finish HND.”

The meal dad ordered was untouched. I hadn’t tasted mine either. We sat across from each other, looking grim but determined to mend whatever was left of our relationship.

“Yes, she had to stop schooling because there was no money. The little money I got from repairs went to food and my school fees. Things became difficult when I began my HND and your mum was pregnant with you. By the time I rounded up school, Yetunde had arrived. I went berserk when she announced she was pregnant with our third child some years later. Shortly after Gbenga was born, Funke lost her father. She came to Akure for her father’s burial and searched for me. It was then, I discovered she had a child for me.”

“You didn’t know she was pregnant before Gbenga was born?”

He shook his head. “No I didn’t. I had completely cut off from her. She brought my daughter to the funeral and said she loved me and wanted me to come to Abuja where her father had some properties. She knew I had a knack for business and for me it was an opportunity to pursue my dreams. Some weeks after she returned to Abuja, I told your mum I had a job to do for a client in Lagos. I never came back. I sent a letter to your mum telling her I wasn’t coming back.”

I stared hard at my dad. “That was really cruel of you to do. We were not important to you. Why do you want us back?”

His eyes were full of pain. “Tinuke, I’m sorry. It was a mistake. I shouldn’t have abandoned you and your siblings.”

“We suffered dad. We went through hell.”

“Tinuke, after I married Funke, I wanted to get back into your lives, but your mother refused. She wouldn’t even allow me talk to you.”

Tears stung my throat. “Why would she, after the way you ran off like that!”

He sat back, defeated. “I know. I don’t deserve your forgiveness or that of your mother. I was selfish to disappear like that. For years while I lived with your mother, I consumed lots and lots of old business magazines. I had these business ideas that I played with in my mind and when Funke presented that opportunity, I jumped at it. I take the blame for whatever has happened. Forgive me please.”

I sighed. “I forgive you but you have to get mum’s forgiveness too. You also have a son who needs you.”

“Gbenga was at my place yesterday. We had a long talk.”

“That leaves mum then.”

He poured the grape juice into the empty cups. “I’m hoping I’ll be able to talk to her. I messed up.”

After that, it was easy to talk with my father. We talked between mouthfuls and when we finished, the waitress cleared the table and returned with dessert. The ice-cream was thickly covered with nuts and milk chocolate. I scooped a spoonful of ice-cream to my mouth and relished the way it melted on my tongue. When I grinded the nuts with the cream, I was taken to another realm. I didn’t want the ice-cream to finish.

“For goodness sake, what did they put in this ice-cream?”

My father watched me, smiling.

“Shade told you I was fired right?” I asked, when I had emptied the cup of ice-cream.

He nodded. “When she did, I was not happy at all. I didn’t even know you were my daughter but the reports I got on the deals you landed were astounding. I told her if Monica decides to pull out, so be it. We can’t be puppets to anyone. I wanted her to find you and bring you back to head the finance department.”

He continued. “Then one day, I was going through a file and I saw your name which I already knew but the surname was one I was familiar with. I’m not sure if your mum told you, but she had insisted you bear her father’s name until I pay the bride price. Anyway, that day, I asked myself, could this be my daughter? I told Shade to send me your picture as well as other details. I shouted when I saw your photograph. You are a younger version of your mother. You took my fire though.”

I chuckled. “That love for corporate finance. That had to be from you.”

“Tinuke, please come back to your company.”

My company. That sounded sweet. “I need some time to think through this.”

When we left Yellow Spice, we went to the hospital where mum had been admitted. At first I was confused if I was in a wrong address. It looked more like a hotel than a hospital until I saw some nurses at the reception. I asked directions to mum’s ward while dad waited in the reception. A pretty nurse led me down a narrow hallway and into a room.

Mum’s room room looked nothing like the hospital rooms I’d seen. There was a flat screen, a fridge, lovely drapes, shinning floor.

Yetunde was sitting on the bed, while my brother sat beside her. Their faces were drawn. Mum’s face was smeared with tears. I panicked.

“What’s going on here?”

“She knows dad paid for her treatment. She is mad at us.” Gbenga said.

I sat on the edge of the bed. “Mum, you have to forgive dad. Please let it go. Please.

Mum sat up and I quickly placed a pillow against her back.

“After everything I did for all of you. Where was your father when we slept out in the cold? Where was he when I had to go hungry for days so you could eat? When Gbenga was three months, he left us.” She pointed a finger at us. “I can’t believe you did this to me. How could you accept a man who left us for another woman?” She lay back on the bed and faced the wall.

We wrapped our hands around her. Yetunde planted kisses on her palms while my brother Gbenga drew lines with his finger on her bandaged leg.

"Mum, we love you and we will never forget the sacrifices you made for us. But we can't deny we have a father." I said in low tones.

Mum turned sharply, eyes moist. She stared at me a long time and faced the wall again.

"Dad is outside. He wants to see you." I announced.

Gbenga's eyes lit up. He broke into a smile but the smile quickly disappeared when he saw my mother's eyes fixed on him.

"I don't want to ever set my eyes on him! I want to go back to Akure."

Yetunde touched my mum's ears. "Please, just hear dad out."

"I said No! Can someone just get me out of this place?"

"The doctor said, you can't leave until next week." Yetunde reminded her.

"I don't want to see him." My mother insisted. "Yetunde, return the two million naira he sent to you. Tell him he can't buy me with his money."

I stood up and went out to meet my father who was sitting at the reception.

I shook my head. "She doesn't want to see you. She is already mad at us for contacting you."

My father let out a deep breath. "I understand. Can I pay a sum into your account monthly for her upkeep? I just don't know how to make things right."

"What's your wife's reaction to all these?" I asked as we stepped out of the reception.

"She is concerned too. I keep her informed with every progress."

Dad reached into the car and pulled out an envelope from a folder.

"Can you give this to your mother? I poured out my heart into the letter."

I took it from him. It was sealed.

He placed his hand on my shoulder. "Tinuke, let me know if you need anything."

I smiled. "Yes sir."

"Can I hug you?"

I nodded. He pulled me into his arms. Tears welled up in my eyes.

"I love you. Thank you for giving me another chance."

I waited till the jeep pulled out of the hospital. When I returned to the room, my siblings were singing for my mother. I joined in and we began to tell stories from our childhood. Mum was still facing the wall, but she was smiling.

That made me happy. No matter what, our mother's sacrifices will always remain in a safe place in our hearts.



The police officer who had kept me up to date on Adunni's case called me on my way back to Mimi's house. Judgement would be delivered the following morning. He didn't think Adunni would get away with the murder of her husband. She had pleaded guilty to poisoning him.

I stayed up all night and prayed. During the devotion, my mentor raised a prayer on her behalf. We asked God to intervene and make this easy for her.

I went alone to court that morning. My heart cried when Adunni was brought into the court room, handcuffed.

Memories of the night in the cell room returned. Her emotional abuse by her husband, the mockeries by her mother-in-law when she couldn't conceive, her conversion at the cell room.

Our eyes met as she was led to the dock. She smiled sadly and I noticed there were tears in her eyes. My eyes were filled with tears too.

Adunni was sentenced to life imprisonment. They called it manslaughter.

I sat in the courtroom numbed by the pronouncement. Why didn't God hear our prayers? Why didn't Jesus do a miracle and touch the heart of the judge? For goodness sake, didn't the bible say, old things are passed away?

Tears ran down my eyes as I watch Adunni walk out of the court room, handcuffed, flanked by two uniformed men. She was led to the truck that would take her to the place she'd spend the rest of her life.

Outside, a woman rolled on the floor wailing. It was not hard to tell that it was Adunni's mother. A man stood near the woman, eyes dried, jaws set. Adunni glanced at me, her face smeared with tears.

"Tinuke, I'm not spending the rest of my life in prison. God told me that yesterday. I'm coming out. You'll see what God will do. Will you visit me in prison?"

I nodded, unable to stop the tears pouring down my face.

"When you come, please bring me some books. I want a bible too. And check up on my parents. Let dad know that I have accepted Christ."

We stood and waited until the truck left the court premises. From the little opening, Adunni waved at us. Her mum was on her feet now, staring at the truck as if she had just been stabbed. Then she fainted. Some of the women who had come with her splashed water on her face. She opened her eyes and stood up. She began to wail again.

I walked over to where Adunni's father stood. His lips moved but I couldn't understand what he was saying.

"I'm sorry about your daughter." I started. He looked at me and continued to mutter words. "Adunni said to tell you she has finally accepted Christ into her life."

His lips closed shut and he stared at me. "She did?"

I nodded. "I was in the cell with her when it happened."

He wiped the tears already gathering in his eyes and pulled me into a warm embrace.

"Oh thank you. I know Jesus will never leave her. He'll never forsake her." He said in a soft voice, barely audible.

It made me wonder how a father could still trust Jesus after a sentence like this.

My birthday came two weeks after I'd decided to return to my father's company. Dad flew in from Abuja on the eve of my birthday and asked that I come to the house for a little celebration. Patrick was in Lagos since the university where he worked was on a semester break.

On my way to see dad the morning of my birthday, I sent Patrick a text message.

I will marry you. Tinuke.

Patrick called me less than a minute after I sent the text. When I informed him about the celebration and asked if he could make it, he said he was at the

hospital with his mother for a check-up. He promised to join me soon and asked that I send the address. He thanked me for accepting his proposal.

I met a full house when I stepped into the living room that morning. Dad, Shade, Yetunde, Gbenga and a handsome young man whose hand didn't leave my step-sister's waist. A large cake was on the center table flagged by bottles of wine.

"Happy birthday!" They shouted.

Dad led the 'Happy birthday to you' song and I stood there watching as they danced in a circle. I wished Patrick could get to the house fast. Dad had a beautiful bass voice and I couldn't help but laugh out loud.

We did the father daughter dance. Dad held my hand and we moved from side to side.

Omo o, ke i pe d'agba
Omo o, ke i pe d'agba
Kekere, jojolo, mo feran re
Omo o ke i pe d'agba
Omo o ke i pe d'agba

Patrick came in while Dad addressed us. My father winked at me when he settled beside me on the sofa. He'd been dying to meet Patrick after I had told him Patrick's role in helping me get back on my feet.

"Thank you for giving me another chance to be a better father." Dad said. "I'm sorry again for whatever hurt I've made you go through and for not being there all those years." He looked at Shade and back at us. "Shade will be taking up a job at a children's foundation in Abuja."

My eyes widened. "What! Shade is leaving Fidson?"

Shade grinned. "Yes, girl."

My father called her to his side and placed his hand on her shoulder. "Yes she is leaving Fidson. The last thing I want is for her to live my dreams. I followed my passion. You all should do same. You must pursue what brings you satisfaction. Yetunde has decided to travel out of the country to pursue a master's degree. She has my full support. I'll be enrolling Gbenga at a school in Abuja until he passes his WAEC exams. That leaves you Tinuke. Lagos branch

is yours to run. If you will kindly take my offer, I want you to head the Lagos Branch of Fidson Corporate Solutions."

My mouth opened. I glanced at Patrick, speechless. He smiled and squeezed my hand. I returned my gaze to my father, my mouth still opened.

"I'll take it." I said without thinking.

That was when the party began. The caterers came in with silver trays stack high with different delicacies. I couldn't eat. I was too excited.

From where I sat, I watched Dad talk to his two future in-laws. They laughed easily with my father and I was curious to know what my father was saying that held Patrick's attention. Shade perched on the armchair and joined me as we watched them together.

"You'd think they've known each other a long time."

I smiled. "So when is our wedding?"

"Next month, hopefully."

I looked at her, surprised. "So fast. You didn't tell me about him when I was still at Fidson."

"It wasn't so serious then. I was still checking him out. So when is yours?"

I shrugged. "I don't know yet. Next year, maybe.'

"That's too far. This is May. You can still fix your wedding before the end of the year."

The gifts came afterwards. Dad got me a black Toyota Venza. Shade gave me a Mac laptop. Yetunde presented a novel, As the shofar blew by Francine Rivers and a collection of Karen Kingsbury's Redemption series. Gbenga got me a wristwatch. Even Shade's fiancé had a journal for me. The best gift I received that day was from Patrick.

He opened a small box and brought out an engagement ring which he slid into my finger.

Dad looked at his two future sons-in-law. "I don't joke with my daughters. You must take good care of them."

Patrick's gaze rested on my face. "By God's grace, I will." When I looked up, Shade's head was on her fiancé's shoulder. They were giggling like teenagers. Tears were pouring down my face like a baby.

The birthday celebration ended quickly because in Lagos, time is money. Patrick drove me in my new car to work. A meeting had been scheduled in the conference room for 11a.m. I sat with Dad as he introduced me to the members of staff as the new branch head of Fidson Corporate Solutions. He made it very clear that I was his daughter and when the other employees looked at him in disbelief, he emphasized, 'biological.'

My eyes scanned the room. I had worked with most of these people and now I was going to lead them. I missed Francis and wished he was back. Not in my wildest dreams would I have imagined returning to Fidson.

Oh God! Is this how you work? Is this how you take a person's mess and make something out of it? But why are you showing me so much love?

I didn't get any response. His silence spoke a thousand words. Later that evening, we saw dad off to the airport. He had to return to Abuja to prepare for a meeting with a Belgium company. Yetunde sat behind me in the car, working on her school application.

"Did mum agree to Gbenga moving in with dad?" I asked Yetunde as we approached the airport.

"Yes she did. I was so surprised. I wonder what Dad wrote in that letter to mum."

Patrick glanced at my sister from the rear mirror, "Tell mum we'll be visiting next weekend."

Yetunde smiled. "I called her this afternoon. She can't wait to meet you."

We pulled behind Shade's car and climbed down. We waited outside until Patrick and Shade found a place to park and then we walked into the airport together. I couldn't help but smile at my brother in a fine t-shirt and jeans with matching sneakers. He looked so different from the Akure boy I knew.

We waved at the men, my father and my brother, as they left for the departure lounge. Shade had decided to stay back for a while to properly hand over to me. Yetunde was returning to Akure to help mum until her travelling papers were finalized. As I locked hands with my husband-to-be, all I could think of was the faithfulness of God.

I slept over at Tola's place that night. Mercy had travelled to Akwa-Ibom to see her parents and so we were alone in the house

"Finally! You said Yes to Patrick."

I frowned. "How did you know? I was supposed to break the news to you."

Tola laughed. "I should have just pretended I didn't know. Patrick informed Wale. Wale told me."

We sat in the living room and talked about love and men and marriage. I noticed that nothing had changed since the last time I came to Tola's place.

"I was asked to convince you about something." Tola said.

I stared at my friend, curious. "What is it?"

She moved closer to me. "Can we get married the same day? You know, both of us starting this marriage journey together will be fun. Patrick is fine with this."

"Your wedding is just two months away. I can't get married in two months Tola."

"We can move it to November, if you want."

I wrapped my hand around Tola's neck. "Girl, you've been waiting for years for this day. Adding another four months doesn't seem reasonable."

"It's fine by us. November is almost here. We actually thought of November 17th."

"We?"

The three of us."

I stood up and laughed so hard. 'Wait, I just said yes to Patrick this morning. How did you guys already fix my wedding date?"

"Like I said, it's just a suggestion. You can say no, even though we will like for you to say yes."

"I have to call Patrick."

I dialed Patrick's number. Tola tried to distract me by blowing air into my ear. I stood up and moved towards the dining table. She followed me. I moved back to the living room. Tola pulled my free hand.

"Tola stop!" I said, trying to jerk free.

Patrick came on the other line. "Hello, my dear queen."

"Don't queen me abeg. How can you fix my wedding date without my consent?"

"Sweetheart, it's not like that. We were just brainstorming and ehm.. you know…we thought you might like the idea. If you say No, we have no choice but to accept on your terms."

I chuckled. "E ku ise o. Una weldone."

"Is that a Yes?"

I didn't respond immediately. Tola was tickling and winking at me. I could hear Wale in the background singing, 'My soul says yes, says yes.'

"You can think about it, if you want. There is no pressure, Tinuke." Patrick said softly.

"Yes. November 17 is fine."

Excited, Tola held my waist and pulled me across the living room. My phone flew out of my hand and landed on the floor. As I crawled to pick it, Tola jumped on my back and began to pull at my waist.

We hung out that night, stopping at Funmi's house to pick her up. It wasn't until midnight that we returned to the house.

Everything went very fast. My introduction ceremony where I finally met Patrick's parents. My trips to Balogun market for my wedding accessories, selection of hall for the event, the pre-marital counselling sessions in church, Shade's wedding in Abuja, our visit to my mum in Akure, my meetings with clients. I felt like my life was on a spindle.

I visited mum again shortly before my wedding. Dad had sent a huge amount of money for mum to start a Montessori school. Our pure water factory wasn't making so much profit and mum decided it was time to take a path she'd been dreaming of. We sold the factory and bought an old building in a swanky area in Akure.

While the building was under renovation, we arranged with experts to train mum on how to run a Montessori school. Thankfully, the years mum spent as a nursery and primary school teacher gave her an upper hand.

Yetunde's admission process had been completed and she was due to travel to the U.S that weekend. We decided to spend that Friday together with mum before leaving together for Lagos.

"Mum, what exactly did dad write in that letter?" Yetunde asked, rummaging through mum's wardrobe.

Mum chuckled. “You can’t find the letter in that wardrobe.”

I played with mum’s finger. “What did Dad write that changed your mind about him.”

Mum smiled. “I just realized that I was getting old and I didn’t want to go to the grave carrying that pain in my heart. Forgiving your father was the hardest and yet the best decision I made. I cried to God after reading that letter. I asked him to help me forgive your father. He did. By the way, how’s Patrick?”

“He is fine.”

“When he came here, I observed the way both of you talked. It was so sweet. It was so different from the way you and Kunle related. I always pitied you when Kunle shouted and scolded you like a child.”

I shook my head. “Mummy, You wanted me to marry him.”

Mum shrugged, “We all have our flaws, don’t we?”

Yetunde looked up from her phone. “Baba Jide just sent me a text now. The toys have arrived. He is waiting for us at the school gate.”

My mother raised her hands “Halleluyah!”

We dressed up and left for mum’s new school. The painters were working on the walls when we got there. I stopped at the entrance to read the name of the school in bold letters.

DIVINE HOPE MONTESSORI SCHOOL

The men began to arrange the toys into the different rooms. The school looked very colourful. Everything was almost ready in preparation for resumption of the new session.

We left for Lagos the following morning. Yetunde flew out of the country that night.

A week after Yetunde left for the United States, I returned from a meeting with the M.D of Zach Tech to find Patrick sitting in the reception, reading a magazine. Seeing him was such a relief because I was so drained out by the meeting with the creative team and I was furious with the terrible way I’d been treated by the M.D who felt because I was a woman, I had nothing serious to offer. I’d left his office almost in tears.

“You look upset.” Patrick said as we entered my office.

"I had a rough day. Business is like that sometimes." I pulled out a bottle of chilled apple juice from the fridge while Patrick got two cups from the cabinet.

"I didn't mean to bump into you like this." Patrick said as I filled the cups.

"It's fine. You came at the right time."

I emptied the glass and refilled before sitting beside Patrick.

"Dad was at my house this evening." Patrick said.

I removed my high heel shoes and shoved them to a corner. 'Oh. Nice. He told me he had a meeting in Lagos but he'd travelling back to Abuja after the meeting."

Patrick placed a bunch of keys in my palm. "He sent his wedding gift ahead."

I looked from Patrick to the bunch of keys. "What's this?"

Patrick smiled. "The duplex. Our wedding gift. He has given me the contact of the lawyer who'll help us with the papers."

I covered my mouth in surprise. "How are we supposed to live in that big house alone?'

Patrick brought a small box from his pocket and gave it to me. "This is from Shade's mother."

I opened it to find a beautiful necklace and a matching pair of earrings.

"This is so beautiful."

Patrick stood up. "That's what I came to deliver. I think I should leave you to work. I'll pick you up at 5."

I pulled his hand. "Please stay a little more."

"But you have work to do."

As if to confirm Patrick's statement, Cynthia, my secretary came in to inform me that some men from one of the big firms we managed were at the reception waiting to see me.

Patrick stopped at the door and faced me. "Can wedding night come very fast please? This body needs to be fed."

I laughed. "Bro, the patient dog eats the fattest bone. Besides, our wedding is next month. It's here already. But until then we wait."

Patrick chuckled. “Definitely. We don’t negotiate where sexual purity is concerned. Lest I forget, I’ve booked our flight to Paris. Every other logistics has been settled.”

My first trip outside the shores of Nigeria would be my honeymoon. What more could I have asked God for.

That evening, Mimi went with us to see our new house. I was mesmerized as I moved from one wing to another. I could hear Patrick and Wale’s voice from the other end of the house. There were three rooms downstairs and about four upstairs. Dad had changed the chairs in the sitting room and brought in new sets of dining chairs. The master bedroom was the largest room with its own sitting area furnished and neatly arranged.

The housekeeper, Kike, introduced us to the chef and other domestic staff. I wondered what I’d be doing with a chef. I was definitely going to cook my husband’s meals. As we walked down the stairs, laughing at Mimi’s jokes, I had just this prayer on my lips.

Lord, help me to always stay at the center of your will. Thank you for the blessings you have given me. But Lord, I hold all of these material possessions with loose hands. May I never struggle to release any of the things you have bestowed on me. I pray for the grace to follow you daily.



November 17th. My wedding. Dad sat beside me as we drove to the church.

“I’m so proud of you.’ Dad said.”

“Thank you Dad.”

I was nervous. I knew that the only way to stay calm was to talk about other things. So I began to narrate to dad the deals I’d pulled in and some of the challenges I was facing. At first, Dad looked at me, puzzled. He must have wondered why I was talking about business deals on my wedding day. But when I kept talking, he relaxed and listened.

He gave me tips on how to handle difficult clients. He laughed when I told him about Zach Tech. He said immediately I left, the M.D of Zach Tech

called to tell him how he'd drilled me and had said I was the true daughter of my father. I was a little relaxed by the time we got to church.

Tola and Wale had been joined an hour earlier. Now was my turn. The moment had arrived.

Slowly we walked into the church, father and daughter, hand in hand. I saw mum sitting somewhere in front, in a purple aso-oke, her beautiful gele decorated with stones. She looked radiant. When I raised my head and saw the bridegroom, the man I was going to spend the rest of my life with, I couldn't help but grin. He looked smashing in his navy-blue suit.

This was a journey of faith for us. I prayed silently for the grace to be a true helpmeet to Patrick. God's unstoppable love had been revealed in my life and his mercy had shown up and pulled me out of the ditch. I was hoping to reflect such depth of love in my home in the face of any challenge or storm.

Only one thought stayed with me throughout the ceremony.

I have met with love and that love is God.

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