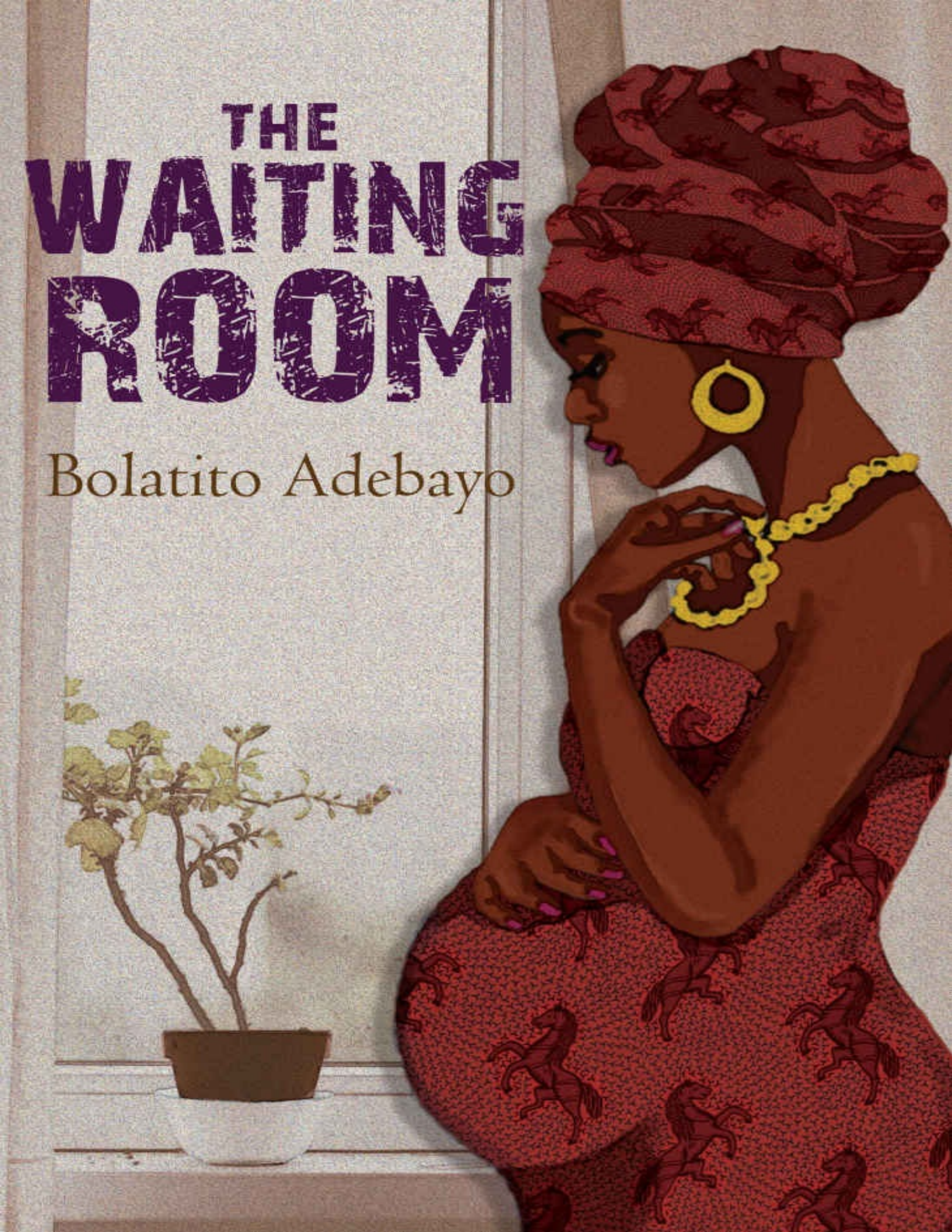
THE WAITING ROOM

Bolatito Adebayo



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DEDICATION

Dear Oloye, you lured me into the world of books and I immediately knew it was the path I wanted to tread.

Ayodeji Sobers Onipede, I wrote this for you. I am sure you are proud of your little niece in heaven. Rest in peace.

PROLOGUE

The rain did not care that it was her wedding day—it poured ceaselessly. It seemed the heavens were angry at Nkechi and Shola's union that September morning.

Lagos was flooded, but thankfully they had chosen to hold the reception at a hall close to Fela's New Afrika Shrine instead of a field which Nkechi had earlier fancied. The bride's wedding gown—long, billowy, silky and white—was stained with mud but she did not let that ruin her joy. She knew the night was going to be special, she had anticipated it for a long time. Nkechi had been a

faithful follower of Pastor Bimbo Odukoya who preached chastity, and she was excited about giving her husband, Shola, the unique gift of her virginity.

After the reception, the best man drove them to Wheatbaker at Ikoyi. The two-week honeymoon at the hotel was a gift from Shola's father's bosom friend, Chief Ninalowo, a popular oil mogul. Shola opened the door to Suite 24, stepped aside and bowed slightly.

"After you, ma'am," he said.

Nkechi giggled, stepped into the room and came to a halt, mesmerised. Her eyes settled on the scented candles, red flowers, glowing satin sheets, and the big, king-sized bed. Somewhere in the background, soft music was playing. She turned around and found him smiling widely. Nkechi felt her knees weaken with admiration for the man, he was not called Shola Sexy for nothing.

Shola wanted to take things slowly because he knew it was her first time, and they were both exhausted. He did not mind if they made love the next day, however, Nkechi wanted it that night.

But once Shola started thrusting into her, all she could think was, *Father Lord, I hope I never have to do this again*. The lovemaking was quick and hurt more than she had anticipated, it was far from all she had read or heard about, despite Shola's kindness. It was a complete let-down.

The next morning was different. This time, they took things slowly. Shola, who was more sexually experienced, first tried to make her feel more relaxed by playing her favourite love songs. As Celine Dion's "I'll Be Waiting for You" raised her spirits, his fingers unravelled unknown places and feelings. By the time he came into her again, Nkechi felt a surge of pleasure that shook her all the way to her toes.

They lay in bed for a while, and then Shola got up to get himself some water. Just as he walked out of the room, his phone beeped. Nkechi picked it up, thinking it was another congratulatory message.

Congratulations on your marriage, Shola. Your son is ill and has been admitted at the hospital. Cheers, Rebecca.

****

"Madam, please shift, I want to sit."

The gruffness of the voice terminated her daydream and brought her back to reality. Nkechi looked up to see a plump, middle-aged woman with a red beret

and a big bible standing before her. The loudspeakers in the auditorium blared a beautiful rendition of “My Redeemer Lives.”

She was in Fruit of the Womb Assembly, a Pentecostal church in the sprawling suburb of Igando. Pastor Abraham, popularly called Father of Many Nations, claimed God had given him special powers to get women pregnant with twins, triplets and quadruplets. For this reason, thousands of women worshipped at the church’s special service on Thursday mornings, encouraged by the testimonies of several women who often came with their babies as proof of their miracle.

“Madam, abeg remove ya bag na. I dey wait you.”

Nkechi hurriedly removed her bag from the space to her left and murmured a greeting but the woman ignored her. After she squeezed her bulk into the space, the woman turned to eye her from head to toe and gave a long sigh. Nkechi did not understand her unfriendliness. *Chineke, could it be because I did not take my bag from the chair on time?*

“Madam, I am so sorry if I offended you.”

She got another malicious glance.

“Sister, you didn’t offend me o! It is Jesus that you have offended. I know you are not a member of this church, if you were, you wouldn’t be wearing trousers here. You didn’t even cover your hair!”

“Oh! That explains your rude behaviour, madam.”

“I am not rude. In this church, if you want God to hear your prayers, you don’t dress this way.”

“Okay, ma.” Nkechi swallowed the lump that had suddenly formed in her throat.

But the woman was not done. “This church na for serious people, not for ashawo ...”

Nkechi got up and found a seat at the back of the church. It had been seven years since her wedding and there was no child to show for it. She was afraid of losing Shola, after all he already had a child. She remembered their two week honeymoon ended a day after their wedding. She cried endlessly and could not tell anyone her husband’s secret. It was too early to start calling in family members to resolve problems. Shola had particularly begged her not to tell her mother, but even if he had not, she knew she never would. Lolo had warned her not to marry him.

Shola had denied paternity of the boy, claiming he only had a one night stand with Rebecca and sent her money because his mother insisted it was the

right thing to do. Nkechi did not know what to believe. Four years into their marriage, Shola's paternal aunt had suggested that Nkechi let him bring the child home to live with them, so she could have her own children too.

"Nkechi, don't be offended," she said. "In Yoruba culture, if Pemisire comes to live with his father, his angels will hasten your childbearing. Sleep over it and give me a feedback." Nkechi never got back to her. She knew if she agreed to the suggestion, Rebecca would have easy access to her husband and take over from her.

Nkechi knew she had to do something fast about her infertility, especially when everyone knew she was the one with the problem. So she went from one church to another, seeking a solution. To her consternation, some of her friends who had been into aristos as undergraduates already had two or three children of their own. She regretted not having sex early like most of her friends. For all her chastity, she was barren and someone had just called her a prostitute in the church.

She checked her bag for the dollars that her elder sister in America, Adaobi, had given her. It was still intact in the envelope. Adaobi had called her on their seventh year anniversary, suggested the in vitro fertilisation treatment, and given her half the cost of the treatment in Nigeria.

As the service progressed, the pastor made an altar call, specifically for women seeking the fruit of the womb. He charged them to sow a seed for their babies and Nkechi brought out a few naira notes. As she awaited the offering basket, the pastor reiterated:

"Women, sow good seeds for your unborn children. The more you sow, the more likely your children are to come forth. Praise the Lord!"

The building reverberated with a chorus of hallelujah.

He continued, "Listen to me, in First Chronicles 21:24, when David was asked to offer a sacrifice to God in order to conquer his adversaries, he said something remarkable. He said he would never give God that which cost him nothing. In Verse 24, King David said and I read, 'No, but I will surely buy it for the full price; I would not offer the Lord a burnt offering that would cost me nothing.'"

His next statement jolted Nkechi.

"Dear sister, why do you squeeze a few naira notes into that envelope when you have much more in your account? Don't give God ₦1,000 or ₦2,000, give God something more worthy. It's a seed from which you will reap. This is about having children, a great gift from the Most High God. Bring your cheques

and ATM cards, we have POS machines here. Dollars or euros, give it to God. You won't regret it."

Nkechi felt guilty and ashamed. She knew God was talking about her because she had slipped in a meagre ₦3,000 into an envelope, while the dollar bills were lying in her bag. She was giving so little to the God who could give her children. She felt strongly that she should give more.

She rummaged through her bag and found another ₦2,000. *After all, ₦5,000 isn't a bad offering,* she thought. She swayed gently to the choir's rhythmic praise and worship. It soothed her while she waited for the offering basket to reach her.

The music stopped and the pastor took the microphone to speak again.

"The spirit of the Most High God is telling me that there is a woman here, God has laid it on your heart to give him dollars but you want to give him naira. Don't disobey God. This is a test you must not fail!" His voice blared from the speaker on the pulpit.

Nkechi wiped the beads of sweat off her forehead. She looked up as she considered what to do and her gaze met that of the woman with the red beret. The woman looked at her with disdain and shook her head. *Oh, this woman must have seen through my heart,* she thought. Guilt overwhelmed her, she was disobeying the Holy Spirit. *Maybe if I continue to disobey God's rules, I will not have children.* She was now almost in a panic as these thoughts filled her heart. The music continued and women began to open their purses and bring out more money.

She was not going to fail this test. She opened the envelope and brought out a wad of dollars.

"Some of you will go and carry big money to do IVF! I am not saying you shouldn't seek medical help, but let me remind you all: Sarah didn't do IVF, Rebecca didn't do IVF, Rachael, Manoah's wife and Hannah didn't do IVF. These women had faith and their faith paved the way for them."

This must be God speaking to me. I don't think I should do this IVF. If I do it, it means I don't have faith. The thought alone can hinder my prayers. If I sow all these dollars in my bag, I am sure God will give me twins.

She brought out the envelope containing the remaining dollar bills, and dumped it into an offering basket. Suddenly, her heart felt lighter and she was at peace.

God had visited her.

Part I

"Childbirth will later lighten your burden."

– **Namibian Proverb**

Chapter 1

As Yeni walked along the strange footpath, she wondered where she was. There was no one in sight to ask for directions from. The sun was receding lazily into gloomy clouds. It was such a pleasant, quiet evening, but the eerie calmness made Yeni tense and uncomfortable.

Suddenly, there was a distant rumble of thunder, it was so faint that she thought she had imagined it but it soon became louder. Yeni gazed upward uneasily. White clouds still prevailed like it was daytime. She looked at her wristwatch. *Wow, 7 p.m. already.* The rumbling grew even louder and the eastern sky began to darken at surprising speed. Within the next few minutes, the sky was so dark that she could hardly see her way. Buffeted by fierce, howling winds and pelting rain, she began to run. Jagged lightning briefly illuminated the darkness before her, and she made out the image of a man.

Perhaps, it's my imagination playing tricks on me, she thought. Lightning flashed a second time, and she saw him again. She stopped running, confused. Another flash of lightning and deafening thunder. The strange man stared straight at her.

As the thunderclaps became louder, Yeni felt propelled towards him. He took her hand and without a word, led her into a hut. He gave her a blanket and a towel and she muttered a thank you, but the stranger ignored her and threw some

logs of wood into the fire. She went to a corner of the small hut and started to pull off her wet blouse when she noticed the stranger watching her. Their eyes met and they stared at each other for a while.

"Could you please, excuse me?" she asked, shivering.

He turned away and fanned the fire.

"Are you scared?" the stranger drawled when she returned to stand by the fire.

"I hate thunder and lightning."

"Of course, I know."

"Who are you?"

"You will find out later. Drink this while I get you something to eat." He handed her a cup of tea with one hand and held her arm with the other.

"Have we met before?" she asked, taking the cup from him.

He ignored her question and said instead, "Yeni, you are just as pretty as you have always been."

She was surprised that he knew her name. She could not help but notice his six-foot frame, dark skin, toned muscles, and the scar on his right cheek. The house was familiar, and she sensed that she had been there before.

"Since you know my name, why don't you tell me yours?"

"Yeni, why do you keep hurting me?" The stranger asked with misty eyes.

"Hurt you? Me? How? I don't even know your name. I don't know you." Yeni was confused.

He held her arms and she tried to free herself from his grip, but he did not let go. Within seconds, his lips brushed hers. The blanket fell off as she found herself kissing him too. He fondled her and she responded to him.

Suddenly she realised she should not be doing this. "Please stop."

He let her go and without thinking, Yeni dashed out into the rain. She ran as fast as she could. The stranger ran after her. He finally caught up with her and held her firmly. *Oh God, he's going to hurt me,* she thought. Their lips met again, she found him simply irresistible. Then she heard her name from a distance. *That sounds like my husband.* Suddenly, she opened her eyes.

"Honey! Honey! Wake up!" Tunde tugged at Yeni's feet under the blanket.

"Good morning love," she mumbled.

They kissed before she rolled over, covering her face with the blanket. She felt guilty about her dream. It was the man in her dreams. She had first dreamt of him shortly after she began her periods. She was barely a teenager then, and did not give it much thought, ascribing it to an overdose of Mills and Boon romance.

“Honey, don’t be lazy. Get up from the bed, the honeymoon is over.” Tunde called out again, pulling Yeni’s feet from under the covers.

“Just a little more time please …”

Tunde was already running late. He had to shrug off the lethargy of his two-week leave and get to work on time today. His new marital status came with new responsibilities. Realising that he had ten minutes left if he was going to catch a BRT, he gave up waking his new wife and put on his clothes hurriedly. He planted a kiss on her forehead, left some cash on the water dispenser, and dashed out of the house.

The BRT had made life easier for many Lagosians like himself. He no longer had to worry about his problematic old Honda Accord and frequent visits to the mechanic. He handed over the car to Yeni, who he thought would have better use for it within their estate.

As he slumped into a window seat, he plugged in his earphones. He had no intention of talking to anyone or listening to the usual banter. As much as he enjoyed the convenience of commuting with less stress, he hated the noise of fellow passengers, blaring horns, and the occasional boom from loudspeakers along the route. Mornings were the only time of the day he wanted to be left alone. His mind began to wander from the hustle and bustle of Lagos to his new bride.

Tunde had noticed something weird about her, twice now he had heard her moaning in her sleep, as if she was having sex with someone. This morning he noticed her limbs jerking and yet she was sound asleep. He was not sure if a raging hormone was responsible for this. *Is Yeni having an affair with someone? Am I not man enough for her? Or is she relishing last night’s lovemaking?* The last question made him smile, and a few minutes later, he dozed off as the bus slowly meandered its way through the traffic.

Chapter 2

Nkechi stormed out of her mother's room and slammed the door shut. Times without number, she had told her mother to stop pestering her about her childlessness, that at God's time she would have her own. But Lolo Chinelo Maduka never gave up and always brought it up at any opportunity.

Her mother's voice trailed after her to the sitting room. Nkechi sunk into the soft couch, her bare feet tickled by the tufts of the shag rug. The room was big and clean with polished floors, and beautiful paintings and family portraits adorned the walls. She picked up a *Genevieve* magazine from the glass stool beside her and tried reading it.

"A woman is disadvantaged in a childless marriage!" Lolo had harped on, emphasising that her daughter was particularly disadvantaged because she had married a Yoruba man. Strangers knew Lolo to be a charming, lovable woman, but her children were careful not to offend her. Nkechi, the last child, was the only one who dared challenge her mother. Her sisters claimed it was because the two were alike.

Nkechi saw no resemblance between them aside their physical features. Lolo was tall, with a regal bearing and an ample bosom. So was her daughter. They both had beautiful, big eyes, a long nose and dark lips. Lolo was highly opinionated, pushy, easily offended and stubborn, and when she was angry, her high-pitched voice could be heard several houses away. Nkechi did not like this side of her mother. Her father, on the other hand, was a complete gentleman. How he coped with such a virago was a mystery to her. Despite their different personalities, they were best friends and loved each other until death separated them.

Lolo was not the typical Igbo woman. It was she who had raised hell when she first introduced Shola as her fiancé. Lolo preferred Obi the medical doctor, and when Nkechi broke up with him, she told her daughter in no uncertain terms that she would never forgive her. Obi had tried to use her mother to get her to

change her mind—Lolo told her he wept the last time he came by her shop. Her mother's importunities did not change her mind though, Obi had cheated on her countless times and she had had enough. It was during this controversy that Nkechi learnt how to deal with her mother. When she pushed hard, she pushed back harder until she grudgingly accepted Shola.

Now her mother was back to nagging her. She told her Shola's family would get him another wife. "That will not be my portion!" Nkechi had countered. Her husband had assured her countless times that he married her because he loved her, and not because of children. Moreover, his family was not as hostile as her mother assumed. Shola's mother was the nicest mother-in-law anyone could ever have. She rarely inquired about the issue and her kindness surprised Nkechi. She was unlike the average mother-in-law portrayed in Yoruba movies.

Her own mother had not been half as understanding. She would say, "You know, to a Yoruba man, marriage doesn't mean much. Even if he has nothing, he will stay under his mother's roof and start bearing children. Shola can easily remarry! Don't be deceived!" At first, Nkechi would try to explain that educated Yoruba men were different. But she gave up when it was clear that Lolo was not ready to have a change of heart. She was still lost in thought when her mother strode into the sitting room and took the seat next to her.

"Nkechi, I'm not saying all these to hurt you. I'm your mother and I want the best for you."

"Mama, let me rest, *biko*! This pressure is too much," she protested in tears.

"*Ndo nu*, Nkechi, don't cry please. It hurts me to see you in tears. You know seven years is no joke. And you know Yoruba people, getting another wife isn't a problem for them."

"Mama, Shola isn't like that. He loves me. His family loves me too," Nkechi insisted, clutching a throw pillow tightly.

"Okay, I have heard you, stop crying." Lolo wiped her daughter's tears with her wrapper. "My God will continue to fight our battle."

Nkechi sighed deeply, she knew her mother was not done. She had only retreated to scheme how best to bring up the issue again. It was why she had never told her the truth about Shola's love child, and the result of her last consultation with her gynaecologist.

Her husband had been reluctant to go with her to the doctor, he always had one excuse or another. So for almost seven years, she went alone. It took all her

feminine wiles to get him to be at the last appointment. The result had been a big shock. Shola had a low sperm count, and she was given a clean bill of health. Shola had disagreed with the results, insisting that there was nothing wrong with him because he had twice impregnated his ex-girlfriend, and stating for the first time that Pemisire was his son.

They were referred to a senior gynaecologist, Dr Molade, who was also a family friend. The verdict was the same. This time, the doctor said Nkechi could still get pregnant if he was well treated. Dr Molade took a while to explain the result. An infection had interfered with Shola's sperm production or health, or caused scarring that blocked its passage.

Shola had taken the senior doctor's diagnosis calmly. But back at home that evening, he prostrated and begged Nkechi with tears, when he saw how miserable she was. He blamed himself for wasting her time by stubbornly refusing to go for a check-up and being careless as an undergraduate.

Nkechi had heard about his fame as an undergraduate. Back then, he was Shola Sexy to his peers, a hero of many conquests, and much loved by ladies for his charming looks. She wished he had told her about his infection, the past had returned to haunt them both now. Still she told him not to worry, she would stand by him through thick and thin. Besides, the doctor had said that they would conceive and have children, if he took his treatment seriously.

Shola took his prescription consistently for six months. Still, Nkechi did not become pregnant. Each month, Nkechi's menstrual flow arrived promptly. At the onset of each menstrual period, she would burst into tears. She was beginning to buy into her mother's superstitions that her uncle in the village, who wanted to inherit her father's wealth when he died, was behind her childlessness. Her mother had told her that everywhere she went, spiritualists had fingered him as the person responsible for all her problems.

Nkechi knew a bit of the story. Shortly after her father's death, Uncle Chidi had come from the village to take over his late brother's estate. It was his by tradition because his brother's widow had only girls. Lolo had fought back fiercely. She went to court and won back her husband's estate. Her mother was a tough cookie who would do anything to protect her daughters.

Now, she was tempted to tell her mother about her problems. She wept profusely on the couch, her emotions running riot. She wept louder. Her cries eventually reached her mother's ears in the kitchen. Lolo left what she was doing and returned to the sitting room. Nkechi poured out her soul to her and immediately regretted it.

“You mean you kept all these from me!” Lolo yelled in incredulity.

“I didn’t mean to M … mama.”

“But you don’t have any other mother except me. You suckled from these breasts.” Lolo tapped her breasts. “Why would you hide things from me?”

“*Nne, ndo …*”

“I knew all this while you didn’t have a problem. I knew it was that *ngbati ngbati* boy you have clung to who has sterility issues. You see, in my family we are like pigs, even your father’s family, we are very fertile.”

Nkechi watched her mother pace around the room, alarmed by her mounting hysteria. “I knew you were going to react like this, that’s why I didn’t want to tell you in the first place …”

“*Mechionu!*” Her mother retorted.

“But Mama we have gone for treatment, and the doctor said he is now alright.”

“Ehn ehn? So, where’s the child now? Now that you have gone for treatment and it’s not working, can’t you see that it’s not ordinary?” Her mother scoffed.

“This is Diopka Chidi’s handiwork, I know. He said it the last time I went to the village that he would deal with me. *Chineke*, help me fight this battle! He never forgave me because I took soldiers to the village during his brother’s burial. Chai! He knows I am not an ordinary woman o! If he chooses to victimise my kids, I will deal with him too.”

“Mama, I have told you to stop believing those talks about Uncle. He can do nothing to us, we are in Christ.”

“What do you know? You are a small girl. I think I need to go and see the prophet. He has been telling me to bring you, but you have refused.”

Nkechi’s forehead furrowed in a frown. “Mama, don’t start that again. I am not going anywhere. You can go, but count me out.”

“Look at you. You kept this from me all this while, you think he didn’t tell his mother about his problem? Very soon they will advise him to try another woman and when she is pregnant they will push you out. But God forbid, that won’t happen to my child,” she snapped her fingers over her head.

“Not while I am alive.”

Suddenly, it occurred to Nkechi that her mother’s words had a ring of truth. She remembered the weekend after the doctor told them that Shola had a low sperm count. His mother had come over, and they both had a lengthy discussion in the guest room. Since then, her husband had begun drinking a

slimy herbal concoction every morning. When she asked him what it was, he said it was the *agbo* his mother brought him. Months later he abandoned it, and when she asked him about it, he said he forgot to drink it. She had never given the whole thing a second thought until now. And now she was not so sure she could resist the temptation to visit the prophet. *It is only to make things better*.

Chapter 3

Tale and her husband, Kunle Thompson walked into the warm reception at Fruitful IVF Clinic on Victoria Island. She took a seat with her heart racing. This was not her first IVF appointment. They had done three IVF rounds in America and two in the UK. They had all failed.

Tale looked around her, fascinated by what she saw. Two large windows looked out onto the parking lot. Purple, white and red flowers bloomed in the garden around the lot. The environment within was clean and serene, the air fresh with a whiff of disinfectant—not the typical hospital smell. The room well illuminated and cooled by air-conditioners. The tables had several bouquets of flowers. To her left was a coffee table and beside it, a water dispenser. Beautiful pictures of cute babies were creatively hung on the walls, as well as a flat screen television. A young couple sat to her left—the woman wore a distant, forlorn countenance while her husband blabbed on the phone. To her right, another couple was chatting.

Tale was tense while Kunle's eyes were glued to the television. Nurses and orderlies walked by with their rubber shoes chafing on the pristine tiles. Tale read a booklet of testimonies of women who had gotten pregnant through the IVF. She prayed, *One day, somebody will read mine too.*

"Mr and Mrs Thompson, it's your turn to see the doctor."

The doctor welcomed them both. He did not look like the typical doctor, he was young and had a good dress sense. He introduced himself as Doctor Cole.

"How may we help you, please?" he asked with a warm smile.

"We have been married for fifteen years now, with no kids. We have tried all we know. We have even done five rounds of IVF abroad, but they all failed. I'm really reluctant about this, but a colleague who had a similar problem came here, and it was successful. So, we thought we should try here too. Honestly, this is our last resort," Kunle concisely presented their case.

"So what is the problem?" the doctor inquired.

"I have blocked tubes, but my husband is medically okay," Tale chipped in.

"Okay. Since we are dealing with blocked tubes, you have both made a good decision in coming here. IVF is usually the best option for damaged fallopian tubes or low quality sperm. It's the only acceptable treatment, and usually the most effective for most other types of infertility as well."

Tale was familiar with the doctor's explanations. She remembered her first IVF experience at a hospital in London. After her eggs were fertilised in the laboratory, the result was positive. The embryos were healthy and were placed in her uterus five days later. Afraid the eggs would fall out through her vagina, she had spent most of her time in bed for the next two weeks. She remembered their friends, Bryan and Laura Wallace, an Irish couple she and Kunle met at a support group organised by the hospital. The Irish couple were in their late twenties and their marriage was barely two years old when they tried. Bryan told them he had a low sperm count, but that this was not a serious issue since his wife's eggs were fertilised with ICSI. He told Kunle that ICSI was a guarantee against any risk of a failed fertilisation. The following year when Tale and Kunle went for summer vacation, they went with gifts to visit baby Sean.

Tale decided to ask the doctor about the ICSI fertility treatment, she wanted to know if the clinic measured up to the standard of the London clinic.

"You mean Intracytoplasmic Sperm Injection?"

"Yes please," Tale nodded, though she had no clue of its full meaning.

"That is a specialised form of In Vitro Fertilisation. It is used for the

treatment of severe cases of male infertility."

"It was the procedure used for a friend of mine in London who had low sperm count. Their son should be a big boy now," Kunle interjected.

"Do you offer the treatment here too?" Tale asked again.

"Of course we do, an IVF clinic without that is no IVF clinic. ICSI involves the injection of a single sperm directly into a mature egg," the doctor replied confidently. Then he spoke directly to Kunle. "Based on what you have told me, I doubt that you will need it, but our tests will certainly tell us more about your sperm health."

"No amount of tests will prove otherwise, Doctor Cole." Kunle smiled.

Tale hated the fact that she would have to go through all the tests again. She had done them repeatedly in the last decade because the tests expired after six months. The doctor discussed the high success rate at Fruitful IVF Clinic, and also emphasised the twenty-five per cent success rate of an IVF pregnancy.

Kunle sighed. "Yes, we have heard that many times. It's a gamble, but we hope that after paying so much, it will work for us this time around."

"I understand it costs a fortune, but be assured that you will have your baby, or babies, soon. We take the very difficult jobs here," Dr Cole boasted.

Tale watched the doctor keenly, her confidence growing with his eloquence. "So, how do we start?"

"First, Madam, how old are you?"

"I'll be 42 next month."

"Wow! You don't look your age," the doctor teased.

"Really?" Tale felt a smile spreading over her face. "That is good to hear."

"I should tell you how much it costs me to maintain this woman," Kunle said with pride, "Her tastes are simply out of this world."

"You must be a good husband," said the doctor with a smile.

Kunle smiled too, he never missed an opportunity to flaunt his wife—it was a small way of feeding his ego.

Dr Cole stood from his seat to find some leaflets with more information about Fruitfulness IVF Centre, while Tale continued to admire him. She appreciated good taste in fashion.

"Hmm, 42 is still okay, but not good enough," Dr Cole said with a slight frown. He handed them the leaflets.

"Why, Doctor?" Tale was disturbed. She looked away from the leaflet she was holding.

"The reason is that from age 35, the chances of getting quality eggs are

reduced. You see, a problem we often face is that many women who come here, usually do so when it's a little late. If only couples came here earlier, instead of going to other places, their chances of a positive result would be higher."

Tale's mind flipped back to their Irish friends. Laura was twenty-eight, a year older than her husband Bryan, at the time they visited an IVF clinic. The Irish couple were young and more informed about fertility treatments than they were. *Probably because they live in the west and have easy access to these things*, she thought.

"Do you mean there is no hope for us then?" Kunle asked, crestfallen.

"That's not what I'm saying. We have seen a few instances of older women with good eggs. In some cases, we have had younger women with fewer quality eggs. However, if we realise that a woman is not producing good eggs, there are other options we can look at, which we will discuss as time goes on. Let's start the treatment first and be hopeful that things will turn out well. I am only saying all these so you'd know what you are getting into."

"I need to know the options, Doctor, before I get into this again," Tale could not keep the anxiety out of her voice. The age factor had not come up during her last IVF. She was 37 at the time.

"Patients often say, 'My eggs are fine, I don't think I need testing for that.' When asked how they know their eggs are fine, the common answer is, 'Because I see my period every month.' It doesn't always work that way. Fertility begins to decline in the early 30s and worsens in the mid to late 30s. Egg quantity and quality in a woman can be average for her age, better than average, or worse than average."

"You've already explained these, Doctor. This is not our first time. I know about egg quantity as well as egg quality. I also understand that if only a few eggs develop in response to ovarian stimulation by drugs, I have a lower chance of success," Tale replied bluntly.

"Wow! I'm impressed. You are well informed. This will make my work much easier. Are you also aware that if we have a case of low-quality eggs, we'll suggest you get donor eggs?"

"God forbid, Doctor!" Kunle retorted.

The doctor adjusted his tie and continued. "Let's hope we would not have to consider that. Since we need to retrieve multiple eggs for the process, you will have to get some hormonal injections, we will be monitoring your ovaries by ultrasound, and your hormone levels by blood tests every day, or every other day, until you are ready for the egg retrieval. This can at first seem quite

intimidating, but we will hold your hands throughout the whole process and guide you gently through this," Dr Cole explained reassuringly. "Underneath that leaflet I gave you earlier is a consent form. After you have filled it, you can make payment."

They were directed to the laboratory for the preliminaries—blood samples, scan and semen analysis. Tale was excited. She prayed all would turn out fine this time. The only trouble on her mind was her husband. She was anxious about his reaction if the treatment failed again. Kunle had taken the first IVF result calmly when the doctor told them it failed. He did not say a word to her throughout that day. At night, he burst into uncontrollable tears, he was totally inconsolable for the rest of the night and grieved for days after. It was like he was in mourning. Tale had to forget about herself and console her husband. When she reflected on how devastated he was after every failed IVF, she never felt like trying again, but he would always urge her to do just that.

Kunle was not good at handling failure, despite being in the navy. Tale remembered when he failed a test woefully back in university, and did not eat for days. Another instance was when his National Youth Service Corps posting was delayed. Kunle went to the administrative office on campus to fight the man in charge, and then ended up being detained in the police station until his father went to bail him out.

Tale knew it was not his fault. Kunle grew up in a polygamous home where every child tried to outdo the other. Right from childhood, his mother had impressed it on him and his siblings to fight for everything they wanted, including love and affection. Kunle once told Tale the only way they got their father's attention was to go home with good results. The rewards included eating with their father, sharing his bed, and receiving gifts from him. His siblings who did not do so well were treated like lepers, as though they did not exist, while Kunle enjoyed his father's attention. So it had been inculcated into his subconscious that winning was the only way to elicit love from others.

Knowing her husband's ego was fragile, Tale was always on edge when she feared that things would not go his way. She could barely handle her own hurt, let alone bear her husband's. The IVF saga was like another battle which had to be won. Despite his calm countenance, Kunle desperately wanted to father a child. He needed the IVF to prove he was not a failure. *God, if only I could get pregnant like every other woman*, she prayed, *if only my tubes were not blocked.* As they drove home in silence, Tale's mind dwelt on the mistake they made twenty-two years ago.

Chapter 4

“ I’m not going to abort this pregnancy.”

“You have to…”

“It’s not possible,” Tale cried.

“Please, you have to,” Kunle pushed back. “My half-siblings will gloat, my sisters will be angry with me for opening myself to ridicule, Mom will never stop crying, and my father, I cannot risk being a disappointment to him,” he pleaded.

His words angered her. “For crying out loud, you are a qualified engineer! Can’t you be your own man? Why can’t we just get married and settle down? I’m almost done with my thesis. You have started your national service. What is stopping us from starting our lives?” she wept.

His voice went cold with contempt. “I should settle down with my miserable stipend, ehn?” Sensing her submission in the solid silence, he pushed his advantage. “You know I still want to enlist in the navy. If my father hears this, I’m ruined! Please do this for me. My love, I will forever be grateful to

you.”

Kunle was not the only obstacle. Tale’s parents were another stumbling block. They were puritans who did not expect her to be sexually active at twenty-one, let alone become pregnant. Her parents had told her that she could only be married after school, but she was yet to get her degree in Economics as a result of the incessant ASUU strikes. She was not permitted to date anyone—her mother thought dating was a sin. Tale often wondered if she was expected to bring a husband from Mars.

Her mother never spoke to her about sex. Tale figured things out herself. It was an older classmate who showed her how to use tissue paper as tampons, when her first menstruation happened during school hours. She shocked her mother when she told her she needed sanitary pads a day later, and awkwardly explained that her menses had started the day before. A five-minute sex education delivered in a harsh voice ensued, and ended with a dire warning—she would get pregnant if she ever allowed a man to touch her.

Her parents were staunch members of the Deeper Life Bible Church, and despite the social and boisterous life on Akerele Street where they lived, the Makanjuolas ran their home like a mini-church. An environment stifled by uncompromising religiosity, that made their home a cocoon for pious, but naïve children. At 17, Tale had never permed her hair, worn trousers, earrings, necklaces, rings or any adornment.

University changed Tale. She pierced her ears in her first semester at the University of Lagos, and at the end of her first year, began to dress in trendy clothes. The first time she noticed her daughter’s permed hair, her mother raised hell, but Tale was ready for the showdown. Tale’s father stayed aloof from the storm, as mother and daughter locked horns in a showdown of will. Sensing her grip loosening, Mrs Makanjuola spoke to her husband.

“Is this how we will be looking at Tale until she goes to hell?”

Mr Makanjuola was weary of religious doctrines. Life had shown him that outward appearances did not count for faith, and the journey to heaven was a personal race no one should be forced into. His wife was the exact opposite. She held on to her beliefs and thought that a Christian woman had to dress in such a way that she was invisible.

Tale won the battle, but was very careful not to go overboard. Her drastic wardrobe makeover did not include trousers. She wore the trendiest skirts, blouses and dresses instead, and stood her ground on several occasions when Kunle insisted on trousers.

“Babe, with jeans you will be da bomb!” he would say.

She transformed into an eye-catching beauty, but was never vain about her looks. She never courted love and did not respond to advances. Tale loved the Lord and did her best to adhere to her church’s doctrine.

She had only one frailty - she could not resist Kunle’s touch.

Kunle was the only male whose overtures she found difficult to spurn. She could not explain how it was so. He knew how to touch her in all the right places, and the mere thought of him sometimes aroused her. Tale knew all the scriptures on adultery and fornication by heart, but a kiss on the nape of her neck was enough to set her heart blazing with a desire that burnt all the scriptures in her heart.

She gave Kunle her virginity on a Valentine’s Day. She could never forget it. It was not planned, it just happened. Previously, they had restricted themselves to the occasional stolen kisses and steamy caresses, never any further. She would not allow Kunle’s hands to move below her navel, until that night. It was so beautiful that she did not want to break it off—she did not want to ruin the mood. Though a little painful at first, she enjoyed every bit of it.

The next day at the Sunday service in church, she felt like the devil himself. The pastor preached passionately about fornication, as if someone had hinted him about the previous night. She left the church feeling damned, dirty and dejected. Then she locked herself in the bathroom and cried, calling on Christ for forgiveness, scrubbing her pudendum harshly, as if it would make her pure.

Her attempts to avoid Kunle quickly failed. The insatiable hunger for him frightened her. In the third week, she took a step towards restitution. After avoiding him for a whole week, she went to his room to break up with him. As soon as he opened the door, she broke down, crying uncontrollably as Kunle consoled her. They ended up on the bed where they made love, good and sweet as before. That moment, she decided that she could not live without him. Kunle became her addiction and she just could not get enough of him. Her friend, Onome, had taught her how to calculate her cycle, but she kept mixing things up. Onome had even suggested that she use contraceptive pills, but she refused. The only way to redeem herself, she thought, was to commit to marrying him. Afterwards, sex became easier on her conscience.

The consequence was not long in coming. Tale was five months pregnant and no one knew about it, she did not even have the courage to tell Onome. Her roommates in Moremi Hall who spotted the tell-tale signs, were thrown off track

by her reputation as a staunch Christian. To escape her mother's detection, Tale remained on campus throughout her ordeal. Kunle cajoled her for months, before she eventually agreed to go with him to the hospital. She had no reason to fear, Kunle assured. Yes, he had done it for some of his friends.

Saviour's Hospital at Yaba was the closest thing to hell. She kept glancing over her shoulder as they walked through Woli Street at dusk. She was frightened of running into someone she knew, especially someone from her church. How would she explain what she was doing with a guy all alone? To avoid this, she walked some steps behind Kunle. She noticed children playing happily in the street. They were scantily dressed but looked clean. Some were playing hide and seek, others were riding bicycles. It was holiday time. *Children, so happy with nothing to worry about* … As they got closer, the void in Tale's mind expanded and filled her insides. At a point, she wanted to turn back and go home, but Kunle prevailed on her. He begged, wept, even prostrated, so she would not change her mind.

Tale had never been that scared in her life. Some other young girls were seated, waiting for their turn to see the doctor. She knew they were there for the same purpose—they all appeared gloomy. When it was Tale's turn, she was given a gown to change into, and then directed to a bed. A nurse inserted two IVs into her, in her hand and on her side. She gave her an injection to induce labour.

The pain was raw. It hurt so much she felt she was dying.

The nurse told her to lie with her knees close to her chest. It would help with the contractions, she said. It did not. Tale felt like she needed to pee. The nurse told her she did not have to. She insisted and was taken to the restroom. Back on the bed, she was told to assume the same position, while the nurse stayed by her side to hold her hand.

Her water was broken with an amniotic hook, and her gown was soaked. The doctor barked at a nurse to get it changed. Tale insisted that they stop, and then begged for a painkiller. The doctor ignored her and continued what he was doing. He shoved a gloved hand inside her and she yelped in pain. She had never felt such pain. She was hurt and angry with herself. *This must be my punishment from God.* She cried to God to forgive her, she would never fornicate again. The doctor told her to shut up and stop scaring the girls in the waiting room.

Seconds later, Tale passed out. When she came to, she felt sore all over. The doctor's voice warned her to remain still. Otherwise, he'd start all over again. That scared her. She wished the horror would end. She yelled and writhed

throughout the insertions and extraction. It was an experience she did not wish on her enemy. She heard a nurse shout at Kunle who had tried to barge in when he heard her screams.

They did not show her the expelled foetus, but she pleaded with the nurses to tell her the sex.

“Na girl.”

Tale felt ashamed. She had killed her own baby. She could never forgive herself for that. She would forever live with the guilt. *I’ll never step into this hospital again,* she swore under her breath.

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Three days after the abortion, a terrible abdominal pain took her back to the doctor. She was shocked at the doctor’s flagrant flirtation with her in his office. *Fool, I may have come to you to abort, that doesn’t mean I am cheap*, she thought.

“You know I like you,” he said playfully, “I want you to be my girlfriend, be my little pet.”

“No. I can’t do that with you, Doctor,” Tale said evenly.

“Why? I am not as good looking as your boyfriend?” The smile on his face expanded.

“You have a wife at home,” she said pointedly, not wanting to appear friendly.

“You are a very beautiful girl,” he walked up to her seat and placed a hand on her shoulder.

“I am a Christian. I don’t do such,” Tale said angrily, brushing off his hands.

His voice became heavy with sarcasm. “But as a Christian, you had an abortion. Isn’t that hypocrisy?”

Tale shuddered, pained and overwhelmed by guilt. She did not expect the doctor to shame her this way. *I thought doctors were taught to say kind words to their patients. How can he be so mean?*

She did not want to bandy words with him, but she said in a brittle voice, “What I did was a mistake, and it hurts so much that someone like you would taunt me.” She stood, about to walk out.

The doctor spoke in a changed voice. “Tale, I didn’t mean to hurt you. But

if you are not interested, I will respect that."

She felt there were words left unsaid.

"However, I have a word for you," he began, "I know you are a good girl, but good girls like you, especially Christian girls, come here in droves." He allowed that to sink in before he continued. "Bad girls are wiser. They insist on condoms if they can't use pills. That is the wise thing to do." He allowed another measure of silence. "There are no two ways about it. Either you go for a safe, healthier choice or you abstain totally and hold on to the pillars of Christianity."

She turned to go.

"I don't want you to come here next time," he said without looking at her.

No response was required. Tale walked out of the doctor's room, her face flooded with tears. She knew she would never go back.

Chapter 5

The air was musty, it was difficult to inhale as she moved deeper into the forest. Brown leaves underfoot squelched in the muddy soil. All around her, rotting mangrove branches and roots jutted out of murky, algae-filled waters. The reek of organic decomposition mixed with other fetid smells in a suffocating blend.

She could feel the moist grass on her bare foot. She scanned the swaying trees, awed by their height and the thick cobwebs between them. The path was

familiar. As she trudged on, she picked up wild pears and threw them back into the bush. The birds, startled, stopped singing.

By the time she got to the hut, the moon was looking down on her. Yeni went indoors and met the room empty. She was wondering why no one was inside when she felt the familiar touch from behind.

“Oh, it’s you,” she said, turning around and smiling at him.

“Yes, it’s me my love,” he said with a wide grin.

“But who are you?” A confused look came over her.

“You keep asking me that same question,” he tightened his hold on her.

“It’s because I don’t know.” She gazed into his eyes, seeking answers.

“Yeni, you don’t need an explanation. All I know is you belong to me and I will guard you jealously, not even Tunde can take you away from me.”

“But I am married to Tunde,” she pulled away from him.

“I married you first!”

“You married me first, when?”

“You won’t understand. When you gaze lovingly at him I get jealous,” he grabbed her with both hands.

Yeni freed herself and ran towards the door, but he got there first and locked it. He looked gently at her and she felt her resistance melt. He lit some candles, took her hands and gently pushed her onto a bench with flat cushions of linen. She responded to his touch. There was something irresistible about the stranger. In the glow of the candlelight, he looked far less like a creature from the wild, and his hairiness and thick build made him more appealing. He stared at her sensuously, arousing her.

He reached out and fondled her breasts. Yeni moaned involuntarily, her hand left his arm and went to his crotch. She felt guilty because she had never felt this way about Tunde. This stranger knew all her erogenous zones. He knew how to manipulate them to give her immense pleasure. She grabbed and stroked his member through his jeans, the friction caused by the rough texture plunged him into the depths of desire. He pulled her dress down from her shoulder, exposing more of her warm dark skin, her breasts spilt free, a chocolate gift of beauty. Yeni felt entranced as she struggled to unzip his trousers. He came to her rescue and undid it himself.

He explored her body gently and minutes later, he jerked and then she climaxed. She came back to her senses, dressed up and made to get up. But it was too late, the stranger grabbed her before she could escape and Yeni continued to struggle, ashamed of her puny efforts.

“Leave me, please.”

“No, I won’t. I have missed you for too long.”

“Let me go, please.”

“I won’t let you go. Don’t you get it, Yeni? I have feelings too. Please, let me feel your warmth.”

She pushed him away and unlocked the door before he could stand up. He ran after her and caught her again. Then he put his palm flat on the ground and smudged her stomach with the dust. Yeni freed herself from him again and ran off. She woke up drenched in her own sweat, panting. It was 3 a.m.

God, not again! The dream was the same. What baffled her was that the stranger had done the same thing Alhaji had done to her earlier in the market. She rolled out of bed to get some water from the fridge. She was almost at the door when she was struck by the conviction that the encounter she had with Alhaji was significant. The encounter had happened on Yeni’s first day at the market as a married woman.

She was heading home when she sighted a destitute. His hair was unkempt and brownish. He had a long, dirty beard and flies buzzed around him. He seemed excited, soliloquising incoherently. Yeni was sure he was hallucinating. They were only a few metres apart, and he was blocking her path. *He could be violent, better to take another path*, she thought. As she tried a U-turn, one of the market women who had read the terror in her eyes said reassuringly, “Madam, Alhaji no dey find trouble o!”

Another market woman told her, “Make you just waka your own, and if you get chop money make you give am.”

Yeni was unconvinced. She backed away anyway and was alarmed to see that Alhaji followed her. When Alhaji looked into her eyes, Yeni could swear she saw the stranger in them. He stared at her like the man in her dreams, and it mesmerised her. Suddenly, he touched her midriff, staining her beautiful white blouse. Yeni was stunned and angry. Alhaji just smiled at her and walked away. The market women sympathised with her.

“Madam, sorry o, e be like say Alhaji like your dress, that’s why, but he no dey find trouble sha.”

Yeni was speechless. It took her a while to pull herself together. She tried unsuccessfully to clean the stain from her blouse. Then she walked back to her car, dejected. She could not get over the fact that she had been touched by the man. She took another look at her blouse in the car. The stain was embarrassing.

She tried to get it off her mind all day, and told herself that it was nothing

to worry about, but she was depressed over the encounter. When Tunde came home at night, she told him about it. He waved it off and told her it meant nothing.

“But you know today is my first day at the market as your wife,” Yeni said as she rolled over to Tunde’s side of the bed.

“So?” he asked. “I have told you that it means nothing. The mad man only saw a fine girl and was attracted.” Tunde laughed to ease her worry.

“What sort of joke is that? Was I the only fine girl in the market?” she feigned anger.

“Mrs Dehinde was the fairest of them all.” He soon succumbed to sleep and was snoring a few minutes later.

Yeni rolled back to her side of the bed, punched the pillow and yawned. She tried to sleep but she could not. She picked up her bible to read but she could not concentrate. Thoughts of Alhaji and the stranger in her dreams filled her mind, she could not shake the odd feeling that both were connected.

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Yeni woke up, heart pounding, hands tightly clenched. As always, the time was 3.00 a.m.

God, I have to do something about these dreams. They are becoming terrifying.

She unclenched her hands and froze in horror. They were there in her right palm, small and white, just as the stranger had handed them over to her in her sleep—twin cowries. She remembered the details with dismay. He had given it to her to pacify her after sleeping with her. She flushed with fear and goose pimples spread all over her skin. Yeni shivered. She quickly threw the cowries away as her emotions overwhelmed her. She let out a cry.

Startled out of sleep, Tunde asked, “Are you alright dear?”

His wife’s frightened look wiped the cobweb of sleep off his face. Yeni began to cry loudly, her body quaking.

“What is it? Please tell me. You know you shouldn’t be doing this in your condition.”

Instead of explaining, she wrapped her arms around her husband, and continue to cry. She paused to breathe, afraid that her thudding heart would burst.

Tunde had never seen his wife this way. He thought it could be her hormones, Yeni was a few months pregnant. They had both been excited when they found out. Yeni's hands opened and closed rhythmically, as if there was something she wanted to get rid of. He was helpless, he did not know what to do or make of her strange behaviour, especially since she was not answering his questions. So he let her cry until she began to relax and her trembling subsided.

Suddenly they were surrounded by the silence of the night. Still, Tunde waited.

"I think I am possessed," she said at last, choking on a fresh sob.

"No, you are not. It's only a dream …"

"Tunde, I saw that strange man again. The same man I have been seeing since I was thirteen."

"You mean like a spirit husband?"

"Yes, I think that is it. He even gave me something today, cowries. I had them in my palm when I woke up. Look over there." She pointed at a corner of the room. "He said it was a gift."

Tunde looked. "I can't see anything."

"They were right here," she blurted before she noticed his odd stare. "Honey, I'm not crazy. I threw them away!"

"I believe you, honey. You need to go back to bed. Relax and think about the baby."

She knew her husband did not believe her. He hardly believed such things. His worry was for her sanity and the baby. They said a short prayer and then went back to sleep. A gust of breeze blew the curtains in the quiet, dark room. Neither of them were asleep. Tunde lay awake, baffled by his wife's repeated dreams. He was not a believer in superstition. But the spate of recurrence was becoming alarming. He had strongly rejected earlier suggestions by Yeni to seek for solutions the unorthodox way. As far as he was concerned, all ailments, physical or spiritual, had to be attended to by doctors and pastors.

But the horrified look on his wife's face bothered him greatly. He listened to her breathing—regular and shallow—and sighed. *Thank God, she has gone to sleep*. Yeni opened her eyes when she heard his sigh. She dared not close her eyes, as she was scared of seeing the stranger in her dream again. The man she knew so well and yet hardly knew. He had become real, no longer a figment of her imagination.

She shuddered at the details of the dream. He had been as sweet as ever, but as usual became enraged when she mentioned Tunde. He had violent sex

with her and apologised with the cowries afterwards. She had lost count of the number of sexual encounters she had had with him in her dreams, but this was the first time with the cowries.

Suddenly she felt a sharp pain in her stomach, it grew intense until it became a huge wave of pain that overwhelmed her body. Yeni got up from the bed, staggered into the bathroom and leaned against the wall. She did not want to scream because Tunde was already snoring. She took deep breaths and tried to sit on the toilet seat, but she felt another sharp again, followed by a squishing that birthed blood clots and pregnancy tissue.

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When Yeni woke up, she was in a hospital bed with her husband by her side. Tunde broke the news to her. It was the fourth pregnancy in four years. She was devastated. She said nothing and cried, knowing this had everything to do with the strange man. She closed her eyes and her mind wandered back to how the dreams had started.

She was thirteen when the ordeal started. She had gone on holiday in Oshogbo, her father's hometown. Her parents had travelled back to Lagos, leaving her and her younger sister with their grandmother. Yeni loved being with her grandmother. With grandparents, it was often liberty unlimited, she could do whatever she liked and easily got away with anything.

That fateful day, they had all gone to celebrate the Osun Oshogbo Festival, seven teenagers from the same household, all of them cousins. Her grandmother kept her sister, Temilade, back. It was a long walk from their family house to the Osun shrine. Grandma said such walks were not meant for children and old women.

Yeni and her cousins had so much fun that morning. There was Funmi the quiet one, Laide the talkative who they all called Radio Nigeria, Femi who was particular about his looks, Folusho, Femi's sister, Moni who had never been to the city, and seventeen year old Aunty Bolutife who told them wild stories. They were waiting for the Arugba to come out at midday when she felt the cramp. Subdued by the growing pain, she went to sit somewhere alone. Her cousins, eager to join the crowd, promised to check on her later. She was under a tree when a middle-aged woman walked up to her. She was one of the priestesses at the Osun grove.

"*Ìyàwó mi o*, you can't sit there."

"I am sorry ma," she said jumping up from the spot and dusting her dress.

"No problem, *ìyàwó mi*. Your husband already told me you are on your first period."

Yeni looked at her confused.

"Don't bother, dear, he's so excited about it he has apologised on your behalf. You can go over there and sit."

What a cryptic message, she thought. She wondered why the woman referred to her as her wife, but was more confounded by her knowledge of her first period. Later on, when Yeni told her grandmother about it, she sighed deeply and said: "It is only those Osun loves that she chooses."

The door opened, and Yeni was brought back to her painful reality. Her mother carried a food flask.

"Yeni, you are awake, I had to dash home to prepare your favourite meal. Sit up and eat something."

Yeni did as her mother instructed, feigned a smile, and masked the emptiness that swirled in the depths of her soul.

Chapter 6

Shola walked into Bristol Company dejected. His secretary greeted him and told him about his upcoming meeting, but he promptly told her to cancel it and all other meetings. He was not in a mood to attend to anyone. Mrs Ayeni thought it was strange, her boss rarely cancelled meetings.

Shola hurried to his office and stared at the results of his third semen analysis. His sperm count was low, the motility was not efficient and the sperm morphology had abnormalities. The doctor had assured him that he could be treated with medication, but there had been no improvements since he commenced medication.

He had been lackadaisical about their childlessness because he thought he could not be sterile. The doubt he had regarding Pemisire's paternity, which he had previously buried, was now resurrected. To think that he could be responsible for their problems, and had wasted years in indifference, made him feel guilty and bruised his ego badly.

Shola was the Casanova who boasted about his sexual conquest at every opportunity, a social butterfly who never had to court a woman for too long before she fell in love with him. Even as a child, everyone doted on him. His father threw a lavish party for his naming ceremony, although his birth had been unplanned. Shola had taken his good looks from his mother, but his character was more like his father's. He was eloquent, exuded confidence and constantly got the attention he so craved.

He picked up his car keys and drove to Rebecca's place. He knew he had to face his demons and clear his doubts once and for all. The doctor had suggested that he bring the boy in for a DNA test. On his way he bought snacks and a drink for Pemisire.

Rebecca was surprised to see him, since he rarely visited. *Maybe he wants to start bonding with his son, since his wife can't bear him a child,* she thought. After the exchange of pleasantries, the atmosphere became awkward. Shola was usually quiet. She watched him hand over the snacks to her son and observe him oddly. He looked as if he wanted to say something. She told the boy to go out and play with his friends.

"Rebecca, I need to clear this once and for all, I want to do a DNA test for Pemisire."

She was shocked, her brain could not comprehend what Shola had just

said. She could not move or speak.

Shola repeated himself again.

“I thought you had good intentions when you walked in,” she finally said, “I didn’t know you came here to look for trouble.”

“Don’t get me wrong Rebecca. All I want you to do is to bring the child to the hospital and get this done once and for all.”

“Look at this man! You should be thanking God that I have given you a son to cover your shame, everyone knows that you can’t impregnate a woman.”

“Whether I can impregnate a woman or not is not the issue. Can I call the doctor right away to schedule a meeting for next week?”

“I am not going anywhere! If you can’t take my word for it, then forget about us!”

“Then I will have to stop sending you money for the child’s upkeep!”

“A child who calls you father, Shola?”

“That doesn’t erase the fact that I have always doubted if he is truly mine, Rebecca. For ten years I have done it your way, now it is my turn to have my way and if you are not ready to comply ...”

“Are you threatening me? This boy knows no one else as his dad except you!”

“Stop this manipulation, Rebecca! That emotional blackmail won’t work.”

“Please leave my house!”

Shola stood up and walked out of the house, slamming the door behind him.

Chapter 7

The couple was barely seated when the doctor gave them the shocking news. After the series of injections, Tale's ovaries had not produced good eggs.

"We performed other tests on your blood samples and discovered that you have a diminished ovarian reserve, which is why your body wasn't responding to the drugs," the doctor calmly revealed.

"Oh, my God! Please have mercy on me. This is too hard for me," Tale sobbed.

"It's okay dear," Kunle said softly, holding his wife in a warm embrace.

"Can you please throw more light on this?" Kunle asked, confused.

"Every woman is born with all the eggs she needs for reproduction, but that number decreases by hundreds every month. Ovarian reserve refers to the number of eggs you carry in your ovaries, as well as the health and quality of those eggs. Assuming no other reproductive problems exist, the ovarian reserve plays a major role in determining whether a woman gets pregnant or not. Her reserve depends not only on the quantity and quality of the eggs in her ovaries, but also on the quality of her ovarian follicles' response to hormone signals from the brain."

"What's the solution now?" Kunle asked holding his wife's hands.

"We have to discontinue the process," the doctor said with finality.

"This means my situation is hopeless! Lord Jesus, your daughter's

situation is hopeless! Doctors can't help me again," Tale said hysterically.

Kunle tried to pacify his wife.

"Madam, it's not hopeless, there is the option of egg donors …"

"Egg donors?" Tale asked looking up.

"Yes," the doctor nodded and continued his explanation. "With IVF, a donor's egg is fertilised with your partner's sperm, and the embryo is transferred to your uterus for implantation and pregnancy. We have successfully used egg donation for many women and they have gotten pregnant and had children."

"Are you saying you will get another woman's egg and place it in her womb?" Kunle wondered.

The doctor nodded.

"You doctors are very funny. My sperm and another woman's egg, really? That is a bastard child," Kunle did not hide his displeasure.

"I disagree. What about those who end up adopting a child?" the doctor replied.

"I won't bring a bastard into my home. Taking another person's eggs is something my brain can't process. And adoption? Please don't even go there."

"Sir, adoption isn't a bad thing, I was just going to suggest that. If you adopt, you will be changing the life of a child," the doctor explained.

"Doctor, why are you speaking like an oyinbo person? We both know adoption in Africa is a taboo," Kunle replied.

"To an extent, but recently, many Nigerians have started to accept adoption. Moreover, it's a way of giving genuine love to a child who has no hope of having loving parents."

"The process of adopting a child in Nigeria is very frustrating," Tale said, still looking dazed.

"Tale, don't even go there," Kunle reprimanded her sharply. "Even if the process is easy, we will not be a party to it. Do you want people to laugh at us?"

"Kunle, this is just a discussion."

"I know, but just know that adoption is out of our options, my dear," he insisted.

"I think you should consider the egg donor option then," the doctor tried again.

"I know many women do it abroad, but I am not sure about donors in Nigeria. If it is not properly handled, things might go wrong and the donor can come back and start making demands," Tale said, deliberately ignoring her husband.

“Oh, Tale, you have already agreed to a bastard child?” Kunle asked, irritated.

“Kunle, they are using your sperm …”

“But not your eggs …”

“Sir, she is still going to carry the child in her womb. Women are created to nurture. I’m sure that’s no problem.”

“Do we know the kind of hereditary diseases the mother is carrying? Do I know if she comes from a family of kleptomaniacs, or if they have epilepsy in their genes? Spare me, I won’t be a party to this.”

He was out of the chair and out of the door in seconds. For the first time, the doctor was ruffled.

“Doctor, don’t worry, he will be back here, just give him a few minutes,” Tale said calmly.

“I am really sorry your husband is upset, but I think you should discuss this with him. You can go home and schedule another appointment with us. You know I can’t speak to you alone. Moreover, it’s obvious your husband doesn’t want to continue with this,” the doctor said frankly.

“Doctor, he is my husband. He will soon be back. I know him very well. What about the legal implications?”

The doctor looked up, surprised to see Kunle back. He hesitated.

“The legal implications,” Tale nudged him.

“We will sort out all the legal implications. Women come here to donate eggs and they don’t look back afterwards,” the doctor replied.

“Can we have some minutes of privacy, please?” Tale requested politely, exchanging a conspiratorial look with the doctor.

The doctor came back into the room a few minutes later. They told him they would go all the way. He told the couple the fertility clinic had a donor bank, they could look at specific features of the donors and make a choice.

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Kunle felt responsible for his wife’s woes. That guilt had brought him back to the doctor’s office. If he had not insisted on Tale aborting the pregnancy twenty-two years ago, things would have been different, and the child would have been twenty-one years old. He had done it for a selfish reason—to please his father.

Kunle knew his attitude did not help matters. In moments of frustration, he let his mind think that Tale was to blame for their childlessness. But the moment she cried for mercy at the hospital overwhelmed him with guilt. He wished he could turn back the hands of time. He was getting old, already in his late-forties and besieged by pressure from his family to take in another woman. He loathed hurting his wife, but the fortune and energy spent on the quest for an heir often made thoughts of an affair appealing. He had gotten three other women pregnant and insisted that they abort them, but his last mistress had been a little difficult. He met Grace in Kaduna, during a two year course at the Armed Forces Command and Staff College, Jaji. She had fallen hopelessly in love with him and tried to trap him with the pregnancy, but Kunle had been brutally pragmatic. He sent her some money and broke contact with her.

Some of his friends already had children in secondary school and higher institutions. Andrew, his closest friend in university who had also been a notorious Casanova, was now a respectable family man with three kids, his first child almost done with secondary school. Merely seeing his friends' offspring sometimes left him green with envy.

Some months back, his best man Ladi, told him of his son who wanted to get into the Nigerian Defence Academy. Kunle bought the forms for the young chap and used his influence to get him admitted into the elite, military academy. Several nights later, he stayed awake, wishing his godson was his biological son.

Ladi was the butt of jokes when he impregnated his then girlfriend, in their second year at the university. Friends made jest of Ladi for impregnating a mere secondary school leaver, a girl who was not as sophisticated as the university girls who wore trousers, painted theirs nails and wore trendy hairstyles. Kunle had advised him to get rid of the pregnancy, but Ladi did not listen. He loved Feyi. It had been a tough decision, but it eventually paid off. The day his son was born, he borrowed money from Kunle to pay the hospital bill. Kunle was magnanimous enough to write off the debt and Ladi had declared him his new son's godfather. After graduation, Ladi got a small job and encouraged his wife to go to a nursing school, which she did. Kunle often thought about Ladi's life and always ended up wishing that he had let Tale keep her pregnancy too.

Kunle remembered when they were newly married, and how he used to flaunt Tale because she was beautiful. How he longed for those days— Tale fashionably dressed, the cynosure of attention. Kunle did not blame her for her withdrawal. One of his aunties had said to her face that all she knew how to do was dress gorgeously, her womb had refused to give them children. That day

Tale cried profusely and swore never again to attend any of his family's outings. She became a shadow of herself—no longer interested in social gatherings, grumpy and unkempt. Tale became depressed and found solace in food.

Tale was tired of the insults, probing questions and curious stares at her belly. His mother was initially good to her, until a few months back when she became hostile, accusing her of preventing her son from trying his luck elsewhere. On the first day of Lent, she came to their home and accused Tale of using charms to tie her son down. It was a really bad day for Tale, she begged him to go and try another woman, but Kunle reassured her of his love. His mother was furious and swore that she would not visit again until there was the cry of a baby in the house. Tale only changed when they started the fertility treatment. Doctors warned her about her weight, so she hit the gym. She began to eat healthy too.

When Tale confided in her friend about the incident, she scolded her for encouraging Kunle to go and try another woman. Onome warned her to watch her husband closely, and if possible, follow him on every transfer because naval personnel were easy targets for women. But Tale could not abandon her thriving fabric business to follow a man who was building his own career, all in the name of safeguarding her marriage. If anything happened to her marriage, she would at least have her business. However, Tale believed that even though they had no child binding them together, the love they shared was enough.

But Kunle's father soon began to mount pressure on him too. He called him countless times, urging him to try another woman. Kunle found it hard to say no to his father so he pleaded for more time.

"Until when? Is it when she reaches menopause and you are in your old age that you will see reason?" Chief had replied.

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The doctor's voice brought his wandering mind back to the room.

"Here are the documents, you may need to go home with them to look through. They will enlighten you more on all we talked about."

Kunle was optimistic that the IVF would not fail this time. He had a point to prove to his family—that his wife was not just a beautiful woman.

Chapter 8

Nkechi was surprised to see a youthful prophet. The man her mother so revered was young enough to be her son.

They were ushered into a big auditorium where a service was ongoing. Her mother, in a low voice, gave her a quick explanation—they could only see the prophet after the noon prayer. He stood on the altar, backing the congregation. He was of average height and slim. When he turned around, she saw that Prophet James Israel had on a long gold chain and a beard. He looked fortyish, and had a bald head. His left arm seemed shorter than the right one. The short arm made him clumsy and the dark scar on his forehead looked like he had been in a fight before. He smiled from the altar but there was no warmth in it. Prophet James was blank, Nkechi could not read him.

She continued staring at him until her mother nudged her with her elbow. She had been to many churches, but Holy Ghost and Fire Church amazed her. Nkechi was surprised at the ideas borrowed from the Catholic Church. The prophet donned a regalia that resembled a bishop's cassock, and they said the Angelus prayer. Seeing the confusion on her daughter's face, Lolo told her the prayer was necessary to ward off evil spirits that roamed in the afternoon. They took the nearest seat and joined the congregation.

Nkechi half-listened to the preaching, her eyes wandered about. She noticed the church was a pastiche of art—ancient art with a modern twist. The congregation was over a hundred, all staring expectantly at the altar. At the extreme end of the altar, a giant bottle of anointing oil was strategically placed. Nkechi had never seen such a bottle before. Her mother whispered that the

prophet got it from Israel. Adjacent the huge bottle was another keg, it was the holy water the prophet had also brought from Israel. She went on about the miraculous water and oil. Nkechi thought they sounded like tools of trade, like miracle equipment.

She became restless after fifteen minutes.

"If you are lucky, the prophet might call you out and tell you all your problems," her mother whispered.

Nkechi prayed silently. *Oh God in heaven, Let your anointed prophet look my way during his ministration.* She was not lucky. The prophet called other people and revealed astoundingly specific things about them. A young man sitting in the front row was dumbfounded, when the prophet reeled out his bank account number and balance. He also called out a phone number to identify somebody in the congregation. He revealed the young man's birthplace, what his problem was and who was responsible. The young man threw himself to the ground, crying and rolling on the floor. It really was dramatic. Everyone was excited, there were screams of joy, but Nkechi was uncomfortable. This was not the Christianity she grew up knowing. This was unusual. Her mother, though self-restrained, was excited too.

The prophet's next ministration startled her. He asked for recharge cards. Nkechi was surprised to see the people falling over themselves in their eagerness to give. She watched in dismay as an usher wrote down the promises of each member.

She felt an urge to get on her feet and walk out, but stayed put because she did not want to offend her mother. When he started calling out various types of recharge cards, Nkechi could no longer contain her anger.

"Mama, what type of church is this?"

"It's a good place. You need to attend the Sunday service to see God at work. They spend a lot of money running this church. Papa calls every member of this church to ask about their well-being. So, he really needs the recharge cards. Moreover, as a cheerful giver, you get your blessings in multiple folds," her mother explained.

"I don't even feel the presence of God here o! It's like this man is using charms," she mumbled, then added, "And calling a guy who your first daughter is older than, 'papa', is beginning to irritate me."

"Come on, *mechionu*!" Lolo snapped at her. She cast furtive glances left and right to ascertain that no one else heard her daughter's impiety. "He might be young but he has power, God-given power, so he is our spiritual father."

“Okay,” Nkechi accepted grudgingly.

The service ended an hour later. Lolo told her they would be seeing the prophet now. They moved to another section of the church, where other people who wanted to see the prophet were seated, holding a blue card.

“Oh! I forgot we need to get one too. You need to have that card before you see Papa. It’s just ₦2, 500,” she said.

“Do we have to pay, is this a hospital?”

“Stop that childish behaviour. How much is ₦2,500?”

“What kind of church is this where they collect money before you see the prophet?” she said, half to herself. “I am scared of this place!”

Lolo stopped and looked hard at her daughter. “Nkechi, I’m your mother. Will I do anything to harm you?”

“That’s not what I am saying,” she replied stubbornly. “All these are strange rituals. You brought us up in the Christian faith …”

“Then you need to trust me. Have you seen any diabolical thing here? I have told you times without number that this place is tested and trusted.”

Her mother beckoned to the usher selling the cards, filled a section and returned it to the usher who in turn gave her a number. Nkechi, who did not want a recurrence of her assault ordeal with Oluso of Olutanmole Cherubim and Seraphim Church, was relieved when her mother followed her in when it was her turn. The prophet ushered them to their seats while praying for someone over the phone. Nkechi took a look around the office. It was tastefully furnished—expensive furniture, a long table with a fresh bouquet of flowers, and a huge bookshelf stocked with bibles, concordances, psychology books and various texts. She tried to read the large spines—*Lost Books of the Bible and Forgotten Books of Eden, How to Build a Successful Christian Home, The Spiritual Church, Introduction to Psychology, Theory of Emotions*. Of all the books, Nkechi was fascinated by the psychology books. *Why does a prophet need them? The primary role of a pastor is to feed and shepherd the soul of the congregation as he himself is led by the Spirit, not by any earthly wisdom,* she thought.

“Madam, you are welcome, but your thoughts about psychology are not totally right. We pastors need to get ourselves equipped to meet the mental needs of our flock,” Prophet James said grinning.

Nkechi almost jumped out of her skin. In her entire life, she had never experienced anything like this.

“Mama, your prophet can also read my thoughts?” she asked, facing her mom.

“I told you that Prophet is very powerful,” her mother said.

“Mama, I’m not powerful, it’s the Most High that has bestowed these powers on me. Only God is powerful and all-knowing,” he said glibly.

Nkechi knew she had to rid her mind of negative thoughts, this all-knowing prophet would easily read them. After a spell of silence, the prophet spoke up.

“My sister, let me see your palms,” he said, stretching forth his right hand. Nkechi hesitated, her eyes caught the expensive bracelet on his right wrist and a bold cocktail ring on his left hand.

“Can I have your right hand, sister?” The prophet asked again.

Her head began to ring. She knew that was another red flag. Her being rebelled against this, palm reading was not biblical. *Be careful, he can read your mind*, a tiny voice cautioned her. Her mother nudged her. She brought forth her palm, trembling.

“Why are you shivering? There is no problem. You came here for a solution and you will get it in Jesus’ name,” the prophet said.

“Amen!” her mother shouted.

It took him five minutes to look through her palm. He explained what he saw.

“Madam, we thank God for your life. You see, the battle you have in front of you isn’t a small one. Somebody has tied your womb under the sea, and until you untie yourself, you can never bear a child for your husband.”

“*Ewo! Chei! Chineke!* Help me o!” She heard her mother scream.

Dumbfounded, Nkechi looked on while the prophet described where her womb was tied. Her mother became dramatic, shouting the name of Jesus so much that the prophet had to placate her.

“Who is that person? *Biko*, Prophet let me know,” Lolo inquired.

“Of course, I will let you know because I don’t like shielding evil people. The person is no other person but her mother-in-law,” he said authoritatively.

Nkechi lost her grip on her emotions, she shed uncontrollable tears. She did not know what to believe anymore. It was now her mother-in-law, not her mean uncle in the village. Her mother-in-law of all people, the nicest person she had ever known. She wished the prophet had mentioned her uncle, it would have been easier for her to believe. Her mother, who had always been fixated on her late husband’s brother as the source of her tribulation, was stunned.

The new revelation did not gel with Nkechi. Madam Shokunbi, who she called Mommy, was an amazing woman. She had accepted her, not minding that

she was not a Yoruba girl. Mommy had been to several prayer houses searching for a solution, and sometimes took her along. She had gotten her her dream job in a telecommunication company. It could not be the same Mommy who cooked for her, and at times did her laundry. How could such a sweet-natured person scheme to hurt her?

The prophet interrupted her thoughts. “You are wondering why someone who is so good would harm you.”

Nkechi nodded tearfully.

“Such is life, my dear. She is not happy you married her son, because you are not of their tribe. She has decided to tie your womb in her coven to punish you. She is a pretender. Be careful, my daughter, she is a black witch, a serpent.”

“*Chei!* This world is wicked o!” Lolo exclaimed.

The prophet addressed her, “Mama, you will have to bring your daughter again. She needs to be fortified. Now that the woman knows you know her secret, she will fight more fiercely.” Lolo sighed loudly. He turned his attention to Nkechi. “The battle has been won, don’t cry again. You need to rejoice. The bible says weeping may endure for a night but joy comes in the morning.”

Nkechi was surprised the prophet knew she was married to a Yoruba man. A part of her began to believe him, but for the small voice of opposition. She shook her head to clear her confusion. All she wanted was a solution—getting pregnant and holding her baby.

“What should I do?” she heard herself asking the prophet.

“Since you are here, believe me, my Lord has won the battle for you.” She wiped her tears. “First and foremost, you will have to come for a service next week Sunday with a bucket of custard. I will pray on it and you will drink it for seven days. You will see what will happen afterwards. Also, you will buy a bottle of anointing oil from our store outside and I will pray for you and God will set you free.”

This time around, Nkechi did not care what a bucket of custard had to do with her deliverance. She walked out with her mom to buy the anointing oil, not caring that it was overpriced or the same thing she could purchase close to her home, all she wanted was her miracle.

Chapter 9

Dinner under the stars with the love of her life, Yeni had never experienced anything like this. Right on the Lekki-Epe Expressway, Lakeside Luxury Resort had magic. The beautifully decorated spa, pools and restaurants made it the most romantic resort in Lagos. Its retro-chic room, thatched huts and gorgeous white beach made it a good destination for a romantic getaway. The Atlantic Ocean was also just nearby.

Yeni loved the privacy of their suite. Their dining area overlooked the gorgeous beach. The table was beautifully decorated with crisp linen and an exquisite floral arrangement. Candlelight added an elegant touch. Their four-course meal, served by a private waiter, came with sparkling white wine in a golden ice bucket. She was overwhelmed and started shedding tears. Tunde held her and reassured her of his unending love for her. After dinner, Yeni went into the Jacuzzi, leaving Tunde glued to the TV, sharing the thrill of a Lionel Messi-led Barcelona bashing Real Madrid's team of lacklustre galácticos.

The couple seemed insulated from the worries that had eclipsed their lives in the past few months. Tunde stretched out on the couch, ruminating on how he was going to tackle the biggest assignment of the day. He had not found the perfect opening.

They had almost everything. Unlike most young couples, money was not a problem. Tunde's career as a senior accountant had blossomed magically by the second year of their marriage—he changed jobs and became an employee of a multinational company. His take-home was good, with an official car and a house in a choice area of Lagos. Yeni also got a plum job as a personal assistant to the MD of a big oil and gas company. Yet, after five years of marriage, their home was still an empty nest - a travail which put a strain on their marriage.

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In the second year of their marriage, Yeni had two miscarriages. A series of tests showed uterine abnormalities. Tunde remembered the doctor said it was uterine septum. Yeni's cervix was abnormally shaped - the miscarriages occurred because the embryo either could not implant or once it did, could not get the needed nourishment to survive. The doctor said the problem could be corrected by surgery. It was the chief reason Tunde discounted her dreams of copulation with a phantom figure. He was sure that all would be well once a corrective surgery was done.

The couple pooled their resources and Yeni went in for the surgery with high hopes and great expectations. The surgery went well but something went wrong in her body, because her periods ceased. She then turned to prayers. Her mother, Kofoworola Folawiyo, brought different types of holy water for her to drink. After everything, her periods were still not forthcoming and she regretted the surgery.

Finally, her menses returned in trickles and irregularly, after she took a pricey Chinese supplement suggested to her by her friend. For several months, her husband's attempts to convince her to see the doctor was met with obstinacy. After a while, she could not get a supply of the supplements anymore, and her periods ceased again. After much persuasion, Tunde was able to convince her to seek medical help again.

It was a sunny Friday when Yeni and Tunde returned to Rays of Hope Fertility Clinic in Victoria Island. The Indian doctor reeled out a series of tests she had to undergo, including the one she dreaded the most, hysterosalpingogram, also known as HSG.

"Doctor, I don't think I need to do the HSG again because this doesn't have anything to do with my tubes. Moreover, I have results for all the tests I did last year."

"Those tests are over six months and outdated," the doctor was firm. "Moreover, HSG is only a radiology procedure, to check if your fallopian tubes are open or blocked, and whether a blockage is at the junction of the tube and the uterus or at the other end of the tube. Madam, it's an important fertility test."

"But it's very painful," Yeni blurted. "It's not easy getting tools in and out of one's vagina all the time." Her husband had wiped her tears and held her closely.

The doctor continued as if he did not hear her protest. “I have got good news for you. The test has been improved upon, there is hardly any pain now. I will send you to a laboratory.”

She turned to her husband: “It’s not just about the pain. Opening my legs wide for every stranger to peer at is not an easy thing. Sometimes I feel like filth, it’s demeaning. Why can’t I just be like other women?”

“Don’t worry about that, baby. Just focus on you holding our baby. We are only going through a phase,” Tunde urged.

A few days later, they returned to the hospital. The doctor said mellifluously, “Madam, the test showed that you have scar tissues.”

The Indian kept his eyes on the file while Yeni felt her palms turn clammy. She thought the corrective surgery had taken care of any abnormalities.

“What does that mean?” Tunde asked.

“It means that intrauterine adhesions have formed within her uterus and is causing trauma to the lining of the womb.”

“What is the cause of this again?” Tunde spoke once more.

“It might have been because of the miscarriages.” The doctor looked up from the files, his gaze levelling with Yeni’s “Or, have you had an abortion before? Because it’s usually the major cause of this.”

“Abortion? That is laughable because I have been looking for the fruit of the womb for five years now. I can’t abort. But if it is in the past, yes, on two occasions, I had done it before I got married.” Yeni was not afraid to say this, her husband was aware of her past.

“But that issue didn’t come up before she had the first surgery,” Tunde defended.

“Yes. I don’t think the abortion had anything whatsoever to do with it, because the doctor you previously saw never mentioned it. It might be the surgery or the miscarriages, definitely not the abortions.”

So why did you ask? Yeni wondered.

“What’s the solution, doctor?” Tunde probed.

“We will have to remove the scar tissue. If successful, your wife will become pregnant afterwards …”

“By removing you mean another surgery?” Yeni asked.

The doctor nodded.

She began to weep, softly, then uncontrollably. The previous surgery had not resulted in her getting pregnant.

It was after the second surgery that Tunde began to believe Yeni’s story

about her dreams. On their last visit to the clinic, the doctor certified them okay and told Tunde candidly, “There are no medical reasons for your wife’s continuing sterility.”

Tunde was at his wit’s end, he needed answers. Finding none in science, he reluctantly turned to the mystical. During Yeni’s last episode with the spirit husband, he had seized a flower vase from her and threatened to smash it. Tunde knew a flower vase was symbolic for the womb, and that if he smashed it, they would never have a child. Yeni’s fear was so contagious that he felt the spirit husband was present in the room with them.

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He had gone to his mother’s house at Surulere the next morning and briefed her in confidence about the incidence. Their discussion further deepened the mystery. He was surprised when his mother told him she knew Yeni was a powerful being.

“The first time you brought this girl home, I knew she was not an ordinary being. I told your elder sister she is an *em*è*r*è, but I didn’t tell you because you wouldn’t believe me.”

“Mom, don’t compound my problems. I don’t want you to scare me,” Tunde said uneasily.

“I am telling you the truth,” his mother said firmly.

“You see, *em*è*r*è are of two types—the wealthy ones and the poverty-stricken ones. We call them *em*è*r*è *olówó* and *em*è*r*è *alákìís*à. Yeni is the wealthy one. Don’t you realise how prosperous you’ve become since you married her? The only problem is that she would have challenges with bearing children.”

“So why didn’t you stop our wedding then?” Tunde quizzed.

“I wanted to, but Uncle Pade warned me not to. Because Yeni had chosen you, there was nothing we could do about it. He said if we hurt her, her spirit friends would be angry and the consequences would be dire.”

“Still, you could have done something.”

“Are you aware of the number of sacrifices we did before and after the wedding? You don’t know, because I didn’t tell you. I didn’t even inform your sister.”

“How did you get to know all these about her?”

“I went to find out about her immediately I knew you were serious about

her, and I was told all these."

"But you never told me!"

"Would you have believed me if I had told you anything negative about her? Do you even believe me now? Times without number, I said, let me take Yeni to Uncle Pade's place, you said no. So, will I force you people? Yeni has been telling you about her dreams all these years and you have been ignoring it like it means nothing."

"I found it difficult to believe those stories," he admitted. "But what can we do now?"

"I will have to take you both to see Uncle Pade. Let's see how he can help us."

"You know I hate going to him. Mom, you are a Christian. A few months ago, you told me you rededicated your life to Christ …"

"Forget that jo! Tradition can't be thrown away, Babatunde! Of course we are Christians, but when I am faced with a difficult situation like this, that is where I turn to."

"That is backsliding," he said without thinking.

His mother's response was laced with scorn. "If by backsliding I find a solution to some of the family's problems, then God himself will forgive me. Too much book at times is problematic, as if I didn't go to school myself."

Tunde hated going to his granduncle's. The horror he had experienced there as a nine-year-old was still vivid. His mom had taken him and his sister to Uncle Pade, who made incisions on their scalps, foreheads and chests. He remembered the pain, and the horror of seeing blood coming out of his body. The black powder his uncle rubbed into the incisions stung like pepper. As a child, Tunde found his granduncle's place spooky. The scariest room, the one in the middle, had black and red curtains, on the curtains hung cowries and snail shells. His uncle had a low table in the room where he placed his *opele*, a divining chain. Also on the table was his *ọpọ́n ifá*, the wooden divination tray. Just by Uncle Pade's seat was a big earthen pot and a small calabash to draw water from it. His home was like a scene from the Africa Magic Yoruba channel.

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"Honey, come and join me, I can't be having all the fun in this Jacuzzi alone." Yeni's voice was tiny and girlish.

“Ok. Give me a minute, let me get my towel,” replied Tunde. He hurriedly finished his drink and pulled off his clothes. As he joined his wife in the bathtub, Tunde pondered the right way to tell Yeni he had to take her to Uncle Pade’s place. It was the reason he brought her to Lake Side Luxury Resort.

Part II

“He maketh the barren woman to keep house, and to be a joyful mother of children.”

– Psalms 113:9

Chapter 10

“Mom, is it true that I am an *emèr*è? Did you have to perform a ritual at the shrine of some fetish priests before you had me?”

Yeni’s voice was thinned by hysteria. Her mother tried to calm her down but she was inconsolable. Kofoworola wanted to know who had called her that abominable name and Yeni rambled about how Tunde’s mom had taken her and her husband to Uncle Pade’s place. Uncle Pade, a native doctor, had told them she was betrothed to the gods, that she had a spirit husband. Kofoworola was shocked that her daughter had gone to visit a native doctor. Her face momentarily contorted as she tried to control her fury, mindful of not hurting her daughter further.

“Yeni, but I didn’t bring you up that way …”

“Mom … the dreams … I was desperate for answers. I have been married for five years now with no child to show for it. Four miscarriages Mom, I have had four miscarriages!” She wailed and then settled down. “When Tunde suggested it, I was reluctant, but his mother intervened, they made it seem like I was responsible for our childlessness …”

“You should have at least informed me about your intention to go anywhere with them. Or do you have another mother beside me?”

“No, Mom …”

“Don’t keep such things from me again.”

“Okay, ma. But what would you have done if you were in my shoes? The whole situation was so confusing.” Yeni’s eyes were soaking again with tears.

“You had no choice,” Kofoworola agreed. “So what solution did the man proffer?”

Yeni’s hesitance was an indication of something unacceptable. She started in a small faltering voice. “He said we have to do some things, things I am not even interested in doing. It’s scary what he asked me to do …”

“Do they entail rituals?”

“Yes, Mom,” Yeni said, avoiding her mother’s eyes, knowing the reproach that would follow.

“We are Christians. I think I need to have a word with your mother-in-law.” To Yeni’s horror, her mother reached for her phone.

“Mom, please, I have had enough drama for one day.” She had come straight to her mother from their trip to Ikirun that evening. She did not speak a word to Tunde or his mother, who had tried to draw her into a conversation while they were in the car. Her mother-in-law blamed her for their predicament. In her tirade, she had insinuated that Yeni was enjoying the affair with the phantom husband, and therefore did not want to get pregnant. She did not want her mother to worsen the discord. “I don’t think I need any additional stress today.”

“Don’t talk like that, Yeni. You can’t expect me not to say a word. I should let her know what is on my mind.”

“Mom, please no. I beg you. You know Tunde’s mom can be vicious. And this should not become a case of us against them. We should be looking for a solution, not worsening the situation with accusations.”

After a thoughtful silence, Kofoworola demanded: “What exactly did they ask you to do?”

“It’s weird what they are asking me to do.”

“Let me hear it.”

“First, I am to spend three days with Uncle Pade in Ikirun. I will take some sacrifices to a crossroad, thrice on the first day. The next day he would make sacrifices to Osun. On the third day, he would make incisions all over my body, supposedly to repel the spirit husband.”

Her mother sighed heavily, but continued to listen patiently.

“After these, they want me to go to Oshogbo and stay with the priestess inside the Osun grove for seven days. On the sixth day, my husband will join me

at the grove. We will take a bath together in the river and then spend the night together. I mean, we will sleep together somewhere inside the grove and … oh God, Mom, it's so ridiculous! I don't want to talk about it anymore."

Kofoworola digested the information in silence until she heard Yeni say, "Instead of me to do those things, I'd rather adopt a child …"

"*Ọlọ́run* ò *ní jẹ́!* I reject it! You will have your own child, from your own womb, in Jesus' name. And what is your husband saying about all this?"

"He is confused. He couldn't say no to his mom," Yeni spoke with anger.

"They wanted me to perform the rites immediately. They had bought the white linen and white cock before even telling me about the ritual." She buried her head in her hands. "They were making decisions without considering how I felt about them." She broke into fresh tears. Her mother let her cry. In between sobs, Yeni poured out her grievances. "Tunde wanted me to do it. It was like he was hypnotised. The Tunde I know wouldn't have gone there in the first place. He never believed in such things. I was shocked when he was trying to cajole me to do it. He even shouted at me. Mommy, you should have seen the humiliation I faced."

"Go, take a bath and change," said her mother. "Let me think about what to do."

After Yeni left the room, Kofoworola sat still for several minutes. She did not know what to do. She did not know anywhere to go. She was a churchgoer, a nominal Christian so anonymous in the church that her pastor did not really know her.

She did not want Yeni to lose her husband like she had. Kofoworola still blamed herself for her failed marriage—she felt she lost her husband to another woman because she had been careless. So she prayed nothing like that would happen to her two daughters.

Kofoworola Folawiyo rejected the idea that her daughter was an *emèrè*—those distressing supernatural beings with powers they used for benevolence or malevolence. Sometimes, they were children born after long intercessions at the shrine of some traditional worshippers. Her daughter was no imp of any deity. She had not begged at the foot of any deity or god to have her. In fact, she had gotten pregnant before she got married to Yeni's father.

A part of her cautioned that there might be some truth to what Tunde's mother had found out though. She remembered when she was still married to her husband, Lateef, and how he would tease their daughter about having spirit friends. Yeni was a reclusive child who played all by herself and enjoyed her

own company. She had strange habits too. She would often laugh out loud for no obvious reason. Sometimes she spoke as if she had other children around her. Kofoworola never attached any significance to her daughter's odd behaviour. As far as she knew, Yeni grew up as a normal child. Her husband was the superstitious type and Kofoworola took his sayings about their daughter with a pinch of salt.

However, Yeni was a sickly child, she was in and out of the hospital every other day. Her father even nicknamed her Madame One week, One Sickness. When it became overwhelming, Lateef Folawiyo took his daughter to one of his uncles who was an Islamic cleric, to find out what exactly was wrong with her. On the several occasions they took Yeni to her father's uncle, he gave them different things to rub on her body and potions for her to drink. He was the first person to pronounce Yeni an *em*è*r*è. That angered Kofoworola, who felt the marabout was using their daughter's frail health to fleece her husband. It had become a routine for Yeni to fall ill at the end of the month when they both received their salaries.

The couple did their best. They took Yeni to the hospital countless times but every test revealed nothing. A blood check ruled her out as a sufferer of sickle cell anaemia—her genotype was AA. A doctor at the Lagos State University Teaching Hospital told Kofoworola that the child was healthy, and would improve when she got older. Kofoworola did not believe him—Yeni vomited continuously and was skinny. It was very exhausting for Kofoworola.

Eventually, a concerned aunt took Kofoworola to a white garment church she attended. She remembered the ritual at the Badagry beach. They burnt all sorts of coloured candles, and held brooms while praying and dancing around her daughter. She was told the brooms would be used to sweep the illness into the sea. Yeni was even whipped with palm fronds, all in the name of deliverance. There was a remarkable improvement in Yeni's health thereafter. Without any doubt, the effort of the white garment church truly prevented her daughter from falling ill again.

This recall greatly disturbed Kofoworola. Had Yeni been initiated at the beach? Had they betrothed her daughter to a spirit husband in exchange for good health? And why was the so-called spirit husband now tormenting her daughter? *Am I a bad mother?* To these questions, Kofoworola had no answers. She wished she could speak to Yeni's father about it, but she had stopped speaking to him since he married another wife. Even when Yeni wedded, they had not said a word to each other, and the only thing they shared was the *aṣọ ẹb*í. Kofoworola

had not gotten over his betrayal.

Kofoworola needed answers and the only person who could provide them was her aunt, who unfortunately had been buried six months before. She knew there was no point tracing the genesis of her daughter's problem, the most important thing was to find a solution at all cost.

Chapter 11

"You have to remove your shoes before you go further," said the beautiful nurse with a wide smile and ample bosom. The tag pinned to her breast read Titilayo. Kunle and Tale both wore the theatre shoes and caps given to them.

Tale loved how Fruitful Fertility clinic took all precautions like it was done in Europe. She did not know that a hospital in Nigeria could maintain such standards. Nurse Titilayo explained that they were about to step into a germ-free area. Nurse Titilayo ushered the couple into a pristine room. The bed was the usual hospital type with a clean, starchy, white bedsheet and double pillows. Another nurse, older and matronly, peeped in and asked if they were comfortable.

Tale could tell that anxiety had taken over her husband. Kunle hardly said a word. As she changed into an overall, she prayed nothing would go wrong. If anything went wrong this time, she did not think she could be strong for Kunle as at other times.

“Let’s say a short prayer,” Kunle broke the silence.

Tale reached for her husband’s hands and felt his sweaty palms. As she prayed with him, her mind drifted to the road that had brought them to this point.

They had mulled over the doctor’s explanations for days. Tale was surprised at how quickly she warmed up to the concept, even though it would be the sixth time they were trying the IVF. As she weighed her options on the donor issue, she felt an inner calm and conviction. It felt like the next logical step to take. She was grateful for the lifeline technology had offered them.

Kunle was not so enthusiastic. He worried that he might find it difficult to love the child as his own, since the child would not carry his wife’s DNA. Tale had tried to dispel his fears, she did not mind if her DNA was not in the child, she told him. Kunle felt they should try another fertility clinic, thinking that they could get lucky and get healthier eggs. Tale calmly explained to him about a couple who had tried four times and ended up using a donor when they travelled to America. She also reminded him of the physical discomfort of daily shots, the emotional cost and the high expense, it had all become too much of a burden for her. She was not sure she could go down that road again.

Tale also nursed an inner fear that she would not share with her husband or anyone else. She was worried about the donor. She had heard about the black market for egg retrieval, but she was not sure if Fruitful Fertility Clinic was involved in it. A popular newspaper had once done an investigation on it. She worried about who her donor would be, where she had come from.

They found a match three months later, but the picture that was shown to Tale said nothing much about the donor. It was just a passport photograph. Tale felt the woman had nothing in common with her. She could see that she had a receding hairline, and did not have long hair like hers. Tale was bothered that this might affect her child too. *That isn’t so important,* she told herself unconvincingly. She also wondered if the donor was as tall as she was. She was a nurse by occupation. Kunle did not want the nurse, he preferred the donor to be doctor, but there was no doctor on the donor list. There was a fashion designer, a DJ, a dancer and a teacher. Tale hoped their child would somehow inherit something from her.

The couple read voraciously on egg donor IVF. In just a few days, they had gleaned a ton of information from books, medical journals and the internet. After they had signed the required documents and Fruitful Fertility Clinic was certain they were going to go ahead, more information about the donor was made available—eye colour, height, blood group and first name. No surname.

Kunle and Tale were not interested in the name. They felt the less they knew about the donor, the better for them.

Shortly after their prayers, the nurse came and told them it was time. They were taken to the egg transfer room. Out of five eggs, two were implanted into her womb. The embryo transfer procedure was simple and painless but Tale was nervous. She watched the process on a screen, while listening to the doctor's explanations. Kunle watched quietly, suddenly confident of a positive outcome.

He believed in the doctor's assurance that egg donation offered a higher chance of pregnancy. He had explained to him that the donation pool rarely included women above the age of 30, because the chances of pregnancy declines and miscarriage rate increases as a woman advances in age.

Kunle knew this was their season, they were going to have twins. He was very certain nothing would go wrong. Soon they would call him Baba Ibeji, he felt it in his soul. All he needed was faith, it would happen soon.

He and Tale vowed to keep the secret to themselves.

Chapter 12

Nkechi was shocked by the huge crowd at the entrance of the Holy Ghost and Fire Church as she arrived for her first Sunday service. At 6 a.m., the first rays of light were struggling to roll the blanket of darkness that shrouded the day.

Nkechi, accompanied by her mother, had thought that she would be one of the early arrivals—she had heard the fable of angels appearing in human form to bless early arrivals at church.

At least 200 people were keeping vigil at the gate, all dressed up in their Sunday best. The sight deflated her hope. Some people had gotten to the church as early as 4 a.m., her mother told her as they joined the queue. Nkechi clutched her bucket of custard tenaciously as if her life depended on it.

Mobile police officers at the entrance informed the restless mob that the gate would not be opened until 7 a.m. Exactly on the hour, the entrance was unlocked, and a flood of scrambling worshippers swept into the sanctuary.

Nkechi was startled by their lack of decorum. They shoved and exchanged angry words. The scene was rowdy, unlike the first time she had visited. Many pushed their way to the front rows, so they could sit close to the prophet. Lolo told her why. If they were lucky enough, the prophet could prophecy into their lives.

While they waited for the crowd to get in, Lolo told her daughter how lucky they were that the police officers were around, stampedes on Sundays used to be the norm. Four times she had witnessed the rampaging crowd break down the church's gate.

Newcomers were divided into groups as they were ushered in by blue-uniformed ushers. Nkechi found herself in a group of twenty-five people. The usher explained the church's code of conduct to them.

"Our slogan is 'Lamb of God' and your response should be, 'You who take away the sins of the world.'" The instructions continued for the next few minutes. "The prophet will distribute holy water at a particular time. He himself fetched the water from the River Jordan in Israel and took it to the mountain to pray. He fasted—marathon fasting—for forty days to pray on the water, and was in a trance throughout the period, speaking with angels."

The information elicited a few nods. The usher continued.

"There should be no scramble. Everyone should be patient. Remember, we are in the presence of the Holy Spirit. The holy water isn't for everyone. The prophet gives as directed by the Holy Spirit. Anyone not lucky enough can buy the anointing oil instead, after the service. All bottles of anointing oil are placed around the altar during the service so the powers of the man of God will fall on them. Therefore, the oil too is as potent as the holy water."

The women murmured.

Nkechi pondered, *How often does the prophet visit the River Jordan? Is*

the water safe for drinking? She whispered: “Mama, is this how you people behave every Sunday?”

“It’s only for newcomers like you,” Lolo replied. “We have a section for regular members. I am here with you to ensure you are familiar with the process.”

Nkechi marvelled at her mother. Lolo still attended the Baptist Church and paid her dues - tithes, offerings, thanksgiving offerings and donations. All her friends attended the Baptist Church. She had already declared her wish to be buried in the Baptist Church. Yet, she believed so much in this weird, wild church. “Here, is my secret place of the Lord. My spiritual sanctuary,” she had told her.

For a brief moment, Nkechi felt a pang of guilt. She had left home on Friday, on the pretext that she was travelling with her mother to observe the burial rites of a distant relative. She had never lied to her husband in their seven years of marriage.

Nkechi found the service entertaining. As much as she tried to be sober, she could not help but be amused by the spiritual gymnastics of the service. It started after the praise and worship sessions, when the prophet took the podium. Nkechi could not take her eyes off Prophet James’ apparel. He wore a green choir cassock trimmed with crimson silk. He had a silk skullcap on his head, and a pectoral cross suspending from a cord of green silk entwined with gold. The big cocktail gold ring on his left hand sparkled. It must have cost a fortune.

Lolo whispered into her ears when the prophet came up on the podium. “The theme for today’s service is fruitfulness, that’s why the prophet is wearing green.” Nkechi nodded.

Immediately he got the microphone, he started a fresh praise session and some members walked up to him with wads of naira notes, and began dancing and spraying him with the money.

Nkechi looked at her mother. Lolo acted like nothing was amiss. People were excited and sweaty in the air-conditioned auditorium. Nkechi felt strange. The service was taking the shape of an ó*w*àń*b*ẹ̀, the loud social revelry peculiar to the Yorubas.

The service proceeded, merging seamlessly with healings and prophesies. The TV crew worked to keep up with the pace of activities. Almost everyone got healed. Those healed the previous Sunday had come with doctors’ reports, which they displayed. Three-quarters of the service was taken up by testimonies, and the prophet queried them to verify that they were indeed healed in his church.

At last, the ministration shifted to those seeking the fruit of the womb. Nkechi was stunned by the sheer number of women with buckets of custard like hers who trooped forward. *Almost all the women here,* she thought. Only a few old women remained seated. As soon as the prophet came down the dais, a few women fell under his anointing. They rolled on the floor, moved by an unseen force. Screaming, writhing, some of them speaking in strange tongues.

Ushers scrambled to cover them up and calm them. Prophet James prayed on the buckets of custard first, before he began to lay hands on the women. Nkechi observed that he whispered into some women's ears. The prophet stopped before a woman, tall, fair, beautiful, and gorgeously dressed. He stared at her intensely. A hush fell upon the congregation.

Suddenly, his voice boomed: "You evil spirit husband, I command you to leave her!"

The woman remained still, eyes closed.

The congregation began a chant. "Lamb of God set her free!"

"I command you spirit husband, leave!"

Suddenly, the woman started running in circles.

The congregation chorused: "Lamb of God!"

Prophet James passed the microphone to one of his assistants and laid both hands on her head. The lady began to scream, propped up by a female usher.

"Every sperm of the spirit husband deposited in your body, catch fire!"

She screamed "Fire! Fire! Fire," while holding her privates.

His microphone retrieved, Prophet James urged the congregation to be quiet. The spirit of God and the spirit husband were in a fierce battle, he announced. Nkechi, standing next to the embattled lady, was trembling. She never thought a spirit husband had sperm, too. "Blood of Jesus," she whispered quietly. The woman fell on the floor and remained silent. The prophet was not done with her. He stepped forward and screamed into her ears again.

"I command every sperm of the spirit husband in your body to catch fire!"

The body on the floor started jerking spasmodically. A voice unlike a lady's bellowed, "No, I will not go! No! She belongs to me!"

Nkechi almost jumped out of her skin.

"I say leave her by the authority of the Lamb of God, I command you to leave her!"

She shrieked loudly like an animal, writhed vigorously, then stilled. Silence overwhelmed the congregation.

The prophet's voice came softly but firmly, "Thank you, Jesus! Thank you,

Lamb of God!" Everyone clapped in jubilation. Nkechi's feet wobbled. This was too much for her. Her faith in the prophet rose. The man gave a short laugh. "I am sure that some of you are surprised, especially the new members, that spirit husbands have sperm. You people don't know anything. I pray God will open your spiritual eyes."

"Amen!" The congregation chorused.

"The kind of things spirit husbands and wives do to their captives will surprise you. We thank God for this lady. She is free, very soon you will all celebrate with her."

"Amen!"

"Praise the Lord!

"Hallelujah!"

"Spirit husbands operate like real men, they have sperm. Just like women, spirit wives menstruate, too. The only difference is that they are spirits while we are human beings. May we never fall into their claws in Jesus' name."

"Amen."

The prophet took a swig from a bottle of water offered by his personal assistant and wiped his face with a handkerchief. Other women were still standing. Nkechi's glance darted back to the woman who still lay on the floor. She was now groaning. A female usher came forward to adjust her skirt to cover her up properly.

The prophet continued the deliverance session, laying hands upon each woman, praying for her. For some, simple prayers, for others, he prayed fiercely. Nkechi prayed silently that her encounter would not be as dramatic as the fair lady's because she would not be able to face the congregation afterwards. She wished the TV crew would suddenly vanish when it got to her turn. She did not want a televised embarrassment. Soon enough, the prophet stood before her, babbling in tongues.

"Madam, your enemy is angry, I want to set you free. She is angry now!" With the microphone close to his mouth, his every word boomed, loud and clear. *Oh, no!* Nkechi thought. She felt like running back to her seat and burying her head in shame. *Chineke! This is going to be on television, and my husband is not even aware that I am here.*

The congregation resumed their chorus: "Lamb of God set her free!"

Her phobia of the cameras threw her mind into disarray. She found it difficult to concentrate on the prayers.

I lied to him. What if he finds out on television? What if someone sees me

and tells him?

"Madam! You need to concentrate," the prophet reproached her. "You need to connect. Oya, set her free! Loose her!"

Nkechi blacked out. What she remembered was vague—the prophet, with the help of the ushers, raising her from the floor when she came to about fifteen minutes later. The church was silent, every eye glued to her.

After praying for her, Prophet James whispered into her ears, "Don't eat your mother-in-law's food again." She was thankful that did not go into the microphone. "That is where she keeps the poison," he continued. She shuddered at the revelation as he moved on to the next woman.

After the deliverance, the church went into another session of prayers that lasted one hour. "Praise the Lord, Church!"

"Hallelujah!"

"You are going to pray like this, 'Oh Lord! Let money pursue me everywhere I go. Oya, fire prayer!"

Immediately, everyone started praying like they were on a battleground. Nkechi noticed a man seated two seats from her shouting, "Money oh! Money oh! Follow me! Follow me!" Another woman who had a child strapped to her back was yelling at the top of her voice, "Naira *mba*, Naira *mba*. Dollars! Pounds! Dollars! Euros! Oya chase me! Chase me o!"

Nkechi was busy watching these people when her mother pinched her and stressed the importance of the prayer. She closed her eyes and began to pray too.

The women picked their buckets of custard after the service. The instruction was brief—to drink it first thing every morning. It would flush out all the blockages in the womb and fallopian tubes. The women were also required to buy anointing oil, a portion of which had to go into their bathwater every morning—this would scare away all spirit husbands.

On their way home, Nkechi remained quiet, buried in her worries as she pondered the prophet's message. *Don't eat your mother-in-law's food again.* She visited her mother-in-law and had dinner at her place every Sunday. She even cooked a special *efo riro* for her. How was she to abide by the prophet's warning?

Then there was the camera. The TV crew had fully recorded her deliverance session—including the minutes she was not aware of—and broadcast it live into people's homes. She was not ashamed of being ministered to by a man of God. It was the lie she told her husband that pricked her

conscience.

Chapter 13

The storm that had been brewing silently for days eventually broke, and they had the first explosive confrontation of their marital life. Yeni was tidying up the kitchen when Tunde walked in.

“Yeni, I don’t understand why you won’t do this, after all I will be there and no one knows you in Ikirun.”

Tunde’s voice was accusatory, but his eyes were pleading.

“I thought we were done with this,” Yeni replied, the surprise in her voice unmasked.

“Where is the baby then, if we are done?” Tunde asked sharply.

Yeni stopped what she was doing and wiped her hands. “Tunde, please, leave me out of your barbaric life!” she yelled. Yeni saw anger blazing in Tunde’s eyes but she did not care. She was not going to make a fool of herself.

“It’s interesting you call my life barbaric. I am not the one sleeping with another being in my dream,” he said disdainfully.

The words cut through her heart. Yeni did not believe she heard him correctly. She started to cry. “Then, leave me to it. Let me deal with it my own way.”

Tunde saw the tears streaming down his wife’s face. But he knew he had to look beyond them and deal with what they had on hand. “Which way are you dealing with it?” he asked. Yeni began to walk to the door but he pulled her

back. “I need to know.” He said firmly.

Yeni cast a cold glance at her husband and said in a low voice. “I have spoken to my sister. She said I should go and see a psychologist. I have a number to call already.”

Tunde was shocked and rubbed his eyes. “Are you alright? You spoke to Temilade who knows next to nothing about our culture here. So, this is now a mental health issue, àbí? We have been in and out of the hospital ever since I married you. Now you have proceeded from seeing gynaecologists to psychotherapists. I think you just love doctors!”

Yeni walked into their room. She almost choked when she heard Tunde’s last words. She loved doctors? All she ever wanted was a solution and now Tunde made it seem like it was an obsession. She turned back with tears streaming down her face.

“Did I hear you right? You think I love doctors? Do you know how humiliated I was each time I had to take off my clothes for every stranger that called himself a doctor? You think I’m excited when they put those instruments through my vagina every time? Do you know what it feels like being sent from one laboratory to another? So, you think I enjoy spreading my legs wide for everyone?”

Yeni wheezed as she wept, trying unsuccessfully to clean the snot from her nose. Tunde felt terrible but he was not going to let her know how he felt. She was only trying to use her tears to whip up sentiments and that would not help to solve their childlessness. He was going to be tough, and Yeni’s tears would not make him change his mind.

“Stop these crocodile tears, I won’t fall for them. This is not our problem, it’s your problem. I have been with you through thick and thin, even when I knew you had two abortions. You brought this upon us and I still went ahead with …”

Yeni slapped her husband. His words were unkind and they cut deep into her heart. *Two abortions.* She could not contain herself after those words. There was silence in the room. Tunde’s hand remained on his face, shock in his eyes.

“Good one. I was waiting for this day to come. Thank God it finally did! Ì*wọ!* Tunde, you are taunting me with my past? You! ”

Tunde would not back down, he raised his hand to strike her back, but changed his mind and pointed at her instead.

“Didn’t you have two abortions? Who knows if it’s God punishing you for what you have done. Who knows? I don’t even know anything about those

murders, yet I am now a partaker of the punishment."

Yeni came closer to him again. He pushed her.

"Stop pushing me! You are the holy one, the one without blemish, àbí? Tell me you didn't ever tell a girl to have an abortion for you. Let your conscience judge you. I should have kept my secret to myself. I wanted to be honest with you. If you are tired of this marriage, let me know, so I can bear my punishment alone," Yeni wailed. This pain was too much for her to bear.

"I am not claiming to be a saint, but the fact still remains that we might be paying for your past misdeeds. I am not taunting you. I am only stating a fact."

"And you think we can only right the wrong by going to your uncle who you have turned into a demigod? You know that every medical test ruled out the abortions as a cause of my predicament. You know this, and yet you hit me below the belt."

Tunde did not waver. He continued his line of argument. "The doctor might have said so, but what about the spiritual angle? What happens to 'what you sow, you shall reap?' What about karma? Don't think I am a fool. Yeni, I have also been thinking about these things. I do not claim to be a perfect husband. I don't want to be. I am just being honest. No matter how hurt you are at the moment, I can't help you if you won't face reality."

He opened his wardrobe, picked out a red tee shirt and wore it. Then he took a pair of blue sneakers and wore them too.

Yeni droned on. "I am not asking you to be a perfect husband, all I want is for you to be my best friend. All the venom you have been spitting won't change my mind about visiting your ancient uncle, and I won't do those things your people are asking me to do. If the spirit husband is going to kill me, let him go ahead. I will bear my punishment all alone. Let God continue to punish me. Go, find another woman who has never had an abortion. Marry her and have a dozen children! Let me have peace of mind. Leave me alone!"

She broke into fresh tears.

"Call my uncle whatever you like. I won't drag you to him. I will let you be." Tunde picked his car keys from the table and left the room.

As Yeni watched her husband walk out, she felt hollow. They rarely argued. She could not recall any friction between them in their five years of marriage. She regretted the visit to Ikirun that had upended their life.

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Tunde drove his Mercedes 295 around the town to calm his nerves. He parked in front of a petrol station in Maryland and watched people streaming out of a night club on the opposite side. He knew what they went there for—cheap beer and free women. He felt the stirring in him. Frustration had a way of goading him to break free of his moral restraint. Not tonight. The smouldering anger in him was enough to tame any suggestion of recklessness. He reviewed the problem all over again.

He could not understand Yeni's stubbornness over the issue. Her obstinacy had been the cause of the strain on their relationship. He regretted needling her about the abortions. His outburst was the catharsis of feelings bottled up for far too long. He had always avoided talking about it because he did not want to hurt her. *But she caused it,* he thought. Her stubborn insistence that she would not go to Ikirun stoked his anger. After he had done all he could in a gentleman's manner to persuade her, she had remained obstinate, blunt in her refusal. Calling his uncle barbaric not only left him livid, it torpedoed whatever control he had left.

He had not wanted to push the issue, but his mother had been on his case, and it was difficult getting her off his back. He regretted going to her for help. Her involvement had compounded the situation. *But Mom is only trying to help the only way she knows how.* Now, he was caught between his mother and wife. This was not him. He, a man of his will, made vulnerable by childlessness, manipulated by two women. His home was no longer the safe haven it used to be.

A knock on the window brought his attention back to the present.

"How far?" said a young woman clad in a miniskirt and braless top, lips painted blood red.

Tunde hissed, started his car and drove away. He knew he had to resolve the problem quickly before it became a conflagration that would consume his marriage. When Yeni's mother called two days ago, there was anger in her voice. He had pleaded with her, imploring her not to call his mother. An escalation was the last thing he needed. He knew his mother. She was a very temperamental woman, very bad at handling emotional situations. He was not ready for a war between the two mothers-in-law.

The dashboard clock showed 9.15 p.m. He had been driving around for over an hour.

I think I know what to do. He suddenly accelerated. In fifteen minutes, he

was back at home, seated before the TV tuned to Channel O. After a few minutes, he went into the bedroom to change his clothes.

His wife was sprawled on the bed in a seductive nightdress. He felt a familiar stirring. He tried to ignore her and would have succeeded but for her beautiful, long legs. For a brief moment, he was overwhelmed by a temptation to grab her from behind. Ego prevailed and his anger surged.

How could she not acknowledge his presence?

She appeared to be asleep. With his clothes pulled off, he stood in his boxers, riffling through his wardrobe for a top. Yeni abruptly rose from the bed and walked to the restroom without a word. Tunde caught a glimpse of her cleavage and the sensation in his groin returned.

She had hardly shut the door when Bruno Mars' "Just the Way You Are" filtered into the bedroom. Tunde missed his wife. It had been weeks since they really spoke to each other. The last meaningful conversation they had was before the Ikirun trip. The song played on. Tunde could discern quiet sobs coming from the restroom.

Man, you have to reach out to her.

He knocked gently. No answer. He knocked again. The sobs grew louder. He opened the door and found her standing, leaning against the basin. Without any hesitation, he held his wife from the rear.

Yeni sobbed louder, yielding to his embrace. Streams of tears flowed, as she held him tightly. As they held onto each other, they knew their arguments of the past few weeks had finally come to an end.

Chapter 14

Tale and her husband went back to the doctor, exactly fourteen days after the IVF. They had invested a lot in fervent prayers for a positive result. They sat quietly, each immersed in private thoughts.

Two days earlier, Kunle had asked Tale, what would happen if the pregnancy did not happen. Tale had jumped from her bed and began a prayer session. She began to bind and cast the spirit behind Kunle's utterances. She grabbed her bible from under her pillow, quoted many scriptures on fruitfulness and assured her husband that all would be well. She prayed until she was covered in sweat in the air-conditioned room. She went into her wardrobe, brought out a white mantle and continued praying.

She told her husband she got the mantle from a seven-day crusade held by their church for women looking for the fruit of womb. She explained how someone had shared the testimony of a dead child who was brought back to life after the mantle was placed on him.

"Ever since I heard that testimony, I have been placing it under my clothing. Every dead organ in my womb must come to life!"

Pastor Timothy and his wife, the senior pastors of Jesus Holy Palace Church, had been very supportive since Kunle and Tale joined their church. The wife constantly counselled and assured her that she would have her child before long.

Kunle endured Tale's unending prayer session, but seeing that it would not end soon, reminded her not to hurt the baby with her spiritual theatrics. After the eggs transfer, Tale had become extremely careful. She worked, walked and did everything at a slower pace. She stopped driving and did not dance. It was as though the eggs would drop out of her if she did anything too vigorously.

Alone, her fears returned. Tale was afraid. She wanted so badly to confide in her husband about them, but her pastor had admonished them about the power of the tongue and dangers of negative confession.

The doctor walked in, greeted them briefly and told Tale to move over to

the bed. She could feel Kunle's sweaty palm as they held hands. She watched the doctor studying the ultrasound. As she stretched out on the hard bed, her nerves tingled like she was being tickled with a feather. She held her breath as the doctor applied the ultrasound gel on her belly and began to move the transducer around it. He directed them to watch the display on the screen.

Tale did not understand what exactly they needed to see on the screen. She saw Kunle looking at the monitor with rapt attention, beads of sweat on his forehead. The doctor kept looking at the screen and moving the transducer all over her belly. He did not say a word. His face was so inscrutable, Tale could not read what was going on in his mind.

Excusing himself, he called a senior doctor via the intercom who walked in with a grave countenance, which could only mean there was a problem. She kept moving the transducer up and down.

Few minutes later, the senior doctor wiped her stomach and asked her to sit up.

"Mrs Thompson, we are sorry, we can't detect any heartbeat in your womb."

Tale sighed, downcast. She understood.

"What does that mean?" It was Kunle.

"It means the pregnancy isn't viable," the male doctor answered in a low tone.

"That can't be true. No way!" Kunle flared up.

Tale sat still staring blankly. *Oh no, this can't be happening to me again.* She tried hard to control a retch. She was not bothered by the calm manner in which her husband left the room. She cared less about his feelings. She was drowning in deep sorrow, trying unsuccessfully to process the reality of another failed attempt. The doctors tried to calm her down but she did not hear a word. She sat frozen as tears rolled down her cheeks.

Why would God forsake me this time again? She had prayed and fasted. One of the doctors handed her a tissue. Like a robot, she took it and cleaned her face.

They were still talking to her ten minutes later, when the door swung open and Kunle's form filled the doorway, looking wild like someone who had lost his mind. In his hand was a pistol, which he pointed at the doctors.

"I have to end this once and for all," he said.

Chapter 15

Trouble walked in on a warm Saturday morning, one week after Nkechi attended the dramatic Sunday service. Shola had gone to the barbershop for a haircut, as was his habit on Saturday mornings. He had left home in a jovial mood.

“Babe, when I return, we are taking a sabbatical for the rest of the day. I have something to tell you.”

He winked, leaning against the doorframe, watching his wife standing at the kitchen basin. His eyes fixed on her waistline. Nkechi smiled a knowing, wanton smile. She understood the subtext of the message—locked up in the room for the rest of day.

“No dice,” she teased. “I am not in the mood.”

Shola snorted. “Leave that to me jo, I know the places to touch to make it happen. You know I am an expert at that.”

They both laughed.

“Don’t forget to trim your beard very well if you want a good kiss from me.” Nkechi called out to her husband. Shola blew her a kiss.

The sexual tension between them was taut. Nkechi did not understand Shola’s sudden obsession with beards. For some months now he had been grooming it religiously. She did not like it, although it suited him. Shola was a typical Yoruba demon. Tall, dark, handsome, fashionable and charming. She was proud to be married to this gorgeous guy and pleased about her husband’s excitement. It stirred her, too.

Nkechi returned to washing the custard bowl. She had been taking her custard religiously, under the strict supervision of her mother who called every day to check if she had complied with the prophet's instruction. But she was afraid. She hoped that Shola would not find out about her deliverance session with the prophet.

He returned a few minutes later in a nasty mood, storming into the sitting room and slamming the net door with so much force that the knob fell off. He bellowed, moving from one room to the other.

"Nkechi! Nkechi! Where are you?"

Nkechi already guessed the problem. She had been expecting the showdown and locked herself in the bathroom. Shola got into their room and bellowed:

"Nkechi, open that damn door! I know you are in there!"

"What's it now, Shola?" her voice was calm, feigning ignorance.

"Come out here!" He tried to pull the bathroom door open, but Nkechi had slid home the bolts.

"But I am in the bathroom, Shola. Let me finish what I am doing."

While he paced up and down the bedroom with his hands in his pockets, she sat quietly, listening to her heartbeat. She took her time to compose herself, splashed water on her face and looked in the mirror. The face she saw was frightened and confused. She had rehearsed this showdown a thousand times, after she discovered that Holy Ghost and Fire Church ran a live broadcast of their Sunday services on three major TV stations, and had a daily rerun on four stations for the rest of the week. She had been stunned to see herself on TV, and knew that it was only a matter of time before Shola saw it or someone told him about it. After what seemed like an eternity, she slid back the bolt and emerged. Shola stood with arms akimbo, fuming, his eyebrows furrowed, and his eyes mean-looking. He stared at her menacingly, waiting for answers to his unasked question. She stood quietly, a demure housewife before her husband.

"Nkechi, why? Why did you have to show the whole world our problem?" the quiet voice shocked her.

Silence instead of a storm.

"I don't get what you are saying …"

"Don't pretend you don't understand what I am saying, woman!"

"What have I done?"

"You went to that goddamned church! You went to Holy Ghost and Fire Church! I was so embarrassed at the barber's shop. I saw you on television,

rolling on the ground like a drum!"

"Will I be the first person to go look for a solution to a problem?"

"For crying out loud, you are giving me an attitude?"

"Why won't I? You sound like I went to do something diabolical. I won't blame you, after all you have a love child! You don't know what it feels like to be childless!"

"You think that razzmatazz, that circus performance isn't diabolical? Do you realise you have tarnished my image? You couldn't even tell me about it, I had to find out like that?"

"Image! That's all that's important to my dear husband! Not the groaning of a childless woman!"

"Stop whipping up sentiments woman! You are a liar! What do you think people will say about me?"

"Stop with that Shola, you are the bigger liar here! You refused to go with me to the clinic on time, just because you have a child. You made this infertility situation drag on for too long. Seven years! Seven fucking years of emptiness! Seven fucking years of reproach and shame and you are talking about your image. Your image, that's all you care about, Shola Sexy," she said with a sneer.

"Don't be defensive, woman. Your stupid prophet even dragged my mom into the charade! He called my mom a witch on television. You know how much she loves you, yet you went to ridicule her in front of the whole world," he said tearfully.

"I wasn't the one who said that, Shola, and he didn't say it publicly like that, he only warned me to stop eating her food …"

"My goodness, my wife has gone crazy! What did they do to you Nkechi? What did he feed you?" He paused and sized her up curiously, then lowered his voice. "Has he slept with you?"

The last statement provoked her. "How dare you say that to me? No, I won't take this," Nkechi yelled at him.

Shola asked coolly, "I repeat, has he slept with you? The gist I got at the salon was that the he-goat sleeps with women who come to his church. Nkechi, did he sleep with you? Or maybe I should rather ask, how many times?"

She wiped her sudden tears with the back of her hands. "Shola, I married you as a virgin," her voice trembled with rage.

Shola snorted. "Don't give me that virgin narrative, a prostitute was once a virgin. Answer my question, did he sleep with you?"

Without warning, she burst into uncontrollable tears. Nkechi felt like she

was speaking to a stranger. They stood face to face, glaring at each other. Anger flowed through her veins. She wanted to hit him back, to make him feel the rawness of the pain she was feeling too.

"At least the prophet isn't as sterile as you are. After you have hidden your sterility from me for so long, don't I have the right to get help elsewhere to cover your secret?" she lashed back.

"Now you called me sterile, Nkechi?" Shola punched the wall angrily. He had been an amateur boxer. "Punch your anger out on the wall when you are mad," his trainer had told him repeatedly many years ago, when he was a regular at the boxing circuit at the Surulere stadium.

Nkechi pushed her defence further. "Don't pretend to be the victim here. You know the number of years it took you to eventually agree to see the doctor. You kept your sterility a secret from me. I was the sucker, the fool who bore the shame of infertility alone. Just imagine it, you are the one with the problem, but I am the one hopping from one church to the other."

"Stop the stupid talk! Did I tell anyone you're the problem? Do you think it doesn't bother me too?"

"Of course, you don't need to tell anyone. The society just assumes I'm the one with the problem. I know the jeers I have had to deal with."

Shola felt fury burning in his heart. "You think you are smart right? You are turning the tables on me now, isn't it? No, I won't let you. How about calling my mom a witch on national television? Was that okay?"

"If you expect me to kneel down and beg you like a submissive wife, forget it. This woman here has had enough. I'm ready to give you a piece of my mind!"

"I see. The devil you call a prophet didn't only sleep with you, he has hypnotised you too. This is not the Nkechi I know."

"I don't care! I'm sure after nine months I will be holding the prophet's baby and that baby will bear your last name," Nkechi hissed.

"Now I am convinced you are crazy! You want to bring another man's baby into my house?"

This time he broke his instructor's warning. Shola hit her directly on the face. The sound echoed for a few seconds in the silence of the room.

"You slapped me?" She gasped.

"Yes," he said shortly.

"How can you be so mean? I went to look for solution for us and you call me a slut, and now you are hitting me …"

“Perhaps, I need to slap you again to clear the juju from your eyes. You conspired with your mom and that stupid prophet to ridicule my mom on television.”

Still in disbelief, Nkechi replied quietly, “I went to seek a solution for us. That was the only place my mom knew. She meant no harm.”

“Well, the truth is clear. Isn’t that charlatan prophet from the same town as you? Your mom finally found you a suitor. Obviously, she never liked her daughter marrying a Yoruba demon like me,” Shola sneered.

“I have no more words for you.”

Like a woman in a trance, Nkechi slowly walked out of the room, muttering, “He slapped me,” over and over.

“Yes, I did. I will slap you again and again until you regain your senses. Come back here! Don’t you walk out on me!”

She turned back and looked him in the eyes, “I found the third semen analysis in your pocket, I am sure that bastard is not even yours, sterile fool!”

She slammed the door after her.

In their seven years of marriage, he had never raised his hands against her. She could not fathom how things got this bad. She thought they would settle it amicably. With the way Shola had gone berserk, she knew the worst was yet to come.

She was surprised at the way she had responded too, and it had felt good saying it all. The words had been bottled up in her for so long. Emotionally drained, she went to the sitting room and called her mother. After a brief conversation in Igbo, she went back into the room, picked a few things and drove out of the compound without saying a word to him.

Shola tried to collect his thoughts. He reprimanded himself for having overreacted. *Big fuck-up, men! Very wrong.* But, he was not going to apologise. He could not help it. Nkechi had hurt and ridiculed him too.

Chapter 16

Yeni was afraid to sleep. The dreams had become incessant and more intense. The incubus now came around with vengeance, no longer making love to her but raping her, even during her afternoon naps.

The last one happened in her office, during a fifteen-minute nap. Her moans had drawn her colleagues to her office. They woke her and stared at her strangely. When she told them she had just had a nightmare, a look of incredulity came over their faces.

“You were moaning like a woman in the heat of lovemaking,” Ada Amadi, the receptionist, had said, and Yeni’s face blanched.

She had become a shadow of herself. Depressed and withdrawn, pimples broke out on her face. Emotionally numbed, she began to lose interest in things that once excited her. At work, her boss was complaining—for a personal assistant, she was forgetting too many things. He advised her to go on leave and return when she felt she was fit. Yeni knew she had to do something urgently.

When she went to the convenience, all eyes were on her. They stared at her like an alien from space. She peeped through the keyhole and saw them talking in hushed tones. She was so embarrassed, she locked herself in the toilet for thirty minutes. She then decided the time was right for her to take the leave her boss had been telling her about. Back at her seat, she typed her leave letter and thereafter called the number of the psychotherapist her sister had recommended two months earlier.

The leave had been a mistake. At home, she became more depressed. Her husband did all he could to encourage her, but he could not get through to her. Yeni suddenly seemed like a stranger to Tunde. He knew their childlessness was eating her up. The situation was becoming more than he could handle. At his wit’s end, he called his mother-in-law.

Yeni’s mother, Kofoworola, arrived the following day. She started by hailing her daughter with her *oriki* and Yeni began to warm up to her, delighted to hear her pet names.

“Mom, I know you didn’t come all the way here to hail me,” she said with a forced smile.

“Your husband called me.”

“What for?” she asked defensively.

“Yeni, why are you doing this to yourself?”

“Mom, I am fine.”

“I see that. Look at you. You are lean, your hair is unmade and you look shabby.”

“I didn’t have time to make my hair. Don’t mind Tunde, he’s an alarmist. I will be fine.”

“Okay, have you eaten anything today?”

“I will eat …”

Her mother’s gaze went to the wall clock. “You have not eaten at 2 p.m. and you are not fasting. And you are telling me there is nothing wrong? I will never mourn my child in my lifetime …” her mother’s voice broke.

“Mom, please don’t make me cry. I will eat something.”

“You are not making me happy. You are a shadow of yourself, Yeni. *Ẹni tí* ò *bímo m*áà ńg*b*é *lé aiy*é *k*ẹ̀,” her mom emphasised.

“I know that people who don’t have children also live their lives, but what about the dreams that are driving me out of my mind? Are other people having such scary dreams? Mom, these dreams are eating me up. If they continue, I can assure you I am going to lose my mind,” she wailed.

“Let me call Temilade in New Jersey since you don’t want to listen to me.”

“I already spoke with her. She told me to see a psychotherapist.”

“*Olộ́run mâjé*! *Irú* ìsọkúsọ *wo nì yẹn?* My daughter will not go and see a doctor who treats mad people.”

“I need an explanation for all these …”

“And you think all these doctors can solve spiritual problems? You will just waste money there again. I rebuke the devourer in your finances in Jesus’ name! You and your husband have been spending your money in hospitals ever since you got married. This is one problem I have with Temilade, ever since she moved to America, her only solution is the oyinbo solution.”

“She told me psychiatry has explanations for recurring dreams…”

“*Ṣíò!* How can they have an explanation and solution for a spirit husband? Don’t waste your money o!”

“I cannot just sit idly while this problem eats me up.”

“Come with me. This weekend, we will both go and see a pastor my friend

told me about."

She began to pack a bag. Her mind wandered to Temilade. Yeni did not realise how much she had missed her sister until that moment. She wished she was around, Temmy was so easy to talk to. She always had the right words. Yeni was the oldest but Temilade had always been the more mature one. A few years back, Temilade won the visa lottery, had a hasty introduction ceremony with her fiancé's family and travelled to America. Temmy's fiancé, Dayo, changed, and after a while they went their different ways. Temilade wished she had listened to her mother and not trusted Dayo.

However, she had moved on and was studying for her PhD. Temmy was in another relationship but her career mattered more to her than men. Their mother had been pestering her to find a Nigerian man in America, but Temilade had decided to only marry a Nigerian with papers, after her ordeal with Dayo and two others. Her sister was currently seeing an Italian, whose baby she had decided to have. Yeni thought it odd that her sister was cohabiting with a man she had not yet married, but kept her sister's secret from their mother. Temmy told her she was happy in the relationship and that was what mattered the most. Her sister cared less about the Bible and what anyone else thought. She was not the typical Nigerian woman, and had unlearnt many things. Yeni wished she could do so too. Many times, she wished she could swap lives with her sister. Temmy did not believe there were enemies or spirit husbands, her life seemed so easy.

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At the first visit, they were told the pastor had gone to pray. He would not be back from the mountain for a while. Yeni spent the weekend with her mom and felt better. Back at home, she withdrew into her shell. Her home reminded her of her unending problems. She would cook but not eat. Once her husband was off to work, she would stay in her room and cry.

Her mood swing was beginning to affect her husband too. Their sex life suffered too much for a couple trying to make a baby. Her doctor had recommended intercourse at least three times a week. In the last two months, they had not had any sexual intimacy. Whenever Tunde made advances towards her, she gave him one excuse or another. After, the first month, he stopped asking.

Chapter 17

They were lucky that the management of Fruitful Fertility Clinic did not report Kunle at the Defence Headquarters.

The episode left Tale trembling. The sight of Kunle standing menacingly at the door with a pistol brought her out of her shock. She had pleaded with him, sobbing aloud, while the doctors watched in utter silence, paralysed by terror. After the situation was brought under control, the hospital management threatened to report Kunle at the Defence Headquarters in Abuja, but his wife had appealed to them. They accepted Tale's pleas on one condition: that Kunle see a recommended psychiatrist at the Lagos State University Teaching Hospital.

His therapy had lasted five weeks. It was a difficult period for him but he felt refreshed, like a man from rehab. Kunle knew he needed help but he had always ignored this. He did not know what came over him and did not even remember taking his gun from his car. The last thing he remembered was the doctor telling him and his wife that there was no pregnancy. He had blanked out afterwards. He simply did not remember anything.

This was not the first time it was happening to him. He remembered the first time, when his stepbrother, Lekan, had wrongly accused him of stealing Chief's money. He was told that he had pounced on his brother and beaten him to a pulp. When his parents came home and asked him to explain himself. He did not remember anything, despite their repeated questioning, but the evidence was there for all to see—Lekan had bandages around his head and Kunle could have killed him. His father became angry and flogged him for his presumed

falsehood. The matter caused a major rift among his father's wives.

The second time was in university during the NYSC posting, again he did not remember what happened, but he found himself at the police station. He could not explain these events. It was like a demon overtook his soul and he did not have control over his behaviour anymore. His mother claimed that her enemies had cast a spell of misbehaviour on him. Kunle was thankful that he did not have blood on his hands, but Tale had experienced two of these episodes of anger and told him that whenever he was in a rage, he was a different person, like he had a split personality.

Kunle was unimpressed when he first met the therapist. He looked way too young. Dr Ono Ohai was fortyish. Kunle had been looking forward to a father figure with a wealth of experience. But as he continued to relate with him, he began to trust and became friendly with him.

Though he looked tough on the outside, Kunle was a broken man. For the first time in his adult life, he confided in someone about an abuse. He was seven years old when it began. His father's younger brother, Uncle Funsho, who lost his job had come to live with them. He abused Kunle constantly until he was ten years old. Each time he came to his room, he would tie a red charm around his loins, tell Kunle to kiss the charm thrice and repeat an oath after him. According to him, if he ever thought of telling anyone about their secret, he would start vomiting blood and die. Kunle believed him. When he tried to refuse him, Uncle Funsho would threaten to turn to his younger brother, and Kunle could never allow him to lay his hands on him. Uncle Funsho sodomised him and Kunle's skin crawled with disgust anytime he remembered.

Kunle's Dad, Chief Thompson, always rewarded his sons for good behaviour, most especially when they performed brilliantly in school. The rewards ranged from special treats, to money and having a meal with him. So Kunle did his best to always be in his father's good books. Of all the rewards he could get, he loved sleeping in his father's bed the most. When he was with his father, he was safe from Uncle Funsho.

He did not always get to sleep in his father's bed though, sometimes, his half-brothers beat him to it. Kunle shared a room with his younger brother while his sisters slept in another room with their mother. Sometimes, he would want to sleep in his mother's room but his step-siblings called him "woman wrapper". It was a name he hated. Anytime he was tempted to tell his mother about his ordeal with Uncle Funsho, a red light flashed in his head, followed by a sharp, banging pain at the back of his head. It was the same sensation he felt just before his

temper tantrums. Uncle Funsho eventually moved out to his own place, and Kunle learned to block out memories of the abuse.

He had often wondered why Uncle Funsho picked him, of all his brothers. Twice, he broke down in tears during his sessions. Dr Ohai explained that he had intermittent explosive disorder.

“Kunle, this condition is usually characterised by a failure to resist aggressive impulses and this often results in serious assault, property vandalism or frequent verbal aggression. All these come in the form of temper tantrums.”

He did not know what to make of the diagnosis, but he knew the psychiatrist was right. Ohai assured him that he would be fine if he took the required steps diligently. Kunle was ready to conquer his demons. After twenty sessions in five weeks, he knew that phase of his life was over, and he was thankful to Fruitful Fertility Clinic for the nudge in the right direction.

Kunle was driving home, on the way from his last session, when he got a text message:

Hello, a daughter wants to meet her dad - Grace Giwa.

The name jolted him. He broke out in a cold sweat. *It must be a joke*, he thought, but he knew it was not. He pulled over his car to calm his nerves. He was not sure if this was good or bad news. He sat in the car for over an hour, trying to make a decision, and then dialled her number. She picked on the third call.

“Hello,” the voice was Grace’s, a low pleasant voice. “Hello, are you there?”

“He … hello, Kunle Thompson here.”

There was a long silence on the other end.

“Hello Grace, are you there?”

“Yes I am.”

“I am sorry about all that happened…”

“You don’t have to be…”

“I didn’t know you…”

“I did. She’s the best thing that has ever happened to me.”

“I am really sorry…”

“Never mind …”

“How do I get to see you?”

“I live in Abuja. I will send you an address and when we can meet.”

“Okay, thank you so much. Can you at least send me a picture …?”

The line went dead.

Chapter 18

Tense and tired, Nkechi waited patiently for her mother-in-law. She had shared pleasantries with Aunty Tonia, the sweet-natured housekeeper. Tonia, who had been with the Shokunbi family for over a decade, lived in the boys' quarters since Shola's dad passed on five years ago.

All the Shokunbi children, except Shola, lived outside the country. The mansion, once a bustling estate, had become an empty nest, too desolate for one soul to occupy. The children had been uncomfortable with the idea of their mother living alone in the vast house and convinced Aunty Tonia to take up permanent residence, to keep their mother company.

Three days after Nkechi moved out of her matrimonial home, her mother-in-law got through to her. She was hesitant to pick the call at first, but the phone would not stop ringing. Nkechi was shocked by her mother-in-law's calmness. She sounded as pleasant as usual, not an iota of anger in her voice.

"My daughter, we are so sorry for what happened. Shola told me everything."

Nkechi was not sure she heard her mother-in-law right.

"Hello, Nkechi are you there?"

"Yes Mommy, I think I should be the one saying sorry."

"Never mind, darling. Discuss with your mom, then give us a time we can

come and take our wife," she said with a short laugh.

"Mommy, you don't have to worry about that. I will come over," Nkechi insisted.

"Your husband slapped you. He had no reason whatsoever to lay his hands on you. I didn't raise him like that. I raised him to always control his emotions. I raised him to respect women. What you did was right and tradition demands that we come to plead with our in-laws and promise them that such event will never repeat itself, so I don't mind coming over to see Lolo."

"I insist, ma. I don't want this to extend to other family members. It is better I come over, ma."

"Okay, if you insist, but make sure your mom permits you, please. I will be expecting you. My regards to your mom, tell her I will call soon."

"Okay ma."

Nkechi was surprised at the fluid conversation. No mother-in-law on earth, called a witch on national television, would behave that way. She began to doubt the prophet and his prophecies.

"*Isi gini*?" Her mother, seated opposite her, stopped her knitting. Lolo wanted to know what they discussed and the look on her face showed she would not be ignored. Nkechi summarised the conversation. Lolo was speechless and only found her voice when Nkechi said she doubted the prophet's prophecies.

"Don't start that. Witches are the greatest pretenders!"

"But Mama …"

"Is she not a witch?"

Nkechi was not in the mood for arguments. "Should I go?"

"You should have allowed them to come here. When I sprinkle the holy water on the floor and she steps on it, she will start confessing right here."

"Should I go?"

"You have to go since you have given your word. She cannot do anything to you again. You are covered by the blood of Jesus. If she tries any evil against you, it is her son that will be struck …"

"Mama, that is my husband …"

"Shut up, *onye iberibe!*" Nkechi ignored the caustic remark. "She dare not harm you any longer, because she knows her secret will be known by everyone." Lolo continued to grumble. "You should have allowed them to come here—that is the tradition. It was wrong for that *onye Yoruba* to lay his filthy hands on you. For doing that alone, he needs to bring a cow before we accept their apologies, but you won't ask me before you make your decisions. Anyway, go and see her."

“Are you sure everything will be okay? Because Yoruba people can be very dramatic no matter how educated they are.”

“Oh, you knew that? And you decided to connive with them by not telling your mother that your husband has a love child. If you didn’t have this fight, would you have mentioned it?”

Nkechi knew she made a terrible mistake by not telling her mother about Shola’s child. Her mother had broken down in tears when she told her Shola hit her. Nkechi had never seen Lolo so miserable and she regretted it. Her mother loved her and even though she could be sometimes irrational, she would protect her with everything within her reach.

Lolo’s voice broke into her thoughts, “I don’t think there is anything to worry about. If she had been brash with you on the phone, I would have tied my wrapper and insisted on going with you. But since she hasn’t shown any wahala, go. Then come and give me a feedback.”

“I don’t even think I’m ready to see Shola. I’m still angry with him.”

“Don’t worry about him. I am sure he was only angry. Mind you, in seven years he never laid his hands on you, so forgive him, *biko*. Even your father would react the same way.”

“But I can’t imagine papa hurling abusive words at you.”

“No, never. But mind you, that was because I did not talk back at him. When he abused you, did you keep quiet? I trust that your sharp tongue.”

“Mama, people say I got that from you.”

“*Onye iberibe!* Just go and see his mother. And rub your forehead with this anointing oil when going.”

She gave her a bottle from the shelf in the sitting room. Just before she stepped out of the door, Nkechi got a warning from her mother.

“*Biko*, while you are there, watch your tongue. I don’t fancy grown-up daughters taking permanent resident under my roof.”

The warning echoed in her ears even as she sat waiting for her mother-in-law. Nkechi noticed the new velvet curtains that hung delicately over the window frames. Nkechi felt the fabric—soft and sleek.

Aunty Tonia walked in with a tray of drinks. “Mommy bought that when she travelled to Dubia,” she said, straightening the tangled rosary on her neck. Tonia lowered her voice “Whenever Mommy travels, she buys new curtains. I wonder what she does with them.”

Nkechi laughed.

“All the curtains she has in the house are good enough to open a shop in

Tejuosho Market. I have told her to let us do the business, and she keeps saying, 'I am too old, Tonia.'" Tonia's mimicry of the other woman's voice was pitch perfect.

They both laughed out loud. Aunty Tonia was more than a housekeeper. She and Mommy had a chemistry. Sometimes, Mommy took her along on some of her foreign trips. She poured orange juice into a tall glass cup.

"Mommy is in the bathroom upstairs. Will you go and wait for her upstairs?"

"I will wait here."

She placed the drink on the table and was about returning to the kitchen, when Nkechi summoned the courage to ask.

"Aunty Tonia, do you know if Mommy is still angry?"

"No, she is not. Can Mommy be angry with anyone? Me, I have never seen a person like that o."

"Did she tell you what happened?"

Tonia made a sign of the cross and answered, her voice lowered to a conspiratorial tone.

"I saw you myself on the television and I heard what that fake prophet said. I am surprised you went there. That man is from my late husband's place. He was formerly a staunch Catholic, but he changed. We all know where he got his powers from."

She quickly sat down closer to Nkechi.

"You see, he was carried away by a whirlwind for twenty-one days. When he came back, he became a different man. We know him very well. We know the Dibia that did the juju for him. When I saw you on television, I made up my mind not to tell Mommy. I was going to call you secretly and warn you about him. But Brother Shola came here in anger and spoilt everything."

"Really, you know the man?"

"Yes, Aunty Nkechi. He's from my late husband's village. We know him. Forget that Prophet James Israel that they call him, that is not his identity at all. It's because he doesn't want to be traced. His name is Cletus Nwankwo."

"What was Mommy's reaction?"

"Can you ever read her feelings? I don't know how she felt, but I think she was shocked. She was even calming Brother Shola down. You know your husband can do *gragra* a lot, and all na *shakara*. Empty barrel. Very boastful like his father. His brothers and sisters are not like him. Mommy spoke to him sha. I don't know the details, but he calmed down after a while and he ate a big bowl

of *amala* and *gbegiri*." Aunty Tonia burst into laughter. "Your husband likes food too much!"

This time Nkechi joined her.

"Don't worry, I already spoke to Mommy about that fake prophet. I told her his family compound wasn't far away from my husband's. I explained to her that the man just wanted to scatter your marriage, Hey, I put food for fire!" She dashed off.

Nkechi felt more at ease.

A few minutes later, Mommy came down the stairs. Ebunoluwa Cynthia Shokunbi still looked pretty at sixty-five. Shola's good looks came from her genes. She smiled as Nkechi knelt down and greeted her. Nkechi could not look her in the face. She was ashamed. Mommy held her hand and told her to stand up. She wiped her tears.

"Nkechi, you don't have to cry. You didn't call me a witch. I understand. I have been through this myself. I was in the waiting room for 10 years. I didn't have Temidire, my first child, until after 10 years of marriage," she said with a chuckle. "I have been through hell myself, so I know what it feels like. That is why I never put any pressure on you. You guys have things a lot easier than we did. I had terrible in-laws and I never want anyone to go through half of what they put me through. As a woman in the waiting room, a lot of dirt will be thrown at you, but you have to be patient and pray for wisdom so that you won't be pushed into something you will regret. Don't be too desperate, if you are desperate, these charlatans will exploit you. Don't worry, you will be fine. You will bear my grandchildren."

"Thank you, Mommy. I didn't mean to insult anyone."

"I know. I purposely told Shola not to come here at the same time as you, but he will be here. He is still very angry. You know he is my last baby, he is used to fighting for me. He takes it as his battle if anyone looks for my trouble." She laughed.

"Thank you, Mommy," Nkechi said, full of admiration for her mother-in-law.

"By the way, have you thought about IVF?"

"I have heard about it ma. I once thought about saving up…"

"I know it's pretty expensive but don't worry, I will foot the bill."

"I was discouraged by a sermon I heard from a respected pastor."

"You see, that is our problem here. We don't see these medical breakthroughs as miracles. Going to the hospital to find a solution to a problem

doesn’t make you less of a believer.”

“After I heard the preaching, I became a Doubting Thomas. I felt really guilty that I was even contemplating IVF. The preacher made me feel like I was belittling God.”

“Many believers don’t know that doctors sometimes are vehicles God uses to give us our miracles.”

“Very true. At that point, I was so brainwashed I dumped all the money meant for IVF into the offering basket.”

“Ha! Well, we learn daily. We should apply wisdom when so-called men of God try to exploit us. They are human beings too and are prone to mistakes. That pastor preached based on his understanding. God really does miracles. When we seek the help of doctors, we are not committing any sin.”

“I understand better now.”

“Shola will soon be here. There is nothing to fear. I will give the two of you time to discuss. You can go to the study.”

Nkechi was in the study for about two hours before she heard a car drive in. She heard Shola’s greetings to Aunty Tonia.

Her heart started pounding all over again.

Chapter 19

It was almost dawn when the stranger led Yeni down a lonely path. They got to a bend and he plucked a red rose, from the thick bush and fixed it in her

hair, above her left ear. Yeni giggled and looked at him passionately. He took her inside the house. Fire was burning in the hearth and the room was filled with an aromatic smell. She inhaled deeply and felt giddy. She suddenly felt rejuvenated after that long trek.

She found a spot to sit. He sat beside her and kissed her. She responded by putting her warm hands on the back of his neck, lifting her lips to meet his. They kissed lightly at first, and then more urgently, his tongue in her mouth. She closed her eyes. She tilted her hips towards his, her breast rubbing against his bare, muscular chest. A small voice in her head was screaming a protest. But her body was responding, lost in the sensuality of his touches. All she cared about was how good it felt kissing him.

"You want to come to the bed?" he asked her.

He did not wait for an answer. He led her to the well-laid bed. She followed sheepishly like a lamb being led to the slaughter slab. She wanted to say no, but felt powerless. God, he knew how to touch her. He raised her to the plateau of pleasure and she yearned desperately for a release. The stranger started peeling off her clothes. Yeni pressed her breasts against him, slowly running her hands over his crotch.

He began by kissing her all over again, leaning into her as he did so. He kissed her face, her throat, his hot breath caressed her ears, and then, at last, he kissed her breasts. Yeni gasped. The stranger smiled. He began to unbutton her jeans.

"It's been a while," he said to her. She nodded, sat up and looked him straight in the eyes. Then a small voice intruded into her thoughts.

You sounded like someone in the heat of lovemaking.

Her desire evaporated. Her faculty rushed back. Seeing her nude body filled her with shame. When he tried kissing her again, she refused.

"Why?" he asked bewildered.

"This doesn't feel right," Yeni said gently.

"We belong together!" he replied angrily.

She found her voice. "No! We don't belong together, stranger. I am married, and I can't be doing this."

"I married you first," he said coolly, trying to control his anger.

"I can't be married to you. When? How?" Yeni snorted with a short laugh of incredulity. She could feel his fury mounting.

"Why do you like ruining things? Everything was going on fine just a

while ago …”

She felt a surge of courage. “You seduced me!” She got up and started wearing her blouse.

“But you liked it. Don’t I always do it better than your husband?” the stranger asked angrily, his eyes flashing.

“I have to go,” Yeni started for the door.

“You are going nowhere!”

He pushed her back to the bed. Yeni tried to push him away but found she was no match for him. She screamed and struggled wildly to free herself.

He had his way, violently, just to punish her. Afterwards, he stood and wore his shorts. Yeni remained curled up on the bed, crying hysterically, her back covered with a long ugly weal. After studying her for a moment, the stranger went to her, and apologised. She kept on crying. He disappeared into the inner room and soon returned with some cowries, which he forced into her hands.

“Take these, you will be fine.”

“Are you crazy? What do you take me for? After forcibly having your way …”

“Don’t talk to me that way! I am your husband.” He rebuked her.

Yeni threw the cowries at him. He picked them up and tried forcing them back into her hands.

“No, I don’t want your cowries,” Yeni said.

Tunde woke her up, and it took her a few minutes before she regained her senses. It was all a dream, but felt so real. The wall on the clock showed the usual time, 3 a.m. After a long spell of silence, Yeni mustered the courage to talk to her husband.

“Tunde, I think I have another life somewhere.” She shivered uncontrollably.

“What happened?” he asked quietly.

“He forced himself on me again …”

“You mean he slept with you.” His voice was steady.

She nodded. “Yes. He raped me and tried to give me the cowries again, but I rejected them.” She began sobbing.

“I think we need to do something fast.” Tunde reached for her hand. “What about the pastor you went with your mom to see last week?”

“We were told he had gone to the mountain for prayers and won’t be back for a while.”

“That means there is nothing to do but wait till then?” he asked rhetorically.

“My appointment with the shrink starts today,” she said.

“You want to try Temilade’s suggestion after all?”

“I thought we have gone past this. This dream is getting me depressed already.”

“I understand,” he gazed into his wife’s eyes.

“Let me just try this. I already discussed with the doctor. She said I could start with three sessions in a week.”

“How much per session?”

“It’s pretty expensive. Five thousand naira, which is fifteen thousand a week.”

“I will foot the bill.”

There was no arguing with him.

“Thank you. This is just too much for me. Thanks for holding my hands all through.”

“Kindly forgive me for my past shortcomings too. You know I love you baby.”

“I know.” She snuggled closer to him, his arms wrapped around her.

He pitied her. “But Yeni, the sessions are quite expensive, how many people can afford that in this country?”

“Government mental health clinics might be more affordable.”

“Are you not afraid of the stigmatisation? Because I have been thinking, what if one of my friends sees you walking out of the hospital?” he asked delicately.

He felt her stiffen.

She disengaged from his embrace and searched his face. “Tunde, I am not mad. I only need help. I don’t care what people say about where I get the help. The most important thing is that I am fine. I understand many people don’t seek help at the appropriate places because of stigmatisation but in my current state, I don’t care at all. You saw how terrified I was just now. If you want me to

continue this way because of what people will say, no problem, but I can assure you that one day, you will find me roaming the streets, out of my mind."

"Yeni, I don't really care about what people may say. I am only afraid for you. If you don't mind, really, I think one of the ways we can also keep this spirit husband away from you is, er ..."

"Hope you are not trying to suggest your uncle?"

"No. We have gone past that."

"So what are you suggesting?"

He lowered his voice. "I think you should stop going to bed naked."

She gazed into his eyes. "You don't mean that right?"

"I do, baby. You have a great body. Your body might be seducing the spirit husband." He could not stop the laughter.

Yeni punched him and tried to smile.

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Being at the clinic was difficult, despite having prepared for it for two weeks.

The place was located in a quiet area, a hidden location for people who had mental issues. Yeni felt safe because the area was not busy. There was no signpost to tell if it was a mental health clinic. A small panel on the building simply read, *Clinic*. Yeni was certain that outsiders would simply think it was a regular clinic.

But as she sat in her car studying the entrance, her emotions ran riot. She suddenly felt awkward at the thought of discussing her problems with a total stranger. She almost drove away. Then she prayed that the psychotherapist would have cancelled her appointment.

When she walked into the psychotherapist's office, the ambience of the room put her at ease. The setting was different. There was a couch in the room instead of the normal small table and chair in a doctor's office. The therapist who ushered her to a seat was petite and in her mid-fifties. She had a broad, charming smile, her voice, soft and warm. Yeni loved her simplicity—a white blouse on a black skirt, with a small, chic hijab. She wore simple jewelleries, flat sandals and had an elegant carriage. Yeni could not help but admire her modesty. Life had been kind to her. Her shape was trim and neat.

She could not help but ask why she had a long couch in her office. "Do

you stay in the office for a very long time, do you sleep here?"

"The couch is not for me, but for friends like you who come to visit. I want you to feel at home and be relaxed when you come in. You can call me Halima. Can I call you Yeni?"

Her smile mesmerised her, teeth so white and so perfectly set.

"Yes, call me Yeni. But forgive my insistence, I can't call you Halima. Let me call you Dr Halima," Yeni pleaded.

"That's fine."

"Okay."

In Dr Halima's voice, Yeni could hear a northern accent. The Hausa lilt in her voice was unmistakable.

"Do you know that the mind is a tabula rasa?"

Yeni raised an eyebrow.

"That means a blank board, which is how our mind is when we are newly born. But, as we grow, we fill the blank board with different things—culture, religion, education, exposure, bias, hate, love and so on. So, during this session, I will help you to understand the defensive operations of your mind by means of interpretations. This will gradually encourage an ever-growing freedom to express whatever comes to your mind, and help you to become aware of your subconscious desires, unresolved conflicts and fears. You will also understand how your dreams come about, and how the content of your dreams can help you to understand how your subconscious works."

Yeni adjusted herself on the couch. Listening to Doctor Halima, she felt a wave of excitement wash over her. She felt relief, no longer the nervous wreck who walked in a few minutes before.

Doctor Halima also discussed with her how confidentiality worked, having noticed her eagerness. She told her that treatment would end in the case of a mutual agreement of improvement. She stressed the fact that anxiety was normal, and that her coming to therapy was a decision that would help her to embark on the scary journey of self-discovery.

"Sometimes," Doctor Halima told her, "it's good to let the demons be and not fight them. It's a part of the healing process. So, why don't you just lie on that couch and tell me about your dreams?"

Yeni needed no more prodding. She stretched out on the couch, and tried to imagine the thousands of secrets that had been revealed on it.

She began to tell Doctor Halima about her dreams and her communion with the stranger. She started slowly, recounting, and reconstructing as

accurately as she could, her encounter with the obsessed spirit who was also a sex predator.

Chapter 20

Kunle slumped into the back seat of the Uber as the car cruised into the heart of Abuja. He was plagued by the pack of lies he had told his wife. He told Tale he had been sent on an urgent trip to Defence Headquarters in Abuja.

"*Oga, wetin be de name of the hotel you dey go*?"

"Sparkles Hotel, I told you it's in Wuse Zone II ..."

"*I dey ask because many hotels dey dat street wey you mention.*"

The driver weaved in and out of traffic but kept his mouth running, entertaining his customer—whose appearance screamed Lagosian—with gist of the corrupt politicians of Abuja, and how they syphoned money in the twilight months of the last government.

"*You see, Oga, I get one customer that time. He fit call me by two for night. Anytime he call, I dey ready. Whenever he call me like dat, I know say na to move money. He is one of de boys of dese popular politicians, and I like de man because he dey settle me well.*"

"What is the name of the politician?" Kunle inquired.

The driver, a man with a squat face upon which he perched a Kangol cap, met his gaze in the rare mirror with feigned disbelief. "*Ha! I no go tell you dat one, this one wey whistle-blower dey everywhere and our government dey use*

EFCC pursue everybody. I no go tell you, but na popular politician for this country."

"*Okay o*."

"*But now, money no dey again. Everywhere just dry, to get customer now come hard. Dat time I almost finish my house for village, now money don finish, de building dey dere.*"

"*So you too follow chop money*?" Kunle asked.

"*I follow chop am well, but since wey dem don dey pick all the corrupt politicians, dat my man don travel go America and I never hear from am since*."

"*So you enjoy that time*?"

"*Yes o*."

"That means you are among those who ruined this country."

"*Me kẹ̀? How much dem give me? Na just chop money o!*"

"*Chop money wey you take build house for village?*"

"*Nna, na just small man house, na. As I see you, I know you be big man, you no fit live dere*."

Kunle was not amused. "You aided and abetted a crime."

"*Oga, you be lawyer?*"

"No, I am not. I am just stating the truth."

"*Dat one don go sha. Things hard now. We no even understand wetin dis government dey do. Dis kain change, we no like am at all, if possible make Jonathan come back*."

"Don't worry, just be a little more patient with this government, and we will have the Nigeria of our dreams."

"*De poor masses dey suffer. Hungry man na angry man o. This government na go-slow jo. We don tire. Where Buhari dey now? Dem say him sick and everytin don dey for stand still.*"

"But the vice president is doing a great job."

"*Yes, de man dey do well, but no be him we vote for.*"

"The most important thing is he is doing well. *So make una wait small. Buhari go soon come back*."

"*Okay, we dey wait.*"

After a twenty-minute drive, he swung into a well-populated area in Wuse Zone II and slowed down in front of a luxurious hotel.

"*Oga*," the driver woke Kunle who had dozed off. "*We don reach o, this hotel dey sparkle true true*." He hooted the horn a few times and the gate was opened. The security men scanned the car with a bomb detector, gave the driver

a car tag and let him in.

"*I like dis hotel, no wasting time like Mega Hotel. If you go dat place, dey make you tink say you be Boko Haram*."

Kunle laughed momentarily. He did not want to seem rude, but man, he talked too much. Kunle was happy to be free of him. He tipped him generously.

The hotel was serene and spacious. The twin doors that led into the lobby were dark brown with golden handles. A porter opened the door and the first thing that caught Kunle's eyes was the chandelier. On his right, exquisite paintings hung on the red walls. Done with checking in, a porter took his luggage and showed him to his room on the fifth floor. His shoes squeaked on the polished marble. Even the door hinges were adorned with swirls and elegant designs. This was not Kunle's first time in a luxury hotel. He had been in many hotels, but he had not seen a four-star hotel with as much luxurious fittings as this one. His room was airy with an amazing view of a lush garden, it had a king-sized bed, plasma television and an impressive décor. Kunle inquired about the owner of the hotel from the porter. She had lived abroad all her adult life and decided to build this hotel when she relocated to Nigeria with her family, having previously worked in a five-star hotel in America. Kunle could understand why the place was so fantastic. He was interested in hotel business—he planned on investing in the hospitality industry upon his retirement.

The linen was white and comfortable. A quick peep in the bathroom and he nodded in appreciation—shining marble, frosted glass doors and a huge, ornate bathtub. He sat on the bed and dialled a number.

"Hello, Grace."

"Hello, Kunle."

He swallowed. "I have just arrived and checked in."

"I am at the restaurant, we can meet there."

"Can't we meet in my room?"

Her voice hardened. "Your room? I just asked you to meet me at the restaurant."

"Grace, I meant no harm. I felt we would have some privacy …"

"Meet me at the restaurant in five minutes." She hung up.

He was not surprised at her attitude. If he were in her shoes, he would do worse. He deserved to be treated with indignity. He had treated her like a bag of trash and tried to pay her off like the other women.

Then, he was a man driven by his fears, and she, a lonely, helpless young woman. He took a warm bath, changed into a casual outfit and sprayed on three

different fragrances. He was trying to look his best. He looked in the mirror and smiled. “Man, you look good.” Then he put on his sneakers and walked briskly out of his room.

Grace was a blast from his past, his mistress six years ago in Jos. They had cohabitated back then. Had he been single when they met, he would have married her. He had met her in her late twenties, an age bracket when most Nigerian women want to settle down. Grace was from Southern Kaduna and from a privileged home. Her father, Solomon Giwa was a wealthy industrialist before his death. Although he was a Christian, he married two wives because Grace’s mother, Lami, could not give him a male child. Lami had three girls, Christy, Grace, and Dorcas who died at four. When trying to have her last child almost cost her her life, Solomon decided to look elsewhere.

A few months later, he married a new wife, Hanatu. Everyone knew he married her because he wanted a male child. But Solomon had hard luck with Hanatu’s first pregnancy. It broke his heart when his second wife had twin girls. Grace told Kunle that her mother had had a good laugh when Sophia and Sarah arrived. Three years later, however, Hanatu gave birth to a boy.

But Solomon was not sure about the paternity of his son. Isaac was the only fair child in the family. The boy was lanky and had a pointed nose. Members of the Giwa family were known for their blunt nose. He looked more Fulani than Southern Kaduna. Solomon confronted Hanatu, but she swore that Isaac was his, and claimed that he looked like her maternal great-grandmother. Solomon never met Hanatu’s great-grandmother. Finally he did a DNA test and found out that Isaac was indeed not his. It broke his heart and he wept like a baby in Lami’s arms. He said nothing to Hanatu, and continued to treat Isaac as his. However, when he died, he left Isaac and his mother out of his will. Everyone was shocked except Lami.

Often times, Kunle remembered this story about Grace’s father. He felt her father was wrong about his decision to leave Isaac out of his will, because the child had always seen Solomon Giwa as his father. He ought not to have been punished for what he had no part in.

The only reason Kunle did not want to get serious with Grace then was his father. He did not want to end up like his father—a polygamist trapped with three wives and 16 children. Kunle abhorred the bickering and animosity that characterised his father’s household while he was growing up. Their neighbours scorned them, calling them Fuji House of Commotion in reference to a soap opera featuring a chaotic polygamous family. Everyone was in competition to

get their father's attention. Oftentimes, the children were neglected. Bringing up his child in a similar situation was his worst fear.

Yet he had let his father goad him into different affairs, especially with Grace, whom he had cohabited with. Three years into his marriage, Chief Thompson, Kunle's father began to question his son's virility, especially when he refused to try another woman. He challenged his son each time he had the opportunity, and once asked if he had sworn an oath with his wife.

"I want to have a hundred grandchildren before my death. You owe me at least four. I wonder why you are delaying," the old man would sneer at him.

Once, he went as far as calling him *ẹshin in*ú ìw*é*—an impotent stud—this was a big blow to Kunle's ego. His mother, who used to sympathise with him, suddenly changed her behaviour. Many times she accused Tale of bewitching her son. "If she is not capable of giving us grandchildren, she should not be a dog in the manger. Let another woman come and try her luck o, *kíló dé k*ẹ̀? Tale, within an earshot, caught every word. Kunle did not blame his mother. She was acting on her husband's instruction.

To ease the pressure on his wife, Kunle capitulated to his parents' suggestions to give another woman a trial. He wanted to prove to his father that he was virile. But he did not only get Grace pregnant, he fell in love with her and breaking up with her became a challenge.

When he called his father from Jos and told him about Grace's pregnancy, the old man gleefully ordered him to bring 'that good girl home' to him. The delight in his voice immediately told Kunle he had made a mistake. His family had found the weapon to make Tale's life miserable. He took a decision on the spot. He did not need to prove anything to his father anymore. He had done that all his life and now felt that it was enough. So he turned his anger on Grace, told her to get rid of the pregnancy and cut off all contact with her. Grace, stubborn and assertive, was a clinger. He purposely humiliated her so that she would feel hatred for him. The memory was unpleasant and it made him sweat. For once, he was afraid. *What if she is setting me up to pay me back in my own coin?* Suddenly, he was not so sure of this idea to reconnect with her.

Grace waited patiently for him in the empty restaurant. She wished he would come down on time and spare her the agony of the long wait. The reunion was not exactly her idea. It came from her sister who just returned from America. Christy had ordered her to reunite her daughter with her father. Coming from her no-nonsense, calculating sister, it felt like good advice to Grace.

Christy, who had chastised her sister for dating a married man in the first place, was more furious to hear all that had transpired between her sister and Kunle. Christy lived abroad with her family, and invited Grace to her home in Chicago where she gave birth to Omotayo. While she was there, she got close to an elderly woman, Mrs Bodunde, who was Christy's neighbour. Mrs Bodunde was there to help her own daughter to take care of her baby. When Christy was at work she would go over to Mrs Bodunde's flat and chat with her to while away the time. The elderly woman was so easy to talk with, and would pray for her and encourage her each time she felt low. Once, she told Grace that having a child brought so much joy, and that phrase sounded acceptable to her as a name for her baby. It felt appropriate, especially because it was a trying period for her, expecting a baby alone.

Her daughter was her carbon copy, but with certain striking features inherited from her father. She was also as inquisitive as her father. Omotayo started asking questions when she turned four. Grace usually ignored her most salient question, but when her sister relocated to Nigeria with her family and Omotayo saw what a father figure looked like, there was no deferring the answer. She probed her mother endlessly with questions about her father. When Omotayo asked Kelvin, Christy's husband, if he would be her dad, she knew she had to do something about the child's questions. So even though Kelvin assured Omotayo that he would be more than a father to her, she sent a message to Kunle.

Immersed in her thoughts, she did not know Kunle had entered the restaurant until his voice disrupted her thoughts.

"Grace, you look as beautiful as ever." The voice was polished as usual.

"Thank you, how are you doing? You are not looking bad yourself."

She looked him up and down and her heart fluttered at the intimidating figure standing before her. Her nostrils caught a whiff of male musk and she felt weak. This was her greatest fear, Grace could not believe she was still in love with the man who shattered her world six years ago.

"You didn't come with her?" Kunle broke the silence.

"No, she is in school. When she is back you will meet her."

"How old is she now?"

"Five, and in primary one."

"She is a big girl … And you kept her from me all this while?"

"You never wanted to be a part of our lives," she retorted.

"There is a probability that if you had told me about the baby I would have

changed my mind ...”

“How would I have reached you? Shortly after our fight, you left Jos. I tried calling but you changed your lines. Even when I had her and returned from America, there was no way I could reach you. I went to your friend in Kaduna, but he was also posted out. So, I gave up. Six months ago I ran into Mohammed at the Mammy Market, the Fulani guy who worked with you in Jos. He was the one who gave me your number.”

Kunle studied her face. She still looked great. Her eyes were youthful, twinkling with innocence as she spoke, her lips, beautiful and bright pink. He wished he could kiss her just once again. He remembered Grace was a good kisser. He secretly wished it would happen again.

“Although I have informed her about you already, I needed to speak with you first.”

Kunle apologised for his past misbehaviour.

They spoke at length about Omotayo and gradually the ice between them thawed. “Let me show you her pictures,” Grace said excitedly.

“I can’t wait,” he moved closer to her as she brought out the pictures.

Kunle gazed at the photos dreamily. “Eyes just like her mom,” he murmured.

“But her father’s bulbous nose and dimples just like my dad’s,” she countered spontaneously. They both laughed like long lost lovers.

They did not notice a woman walk in majestically and stand behind them, not until she cleared her throat.

“I am sorry for interrupting your little reunion.”

Kunle froze. Grace looked up and beheld a gorgeously dressed woman with fiery eyes.

“Tale!” Kunle said in shock.

Chapter 21

Shola almost collided with Nkechi as he walked upstairs to his mother's room. She was coming from the study and her presence had startled him. He muttered greetings before disappearing into his mother's room. When he came out later, he found his wife lolling in the corridor. Nkechi ignored him and attempted to walk past him.

"*Sisí mi, ẹmá bínú sí wa.* I am sorry," Shola said sweetly, mimicking an Osun accent. She stopped and turned back immediately. She had been expecting him to break the ice. "I know I am in the wrong this time. I regret hitting you. Na frustration cause am," he said holding her hands.

Nkechi felt mollified. "You should have been more patient with me," she said, pretending to be angry.

"The words hit me hard. I am sorry. But we promised to always tell each other the truth."

"Yes, I know, I am at fault there," she said with a smile. "You forgot you are a boxer, your slap was heavy, it almost removed my tooth."

"I'm sorry. Remember I said I wanted to share something with you, before I left for the barber's shop that day? Pemisire isn't my child, like you said."

"You are kidding me, right?"

"No, I am not. We had a DNA test and found out he wasn't mine. I was really frustrated that day. It was painful but the truth was soothing."

"Oh … so what's going to happen to the innocent child?"

"He will be fine, Mommy promised to continue paying his fees until after he is done with his university education."

"I am sorry darling."

"Come on baby, you know when you look like that, I just want to kiss your pretty pout," he laughed heartily, hugging her close.

They both shared a long passionate kiss.

Shola knew he was at fault and regretted hitting his wife. He wished he could take it back. The only other time he had hurt her badly was when he cheated on her, and that was early in their marriage. He held on to Nkechi

tightly, muttering sweet nonsense. He loved her and never wanted to do anything to jeopardise their union again.

He broke his hold and searched her face. “If I am correct, there is still a standing order for a bedroom sabbatical, right?”

“Oh yes, I remember. Would you want us to proceed right away? I won’t mind …”

“There is a place for everything!” She scolded playfully.

“This is also my home. My room is still upstairs.”

“Bachelor’s room,” she scoffed. Nkechi remembered it clearly.

“What about it? Does it make any difference?”

“A world of difference, small bed, hard mattress. In my house, I can scream in ecstasy without someone knocking to ask what is wrong.”

Nkechi remembered Shola’s bed. Although, she had insisted on a Christian courtship, which meant no sex, they nevertheless stole a million kisses in that room and had many moments of fondling. The memory filled her with warmth. She knew she wanted him too. She kissed him and he kissed her back passionately. Then Shola started to kiss her neck, and she knew that her resistance would crumble.

“Leave me,” she whispered.

He responded by pulling her sharply into his embrace, and kissing her neck and lips again. She felt her defences weakening, and moaned. She wanted this.

Shola’s mom cleared her throat. It suddenly occurred to them that they were not alone. They froze. Shola’s mother and Aunty Tonia smiled back at them.

“You guys should better get yourselves a room,” Mommy said.

Aunty Tonia walked into the kitchen with a straight face. They separated awkwardly when it was obvious Mommy would not walk away.

“And, it is time for some serious talk. Have you read about IVF?” she gazed directly at Shola.

“I don’t know anything about it …”

“Ask your wife. Both of you should discuss it and get back to me by tomorrow.” She walked away to join Aunty Tonia in the kitchen.

“You see what you have done?” Nkechi accused him.

“Babe, the room upstairs will suffice, don’t you think so?” Shola said in a pleading tone while stroking his beards. He pulled Nkechi closer again, and she could feel his hot breath on the nape of her neck, followed by a rain of tender

kisses. The tender brush of his lips made Nkechi burn within her thighs, his hands began to run through her hair as the kisses became more urgent.

"But what if I scream? You know I am a screamer. I don't want to be embarrassed o."

"Mommy will understand *jo*," he impatiently swept her off her feet and carried her upstairs.

Chapter 22

Yeni had gone through three weeks of therapy, but the dreams had not stopped. The stranger was no longer violent, but he kept on having sex with her. Yeni begged Dr Halima many times to give her prescription drugs that would keep the spirit husband out of her dreams. But the doctor calmly explained that her dreams were a manifestation of the subconscious workings of her mind.

"I can't just write you a prescription, not until I know the root of your problem. Good enough, you have been sleeping well since I gave you the sleeping pills. However, what happens in your dream is a conscious expression of your subconscious desires, fantasies, fears and so on. These subconscious elements of our dreams often include what we call the nocturnal sensory stimuli, which is hunger, thirst, pain and so on."

"Doctor, I really don't get what this has to do with my dreams. I don't eat in my dreams. Neither do I drink water. I don't feel pain. All I do in my dreams is have sex with this particular man, and when I refuse, sometimes, he rapes me.

You asked me in the last session if I was abused as a child. I wasn't. You asked me whether I was raped. I wasn't. So, I don't understand where this kind of stimuli is coming from. Doctor, I need answers!"

"Take it easy, Yeni. Let me explain further, the sensory stimuli that reach us during our sleep may easily become our source of dreams. There can also be some repressed unacceptable impulses, like sexual activity with the same gender or a crush. Have you been crushing on anyone recently?"

Yeni began to laugh hysterically. "The only persons I am crushing on right now are Anthony Joshua and Richard Mofe-Damijo, and I don't even think I can ever meet these people." They both started laughing.

"I am also crushing on RMD. Aren't all Nigerian women crushing on RMD?"

"You see, my problem is that this stranger doesn't even look like any of these people. Although he is good looking, and I can recognise him in real life if I see him, he is nothing like any man I have ever met."

"This man might just be a missing link between Anthony Joshua and RMD. Your mind simply created the man of your dreams from these men, and this gentleman appeared in your dream."

Yeni cast a sceptical look at Dr Halima. She did not understand the correlation between her crushes and the stranger that appeared in her dreams.

"Dreams are end results of things buried in our subconscious mind. When we go to bed at night, the contents of our subconscious begin to unfold and manifest as dreams. The stranger in your dream is the combination of Anthony Joshua and RMD."

"You are teasing me, Doc!" Yeni broke into a short laugh. "A gentleman? This man is sometimes violent. I don't think my mind can be so stupid as to create something that will haunt me. I married the man of my dreams and his name is Tunde," she said frowning.

A few minutes later, she interrupted the doctor again.

"I have been trying to reason your own way but I can't comprehend your theories. You remember Evans, the Billionaire Kidnapper?"

Doctor Halima nodded, alertness in her eyes.

"Did his victims invite him to kidnap them?"

"No."

"His victims never did, he caught all of them unawares and captured them. Then he made them pay huge sums of money."

"Yes."

“That is exactly what that stranger in my dream does to me. He sneaks into my dreams every night uninvited, and I am paying for it with my sanity. If I don’t get help soon, I might lose it.”

“You won’t Yeni … calm down. I am going to explore another area. Sometimes, dreams give us an insight into the subconscious mind, like I mentioned earlier. Your brain is only trying to let you know about those physical desires that are not satiated. What is your sex life like with your husband?”

“Are you trying to ask if my husband satisfies me sexually?” Yeni asked, surprised.

“Well, if this makes you a little uncomfortable, we can do it in the next session when you are ready,” Halima adjusted her glasses.

“It’s not about that. In fact, I have the most terrific sex life ever, so this absolutely has nothing to do with my husband and our sex life.”

“Were you bullied in school as a child?”

“No. I was a popular kid because I was a good dancer. I was loved by all.”

“At what age did you stop bedwetting?”

Yeni did not understand what bedwetting had to do with dreaming. “I stopped bedwetting very early, I can’t even remember exactly when.”

“Each time you have these dreams can you easily recall them?”

“Yes, I can recall the details. They are as vivid as my favourite movies.”

“Do you usually shout or scream when you wake up?”

“Sometimes I do, sometimes I don’t.”

“When you wake up, do you feel disgusted, scared or sad?”

“Of course, they are terrible dreams! I don’t even wish them on my enemies.”

“Do you also feel sweaty, have palpitations or feel paralysed?”

“Yes I do. Sometimes, I force myself out of the bed, and at other times, I stay in bed crying and feeling miserable,” Yeni appeared calm, but the edge in her voice was obvious.

Doctor Halima broke the interrogation and instead leafed through her files. After a few minutes of silence, she began to speak again.

“Do you have any long-term illness that you have been taking medication for?”

“No.”

“Yeni, from all our discussions, I’ll say you are having nightmares. The average human goes through six sleep cycles a night and you go through all the cycles in 90 minutes. However, nightmares occur during the stage of sleep called

Rapid Eye Movement (REM). Your nightmares usually begin in the second half to the last third of your night. Although this happens more to children, but adults with any underlying anxiety problems can also have such problems. Your underlying anxiety can be traced to your inability to have a child which cannot be ruled out."

"You think it's because I haven't had a child that I am seeing a spirit husband? But I have been having this dream for a long time!"

"But it wasn't this frequent and horrible, right?"

"No, I just had it once in a while back then."

"From our sessions, I know you come from a family that believes in spirits and traditions. I am not saying you are a pagan, but your exposure to these beliefs has been reoccurring in your dreams for some time now. However, I will be referring you elsewhere because your sleep has been severely disturbed. I don't have the facilities to address these problems here in my office, but a colleague of mine has and we will be having an overnight sleep study to help determine if the nightmares are connected to another sleep disorder."

After a moment of silence, Yeni gazed at her and asked: "Please, doctor, do you think I am crazy?"

"Not at all."

"So, what's a sleep study?"

"Polysomnography only requires that you spend the night in a sleep lab. During the test, sensors will be placed on your head and body to record your brain waves, the oxygen level in your blood, heart rate and breathing. Also, your eyes and leg movements will be watched. Then we will review the information from what we have gathered and see whether you have any other sleep disorders."

"Before the sleep study, are you giving me any medication?"

"Not at all. Aside the sleeping pills I gave you some time ago, which you must have almost exhausted by now, what I will tell you to do is Imagery Rehearsal Therapy. This is about you changing the end of your nightmare yourself. It's like you writing a script of your dreams by yourself and you can keep rehearsing it like a play in your head. This approach may decrease the frequency of your nightmares."

Outside, before Yeni got into her car, she took a long look at the hospital. She knew she would not be returning. Dr Halima had done her best, but Yeni knew her remedy was not going to come from her. She had learnt a valuable truth from their sessions together. Science had no remedy for spirit husbands.

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Tunde made a joke about the sleep study when she told him about it.

"That sounds like something from a science fiction movie," he said in his usual way of making light of serious issues. He wondered if Yeni would have been transformed into an alien with supernatural powers if she had complied with the doctor's recommendation. They were both laughing when her phone rang.

Her mother's voice came through urgently. "The pastor is back and he said we should start a three-day fast."

"That's good, Mom. When can we begin?"

"I will prefer that you do it before you resume work. We can start tomorrow."

"Fasting begins tomorrow, Tunde is that fine?" she asked, her hand over the phone.

Tunde nodded in affirmation.

"Okay, Mom, tomorrow is fine."

"I will inform him then because he said he will be fasting with us. On the third day, we will meet at his church for prayers. I will send you the address."

"Okay, Mom, thank you."

"You are welcome, dear. *Olộrun* á *k*ú*k*ú *gb*ọ́ à*d*ú*r*à *wa.*"

"Àmín o."

Yeni dropped the phone and heaved a sigh of relief. A joyful sensation ran through her body.

Chapter 23

“Who is she?” Tale demanded.

“Let me explain, please,” Kunle said in a state of shock.

“So, this is the emergency official trip you came for in Abuja?” Tale screamed.

“How did you get here?” Kunle asked defensively.

“You still have the audacity to ask me a foolish question?”

“Take it easy madam,” Grace started but quickly withered under Tale’s scornful look.

“Who are you to interrupt my conversation with my husband?” Her gaze shifted to the photos on the table.

“Who is that girl, Kunle?” Tale picked one of the photos. Kunle was still trying to mutter some words. Tale studied the photos critically, plunging into a monologue. “Now, I get the picture. My man has a daughter by another woman while I am fooling myself, playing the good wife. Isn’t life a big joke? Kunle, you have a daughter, and all this while and you hid her from me …”

“Calm down, Tale, it is not what you think.”

She snapped at him. “Don’t start that stupid line. Think of something more intelligent to say.”

“Madam, he just got to know about her now,” Grace tried to intervene.

“Baby mama, I have told you to keep the hell out of our conversation when I am talking with my husband!”

“Let me excuse you guys, then,” Grace packed her bags and fled.

Tale hissed and watched her leave.

Kunle found his voice. “Tale, I am really sorry you got to know this way. I didn’t mean for this to happen. I was going to tell you at the right time.”

“To hell with the right time,” she shrieked. “After I caught you sitting cosily with a strange woman, you are telling me trash about the right time.”

“Take it easy, you are shouting. Please, don’t create a scene,” he said huskily and regretted it the moment he said it.

Tale raised her voice. “You don’t want a scene and you cheated on your barren wife? You don’t want a scene, but you had a love child and kept the secret

from her for God knows how long? You don't want a scene, but you came running to Abuja to rendezvous with an old flame?"

"Please, let us go and talk about this in my room," Kunle said shamefacedly.

"So, you got a room? How wonderful! You left the miserable fruitless tree in Lagos and ran to the arms of the fruitful one, *ṣẹbí*? Now I see the light. Your father eventually convinced you. You think I will follow you to that room where you committed adultery. Shameless man!"

The nightmare unfolding before his eyes saddened Kunle. Tale had become hysterical and her voice attracted people. An audience was beginning to assemble at the entrance of the restaurant.

"You nauseate me so much I want to puke. I am out of here!"

****

Across town, in the uptown Central Business District, Tale checked into her hotel room and spent a few hours draining her tear ducts. She called her friend Onome and narrated her story. Onome calmed her down and promised to meet her at the Murtala Muhammed Airport the next morning.

Tale had felt betrayed when she discovered the text message. She suspected an affair when she googled the restaurant address and got an Abuja hotel address. She had called her cousin in Abuja who told her the new hotel was the talk of the town. She planned to catch him red-handed. He flew Arik. She booked Medview thirty minutes earlier and touched down at Nnamdi Azikwe Airport before him. She was waiting in her rented cab when he came through the hotel gate in the Uber. Tailing him to his hotel was the easiest part. She wanted to surprise him, but she got more than she bargained for.

How could Kunle keep such a secret from her? The girl looked five. They had been married for fifteen years. She had never felt so sad in her life.

A five-year-old secret.

Clearly, Kunle had given up on her and had heeded the counsel of his family to try another woman outside wedlock. If she had not listened to him twenty-two years ago, their child would be twenty-one years old now. He forced her to terminate that pregnancy and her world had been in shambles since.

She could not control the hate that was in her. She hated what she did twenty-two years ago. The innocent child she sacrificed on the altar of love, her

womb that she gave as an oblation to Kunle. She traded her joy for this sham of a marriage.

If only she had not listened to him. If only she had listened to her mother's many warnings. If only her mother had been kinder and not pushed her further into Kunle's arms with her harshness. She had begged God countless times for forgiveness, but he seemed bent on punishing her and her alone. They had both sinned against God, but she was the only one being punished. Why?

Her phone rang several times. She ignored it. Without looking at the screen, she knew Kunle was the caller. She was not ready to listen to him. He had hurt her deeply. She had only thought she would discover a young mistress, not one with a five-year-old daughter. She cried until she fell asleep.

Two hours later, she woke up, still terrified. She stood up and looked into the hotel mirror. Staring back at Tale was not the same girl Kunle met at school years ago. She was no longer the girl who poured herself into their relationship. This new Tale was consumed by a kind of hatred she never thought could dwell inside her, and she recognised that it would not go away, it would only grow wild.

****

Inside his hotel room on the other side of town, Kunle paced the floor, tense, tired and disoriented. He did not know what else to do. He had called Tale's phone several times but she did not pick up. He was certain she was still in Abuja because it was too late to get a flight out to Lagos.

He felt guilty. He was to blame for all the mess. He was in this state when there was a knock on his door. Room service. He had requested for water. He opened the door. They stared at each other in silence. Her perfume invoked a romantic nostalgia—the scent, a reminder of those heady months when they were still having an affair. They gazed lovingly at each other. It was déjà vu all over again. They were transported in time to the past when they first set eyes on each other in the hallway of a hotel.

Kunle let his eyes roam her body. After all these years, Grace was still stunning. She had changed to a casual wear. In her simplicity, she was ravishing. He stepped aside and closed the door after her, his eyes riveted on her petite frame. Grace had a kind of understated beauty, probably because she was unaware of it. Her dark skin was flawless and glowing.

“Why are you staring at me that way?” Grace asked.

“I can’t help it. You look different now,” he said.

“I felt I should check on you. I couldn’t help but feel sorry for you.”

“Thank you, that’s quite thoughtful of you. Please, have a seat.”

“Have you spoken to her? I saw her leaving, she was not in a good state of mind.”

“I have been calling her, she is not picking my calls. The problem is I don’t know where she is staying.”

“Do you have family members or friends in Abuja?”

“Yes, I have called all of them. The only person who knew she would be in Abuja, told me she might be lodging in this hotel, because she asked her about this place.”

“I get it now. She must have read your messages.”

“I think that was where she got the information. I was careless, I guess. I should have known, since the last time we tried IVF and it failed, she has been under a lot of pressure. I took it badly. She was calm about it. Tale has always been calm. I never tried to check up on her to see how she was feeling. I didn’t even notice all her insecurities. It was always about me,” he sank heavily to the bed’s edge.

“Poor you. Why IVF? Do you guys want more kids?” Grace probed.

“We don’t have any at all.”

“But you used to tell me you had two girls. You even showed me their pictures,” Grace countered.

“They are my nieces.”

Grace stared stonily at him. “And you shoved me off like that? You weren’t even desperate for a child?”

“Grace, I love her. I couldn’t afford to hurt her. Please forgive me.”

“Wow! I have forgiven you. You just take it easy.”

She sat close to him. He remembered that familiar fragrance and wanted to hug her, but he restrained himself.

“This is so unfortunate, but you will be fine.”

“How do I see my daughter before I leave tomorrow morning?” he asked finally.

“I will bring her tomorrow morning before you leave.”

He was aware their hands were touching now.

“Don’t worry, everything will be fine,” she said, touching his head.

He moved closer to her and hugged her, tightly. She allowed him. All she

had wanted when she saw him was to be in his strong arms again. He kissed her softly. She clung to him. Their kisses became intense and frenetic. She pulled him closer. Amidst groans and moans, he began to undress her.

Chapter 24

She came out of the plane broken, her world crumbled and empty. It was 10 a.m. and the morning sun was warm. It was as if nature also mocked her. She was all gloomy inside, but everything was bright and beautiful in Lagos that morning. Like a dreamer, she walked light-headed through the arrival gate, and then wandered out absentmindedly.

The sight of her friend brought her back to her senses. Onome, standing by her Pajero at the parking lot, willowy, her red boubou billowing around her, her long hair blown across her face by the wind.

Onome had been her bosom friend since their days in the university. They had met by chance at the faculty orientation party for fresh students. Seated next to each other, they had struck up a conversation and friendship that lasted throughout their time on campus. Onome had been married for thirteen years and had become a mother of five children. But Tale did not envy her life. She was stuck with an unrepentant lothario of a husband who cheated with every willing woman in Lagos.

They both leaned on each other through it all, sisters in misery. They drove

out of the airport in silence. The traffic was light. Soon they were negotiating Isolo Road. Onome broke the ice.

"Friend, you look horrible."

"Kunle has a love child," Tale burst into fresh tears.

"So sorry to hear that," Onome stopped the car and hugged her friend.

"I am so confused right now," Tale sobbed.

Onome kept her voice low: "I warned you times without number. Men are men. They have their ways."

"How do you hold a man down?"

Tale narrated everything to her again. Onome was a careful listener, she did not interrupt. She started the car when Tale was done.

"What will you do now?" she asked as she drove off.

"I want to get home first, pack my stuff and leave that house …"

"You can't do that, Tale. I won't come to your house and help you pack your things. I can't do that …"

"Onome, I am done! He has a child with another woman. Don't you get it?"

"Did you listen to his explanation?"

"Explanation? How he slept with another woman and got her pregnant?" Tale scoffed and blew her nose.

"Sister, I know you are hurting. However, I won't allow you to make any rash decision."

Tale went on in the same disembowelled voice. "Fifteen years of marriage and this is all I get from it, betrayal!"

Onome kept her eyes on the road, giving her friend some time to think, and wishing she could do more to help.

"And you are telling me to stay?" Tale asked after some time.

"Tale, I will never tell you to leave your husband. Why would you leave because he cheated once?"

"How are you sure it was once?"

"Anyway, your husband called a few minutes ago. I told him you were back in Lagos."

"Why is he interested in my whereabouts?" Tale wondered in anger.

Hours later, she was moping about in the house. Mad. Morose. Her friends had warned her about her husband taking a second wife or having kids out of wedlock. She never took it seriously. Two months ago, they had celebrated their fifteenth year anniversary - with no child to show for it.

Kunle stabbed her in the back. The coward did not even have the guts to tell her to her face. He was such an actor, to hide his double life from her all this time. She would have continued to be the fool if she had not started reading his text messages.

Tired of moving aimlessly from one room to another, she went into her room and took sleeping pills. She had not slept since the encounter at the hotel yesterday. She took an overdose. For two hours, she tried unsuccessfully to sleep. The picture of the little girl kept playing in her mind. Numb, doped by the pills, she sat quietly, very miserable. Finally, she dragged her feet to the sitting room, took a bottle of Coke from the fridge and switched on the TV. A rerun of *Sin senos sí hay paraíso* was showing on Telemundo.

She was still cradling the bottle of Coke in her hands, staring emptily at the screen when Onome came through the door an hour later.

"I brought food for you. You need to at least eat," she said opening the food flask.

"Thanks, I am not hungry."

"You haven't eaten anything since yesterday."

"I'll be fine. Food is the least of my problems now," she said stubbornly. She burst out in fresh tears. Onome decided it was time for some hard talk.

"Wipe your tears. It's not going to help you." She began her rehearsed script. "My aunt who lives in Port Harcourt had a set of twins last year. I told you about her. Remember I had to travel for the dedication. You know she waited for 17 years before she had those twins?"

"I remember. You told me about the party."

Tale remembered the naming ceremony of the Timpere babies. Jude Timpere was a businessman in Port Harcourt and Tamara was a housewife. Jude was known for his many lavish parties. On the christening of the twins, the Bisi Olatilo Show covered the event and AIT televised it live. Onome had invited her but she could not attend because she travelled out of the country. The party was extravagant. Two free pieces of *aṣọ ẹbí* were given to every invited guest. The fabrics were expensive and ordered from Dubai. Tale remembered the souvenirs her friend returned with—they had a standing fan, tickets to a spa treatment and live turkey for everyone. She caught the last words of Onome's questions.

"Did I tell you she had her baby through IVF?"

"Yes, you did. Lucky her," her voice hardened. "I have done IVF six times. They all failed. The last time, I almost lost my mind. Kunle almost committed murder. I am done with the bloody IVF thing," she said coldly.

Onome was not deterred. “The one I am talking about is different.”

“How? IVF is IVF *jo*. I think I’m not destined to have a child. I am not interested,” she said with finality.

“What my aunt had was traditional IVF,” Onome said. There was a minute of silence.

Onome had taken her to different places for solutions at some point some years back. She had spent so much money at these places and yet there was no result.

“Which one is traditional IVF? I am not ready for any trado-medical treatment. I have tried enough of that herbal stuff. Remember you took me to some of these places? Nothing worked.”

“Try this one,” Onome persisted. “You can’t just let another woman take over your husband.”

“She already has. She has his child,” Tale said tonelessly. “The girl has his nose, she is adorable. This is an opportunity for Kunle’s family to mock me. God, why have you shamed me? This garment of reproach, how long will I wear it?” She stood and raised her hands helplessly.

She turned to her friend, her face, haggard and drenched in tears, a frightening mask. Onome felt a sinking feeling. What she was hearing were the ravings of a broken mind.

“God? Is He still in heaven? Why do I have to go through all this pain? Haven’t I asked for forgiveness? Am I the only girl on earth that had an abortion? Just one abortion! Why should my suffering be without end? Even Job got a reprieve. We all know Tochi in school and the several abortions she had and immediately she got married, she took in. She now has four boys. But I, the church girl who served God all her life, made just one mistake, and God has refused to listen to my prayers. I have prayed and fasted many times, asking for His mercy. What do I get? A rival! A baby mama! Why me? Why?”

She burst into fresh tears.

“I don’t know how to placate you, Tale, but I promise you, all will be well. I spoke with my aunt a few minutes ago and she assured me about this place …”

“Kunle doesn’t need a child from me again. He already has a woman who can bear him children. So, what else am I trying for …?”

“You shouldn’t give up on your marriage.”

“What haven’t I done? Six failed IVFs, two fibroid operations, several fertility treatments. I have taken herbal concoctions. The only thing I have not eaten with my mouth is faeces … if I had been asked to eat faeces with the

promise that I will bear a child, I would have gladly done that too.” She sat and buried her head in one of the throw pillows.

“Try this place. My aunty told me that everyone who did had children. She said it’s usually the last resort for women searching for the fruit of the womb.”

“Are you saying this won’t go wrong?” Her eyes bored into Onome’s, seeking reassurance.

“Try it, at least do it for yourself, children bring so much joy into our lives.”

“How do I go about it?”

“You have to see my aunt. She will explain better.”

“How do I see her?”

“She is coming to Lagos for my cousin’s wedding next week. You can meet her then.”

“Are you sure about this?” Tale asked, looking at her friend for reassurance.

“She told me it never fails.”

Hours later, she was still lost in thought. *Traditional IVF. It never fails.* She was unaware of a car stopping outside, of the door opening, and her husband standing before her, until he coughed. The sight of Kunle broke her reverie. Tale bolted into her room and locked the door.

Chapter 25

It was a day the earth baked under scorching heat. Three ceiling fans inside Victory Gospel Church auditorium were spinning furiously, yet the pastor and the prayer warriors were all drenched in sweat, a rigorous deliverance session was underway. The singing, clapping and prayers were intense. Kofoworola sometimes joined them, but she had eyes only for her daughter who was lying lifeless in their midst. On two occasions, she checked Yeni's pulse and was relieved that she was breathing.

Kofoworola was shocked at Yeni's manifestations. If she had not been there right from the start, she would not have believed it was her daughter. Sometimes she let out a growl like an animal. Other times, she wriggled on the floor like she was swimming. It was clear to her the reason the pastor had instructed Yeni to wear a pair of trousers when coming for the deliverance session. The ushers had picked her fallen scarf and re-tied it on her head several times, until they got tired and let it be. Kofoworola had never seen anything like this all her life. She could not understand where her daughter had met this spirit husband.

Midway into the deliverance, Yeni screamed angrily in a strange voice.

"Leave me! This is my beloved wife!"

The voice scared Kofoworola out of her wits. She was thankful Tunde could not make it as earlier planned. The pastor began to speak in tongues. Yeni too countered in strange tongues. He sprayed anointing oil on her and she started shouting in that strange, manly voice.

"Fire! Fire! Fire! Fire in my home! Fire!"

They all prayed. "Holy Ghost Fire, burn that home because Yeni doesn't belong there! Holy Ghost fire!"

Kofoworola was forced to open her eyes when Yeni began to scream fire. She was afraid her daughter was ablaze. Her mind dashed to the Reverend King saga. She did not want her daughter's life to end like the lady who was burnt to death by a pastor. However, each time she opened her eyes, all she saw was a splash of olive oil. She did not see any fire. Yeni was stomping around the auditorium, raising dust everywhere and on herself.

Kofoworola could no longer pray, she began to cry. After some minutes, Yeni fell flat on the floor, still speaking in strange tongues. The prayer warriors continued praying until she started crying.

"Let me go please," the strange voice pleaded.

"Yeni, stand up," the pastor commanded and held her hands to lift her up.

Yeni stood groggily, worn out. He spoke into her ears and she held her

groin this time. Kofoworola wondered what the pastor said to her.

“Every remains of the spirit husband in you, I say catch fire!”

“Amen.”

“Catch fire! Holy Ghost, begin to move!

Yeni began another round of screaming, turning round in circles. The Pastor went closer to her and spoke into her ears again, this time, his voice was louder. Kofoworola heard every word.

“Every evil deposit of the spirit husband in you catches fire!”

“Amen!” Kofoworola shouted.

Yeni bent double, holding her belly and screaming in pain. Kofoworola wiped her eyes and started shouting too.

“Catch fire! Catch fire!”

The strange voice emitted from Yeni’s throat. “I am going! I will leave her!”

She let out a big roar like a wounded lion, collapsed on the floor and became still. The pastor and prayer warriors began to sing songs of thanksgiving.

Kofoworola waited, eager to see her daughter. After a while, the pastor said a short prayer and the prayer team dispersed, leaving Yeni lying on the ground lifeless. Kofoworola went to the pastor.

“Pastor, can I wake her up?”

“She will get up herself. She is in a trance. She will be okay. The Lord has won the battle and victory is ours.”

Unconvinced, Kofoworola pulled a chair closer and sat to watch over her daughter. She took a look around the church, she did not believe there was so much power in this uncompleted church in Egbeda. The church was modest, and the pastor, simple and unassuming. A man of average height and a slim build that could be as a result of unending fasting. His choice of clothing was simple, he had no airs about him. It was obvious that he was a happy man, but during the deliverance session he was fierce. He was educated but not as sophisticated as the average Lagos pastor. From the short discussion Kofoworola had with him, his emphasis was on holiness. Kofoworola was convinced that if Jesus came, Pastor Olaiya would be among the raptured.

Yeni stirred, coughed and woke up. She sat up slowly, ignoring her mother. She tried to grasp the last fragments of her dream, the last part that was still very vivid. The stranger had stood on the porch and watched her pack her possessions out of the house, the same building where he had ravished her times without number. He looked dejected and deflated. Mean-looking soldiers occupied the

whole place. Yeni did not understand where they came from, she was only happy that they were working for her. They helped her with packing and each time the stranger tried to move close to dissuade her, they shoved him off. Done with her packing, the stranger walked up to her and handed her a flower vase.

"Have this, it's yours," he said timidly.

"I am not going to take anything from you, stranger," Yeni said sternly.

"You are not taking anything from me. This is yours. Please take it. I stole it from you. I have been ordered by greater powers to return it to you."

Yeni looked at the soldiers. They nodded their assent. "Let me have it then."

"Yeni, you know I love you…"

"Goodbye!" She said and walked out, led by the men in uniform. She looked back to see a soldier putting a padlock on the door. The stranger stood crestfallen, watching her going out of his grasp.

Part III

"A pregnant woman is not afraid if you threaten her with what you made her pregnant with."

– **Bambara Proverb**

Chapter 26

Their journey to IVF began the day they made up at Shola's mother's house. Mrs Shokunbi had ordered the couple to consider the option.

"So what's this gist about IVF Mommy mentioned?" Shola asked later as he sat up in his old bachelor's room upstairs. They were on the bed in semi-darkness. The door to the room did not close properly, and a beam of light from the passage filtered into the room.

"Don't pretend she never discussed it with you," Nkechi replied, keeping her voice low.

"Honestly, she didn't discuss it with me. You know her ways, she will always come to you first."

They could hear Mommy and Aunty Tonia talking in the sitting room downstairs.

"The only thing I know about IVF is that it is pretty expensive. In this recession, I don't think we can afford it." Shola said reflexively.

"Mommy said she'd give us the money."

"Really? But I asked her to borrow me money two days ago. She bluntly refused. So she has money for IVF?"

"She probably had this in mind and felt it was more important. I don't blame her. You keep borrowing money from her and you hardly repay," she teased.

"*Pẹ̀lẹ́, ọmọ* Mommy," Shola teased. He continued. "Seriously, I have heard

some negative things about IVF."

"What are the things you heard?"

"This is not the first time I have heard about it. I have a colleague in my office that had his son by IVF, but someone in my office said the treatment gave her aunty cancer."

"That's not true. Did that colleague of yours get cancer?"

"No."

"So the cancer thing was just hearsay. From what I read, IVF does not cause cancer. Medical research to date has shown that IVF doesn't have any link to any form of cancer."

"You know my problem. The low sperm count issue *nko*?"

"IVF can help men with low sperm count, in as much as it is not zero sperm count."

"But the success rate is really poor, Nkechi. My friend's wife who had an unsuccessful IVF almost went berserk."

There was no panic in her voice. "That's true. The failure of assisted reproduction technology on some women can be devastating. That is why couples are usually counselled, to prepare them to face the uncertainty and disappointment related to a failed IVF cycle. But I feel very positive that I am going to be among the successful ones."

"I pray so."

"Since Mommy is going to pay for this, we should save up for the next one, because couples are advised to prepare for at least two cycles to achieve success. I am really positive about this."

"Woman, you have suddenly become a professor of IVF."

"I would have suggested this to you a long time ago. I was misled by a sermon I heard from a pastor. I was secretly saving for it and my older sister sent me part of the money. But the preacher made me change my mind. "

"You and your legion of pastors..."

"I am sure that the money I have spent at these fake churches and other places, would have covered the cost of two or more IVFs."

"You learnt some lessons out of it. Having faith is not being dumb."

"Thank you. Oya stand up, let us go and tell Mommy our decision."

"Haba, not so fast."

"What else are we doing?"

"At least one more helping," his voice came urgently.

Nkechi tittered. "Bros Oliver Twist."

“We both are. Tell me you don’t want it too.”

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For two weeks, Shola and Nkechi searched the internet for all the information they could gather on IVF. They also researched clinics and eventually decided to use Tiny Tots Fertility Clinic at Ikeja. Shola had spoken to Emma Nelson, his colleague at the office. Emma, and his wife Vivian, invited the Shokunbi couple to their home for dinner. They gave them all the encouragement and told them what to expect during the treatment.

The highlight of the meeting was when they met the Nelsons’ twins. Peter and Paul wandered in, and their nanny, who was surprised to find them in the sitting room, began to chase after them. The toddlers giggled and enjoyed the chase.

“What are their names?” Nkechi inquired.

“Peter and Paul,” Vivian replied.

“How old are they?” Nkechi probed further.

“Eighteen months next month,” Vivian answered.

“And they are this big?” Shola chipped in.

“They can eat o, and they are very energetic too,” Emma replied.

The adults laughed. Shola could see the IVF babies were normal children, healthy and without any deformity. His doubts about IVF fizzled out as he watched Peter and Paul running around the sitting room.

Nkechi’s challenge was with injecting herself to stimulate her follicles. It was the part she did not enjoy. For someone with a phobia for needles, Nkechi did not see herself doing it. The nurse had been blunt with her. There was no other way, it was the doctor’s orders. Thankfully Shola stepped in to help.

She was examined after two weeks and the doctor proclaimed her ready for egg retrieval. At the beginning of the procedure, Nkechi was given an anaesthetic through IV to numb the pain.

In the next room, Shola watched a needle pass through his wife’s pubis under an ultrasound guidance to get to the ovary and follicles. The doctor explained what was happening on the screen to him.

“You can see the fluid in the follicles as they are aspirated through the needle and the eggs detached from the follicle wall.”

Shola nodded. He tried hard to understand what the doctor was saying.

“What happens after this?” he asked.

“The fluid with the eggs will be passed to the IVF lab where the eggs are identified, rinsed in culture media and placed in small drops in plastic culture dishes. The dishes with the eggs are then kept downstairs in specialised IVF incubators under strictly controlled environmental conditions.”

The procedure was done in twenty minutes. Nkechi was taken to another room to change. Thirty minutes later, they were facing Dr Charles Obadiah.

“Madam, how are you doing?” he asked smiling.

“I am doing great,” Nkechi replied.

“How many eggs were you able to get, doctor?” Shola asked.

“I am sure by the time you leave here, Mr Shola, you will be an IVF expert.” They all laughed. “We got eight good eggs. That is great. You know, age affects egg retrieval. Younger women give more eggs than older women. Your wife is still young so we were able to get many healthy ones.” Shola held Nkechi’s hand. “Since we already got your sperm earlier, what will happen now, is that your sperm will be injected into her eggs and then we will take it up from there.”

They had a few more minutes of chit chat with the doctor. They were to return three days later for the implantation of the eggs into the uterus.

Chapter 27

She sat on the edge of the bed. He knelt on the floor in front of her.

“Tale you know I love you and would never do anything to hurt you.”

“But you hurt me.”

“I have explained what happened. I meant no harm.”

“I don’t know what to say about it.”

“I have been on my knees begging you for over an hour...”

“I didn’t ask you to kneel.”

“In the spirit of forgiveness …”

“I will have to bear the hurt my entire life. Just imagine it. I have no child for you. You gave someone else a child. How do I get consoled? How do I face your family? You know your people detest me for not having a child for you.”

“I am sorry, Tale. I love you no matter what …”

“Love? You love me and you looked at that woman with affection? Kunle I saw it all. I watched both of you giggling like teenagers.”

“That doesn’t change the fact that I love you more. Whatever we had is in the past, I told you.”

“How am I sure you guys didn’t rekindle your love?”

“I swear, nothing happened between us. I could have followed you immediately but I had to see my daughter.”

“See your daughter. She now comes first!”

The words “my daughter” pierced her heart, she had always thought that she would be the one to bear all his children. Now she was not even sure she would still have his child. She was so angry that she did not know when she blurted out those words. She looked at him with disgust.

“Tale, please! I hate to see you this way. I am very sorry, my love,” Kunle said. He inched closer.

“You love me and you look at another woman that way? You love me and both of you giggled like lovers? You love me and you lied about your whereabouts.”

Kunle tried to touch her. “Don’t come near me. Please don’t!” she shrieked. He froze. She shrank further away from him.

“I will remain here on my knees until you forgive me.”

She stood from the bed, picked her scarf and went into the bathroom. Tale looked at herself in the mirror. She saw the face of a stranger, etched with lines of worry and dotted with pimples. A once beautiful face. She tied her scarf and wiped her tears. She thought of applying powder, and then thought otherwise. Instead, she splashed water on her face and went back into the room. Kunle was seated on the bed. She picked her bible and car keys.

“Where are you going?”

She did not answer. From the window, Kunle watched Tale drive out of the compound. It was late in the day, but he knew she was going to the church. She was going to talk to their pastor. Tale had been a faithful churchgoer despite their challenges of childlessness.

A few times though, she had followed her friend, Onome, to strange places. But Tale found her way back to God. She always went back for repentance and never kept anything from him. He felt bad. He was the bad person in the equation. He had lied to her many times. He had cheated on her countless times. Grace was not the first woman to be pregnant for him, but only she had been obstinate.

Kunle loved Tale and never wanted to hurt her. His father and mother had pushed him to get somebody pregnant. Each time it happened, his courage failed him. How could he face Tale with such a shameful confession? He did not want to hurt her. Getting the other women to abort their pregnancies was the lesser evil.

He caused Tale’s predicament, and the guilt was eating him up. She had wanted to keep the pregnancy, but he bullied her into submission. Now that they found themselves in a quagmire, he had sorted himself out, and she was stranded. He knew it was selfish.

But his guilt was tempered by a new joy. He had tasted the joy that comes with having a child. Pure ecstasy! Kunle was filled with joy the moment he set eyes on Omotayo. She was a spitting image of her mother. He was grateful that Grace did not get rid of the pregnancy like he had insisted.

His mind went back to what happened in the hotel room. He was ashamed. Tale had been right, he had had sex with Grace again. Despite the conflicting emotions he had at the time, he still slept with her. It had been so beautiful but he knew it was not right. A few hours after the romp, they had another one. Grace was hesitant but he could not get enough of her.

Kunle felt guilty and he knew he would never tell his wife. But he knew he had to pacify her, maybe he would buy her a new car or buy her a house. He needed to make his wife happy again. It was very important.

He was done with Grace and would not have anything to do with her other than Omotayo. The die was cast. He had to face the difficult decisions ahead. He had started arrangements to be financially responsible for his daughter. He had to break the news to his parents and siblings about his daughter. Yet he had to protect Tale, he could not afford to hurt her any further.

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Tale drove herself to church crying. She felt horrible and did not know where else to go. She resented Kunle and felt like snuffing the life out of him. Twice she had been tempted to buy and put poison in his meal, luckily she could not find it at the shop. Another time, she had tried to stab him while he was asleep but she could not muster the courage to do so. Even while he was down on his knees, she felt like taking his gun from his safe and shooting him. Tale hated her husband. She did not understand how she could love someone one minute and want to kill him in the next. She knew she had to speak to someone quickly. She needed some spiritual guidance now and her pastor would be of great help.

Tale and her husband had been attending Jesus Holy Palace Church for two years. They joined the church when they attended their friend's baby's dedication. Her friend had a baby in the church after a delay of five years. Tale had heard numerous testimonies about miracle babies in that church.

When they joined the church, her friend had introduced her to Pastor Timothy. Tale became friends with his wife and would visit them often. She always confided in the pastor about her fears about her barrenness and he would always encourage her. Twice, he had travelled to Israel and bought special anointing oil for her to rub on her belly every night before making love to her husband.

Pastor TJ, as he was fondly called by the church members, was a very fashionable pastor and loved by all. His afro was full. His suits were always well-tailored, he wore Italian shoes and costly watches. Pastor TJ was a modern pastor. He was active on social media and always posted pictures that showed his affluence and miracle babies. He loved Instagram and made the most use of it by taking many selfies.

The pastor was about to go home when she came in. He looked at her once and was afraid for her. He held her hands and led her to his office. There was nobody else in the Pastor's office, aside the two of them.

"Sister Tale, are you alright?"

"No, Pastor."

She narrated all that happened to him, crying profusely. The pastor gave her his handkerchief to clean her face but the tears kept flowing.

“Pastor, I am tired of my marriage. I can’t live with him anymore.”

“Sister Tale, God hates divorce. You can’t leave him.”

“What should I do?”

The pastor held her close to his side. Tale felt uncomfortable but she was troubled and needed comforting. She shrugged her inhibitions aside.

“Don’t cry, Sister Thompson. The Lord will sort it out and it will end in praise,” the pastor said, stroking her hair.

“But why has God forsaken me?” She cried hysterically.

It took a few minutes before it registered in her consciousness - the pastor held her in a warm embrace, his hand stroking the lines of her bra. Tale pulled herself together and moved away from the pastor and he tried to pull her closer.

“Sir, I don’t understand what you are doing,” she said in surprise.

“Come off it, Sister Tale, you are very beautifully and wonderfully made.” His breath had become heavy.

“Meaning sir?”

“That I have always loved you. I can help, you know? My wife has five healthy children, three boys and two girls.”

“*Ișe* èșù *rè é o*,” Tale jerked upright and scampered like a frightened mouse towards the door.

“Sister Tale, I only want to assist your husband. You see, as a man of God, my blood goes with any woman. I have anointing sister,” he said huskily.

“Pastor, but I know Mommy very well. She is like a mother to me. I can’t do this with you, not with the kind of anointing you carry.”

“Leave that jàre. I will ask for mercy. God will forgive us. Remember David was a man after God’s heart,” he took a step toward her.

“Please don’t come any closer,” she stopped him from advancing with her outstretched hand.

“Just this once and you will have your miracle baby. I am prophesying.”

The lust in his eyes alarmed her. *Could it be that all the women who got pregnant in this church were impregnated by the pastor?* Tale thought to herself while she kept her gaze on him.

“C’mon, take a step of faith. You are not the first woman in this church ...”

The last statement galvanised her. She turned around and dashed out of the office.

Chapter 28

Tunde and Yeni waited anxiously for the results of the tests.

“Tunde, I’m afraid. Could it be the spirit husband tormenting me physically this time?” Yeni asked in a low voice.

“But you have stopped seeing him in your dreams, àbí?”

“Yes, I don’t see him anymore. But you know he is a spirit, he might want revenge.”

“I don’t think so. We have overcome that phase. It won’t re-occur.”

“Then what is wrong with me, ehn? I’m really scared,” Yeni said, holding her husband’s hand. Tunde felt her tremble.

This new problem had been troubling them for weeks. She had been vomiting several times in a day. Every day, she felt exhausted, like she was hit by a ton of bricks. There was also a migraine making her life miserable. She had never been this seriously ill in her adult life.

She had refused her husband’s suggestion of going to the hospital. She had a secret fear that she would be diagnosed of a terminal illness. When Tunde had asked her if she was pregnant, Yeni had laughed it off. She was on her period. Besides, this was not the first time she would be pregnant. She usually did not feel this horrible. Yeni felt the vomit stuck in the back of her throat. She could not swallow it. She tried all day to get it out. She was practically living in the toilet, throwing up, head buried in the toilet bowl.

She stopped eating and surprisingly did not lose weight. But the illness was taking a toll on her output at the office. Lest she embarrass herself further, she had taken a three-day sick leave.

Everything came to a head when she fainted earlier that morning, while knotting Tunde's tie, after throwing up everything in her stomach. She just slumped against him and went down like a sack. It took Tunde five minutes to bring her around. Immediately, he had carried her into his car and driven to the hospital.

Now he held his wife and smiled lovingly at her. A few minutes later, a doctor walked in smiling.

"Congratulations Mr and Mrs Dehinde."

They both looked at him, confused.

"Madam, you're ten weeks pregnant."

"Pregnant *kẹ̀*? But I'm on my period," she answered, looking at husband.

"That is what the test says. After running some initial tests, we couldn't find anything. So I instructed them to run a pregnancy test, and it was done twice."

"My wife is pregnant?"

"Yes, she is. I have asked the laboratory to expect you for an ultrasound. I will see you afterwards." He said before turning his attention to a nurse who appeared with a file. They walked away to another ward.

"Thank you Jesus!" Tunde went on his knees, waving his hands. Yeni looked on blankly.

"Darling, why do you look so sad? You should be happy."

She sighed. "I'm just afraid. I do not have a problem getting pregnant. I have been pregnant many times ..."

"I understand, but this one will come to full term." Tunde assured her.

She was close to tears. "I don't want to raise my hopes."

He took her into his embrace muttering, "It shall be well."

The ultrasound discovered two heartbeats.

"These babies will surely grow to full term in Jesus' name!" Kunle could not contain his joy.

"Amen," Yeni said smiling and crying at the same time.

"However, Madam," the doctor said. "Based on your medical history, we will be performing a cerclage."

"What does that mean, Doctor?" Yeni asked, suddenly anxious.

"This pregnancy is high risk. We will be giving you a treatment for cervical incompetence. It's a surgical procedure in which the cervix is stitched closed during pregnancy."

"What is that for?"

“To prevent miscarriages.”

“What happens when she is about to put to bed?” asked Tunde.

“We will remove the stitches, a minor surgery and we are done.”

“How soon can we have it done?” Yeni asked.

“The embryos are ten weeks old. We are on track. Come within the next few weeks.”

Chapter 29

Lolo was busy washing clothes in the bathroom when Nkechi walked in. It had been two months since she last visited her mother. The last time she saw her was when she helped her to pack her belongings back to her matrimonial home.

“Mama, haven’t you finished?”

“I am almost done, Nkechi.”

Her mother raised her head and remembered there was something she wanted to discuss with her.

“Nkechi, this IVF you are talking about, is it not the same one Mama Ebuka did? She told us she was pregnant, we didn’t even understand it. Sometimes it will come up and sometimes the pregnancy will come down. Then one day she called that she had put to bed. I called her over and over again to visit her at the hospital but she didn’t let me o! Three days later, she brought Ebuka home.”

Nkechi laughed hard and replied her mom. “Mom, I don’t know what you are talking about. Mama Ebuka probably went to adopt that child and then

pretended that she had him naturally. When I get pregnant, I will show you my belly. Mine won't go off and on like Mama Ebuka's pregnancy."

Lolo nodded, wiping the soap suds on her hand with her wrapper. "Okay, I have heard you. As your mother, I have to tell you the truth always." She continued her narrative. "A week after her phoney delivery, Mama Ebuka was wearing jeans and flying about. Everybody got talking. I'm sure she must have heard too, because after a while, she moved from Onitsha to Owerri. *Biko*, I don't want people talking about my own daughter like that. So open your eyes. Don't let people deceive you."

"Mama, this is science. No be juju. No one is deceiving me. The hospital is duly registered by the government. There is no mago mago. You see, all the injections helped me produce more eggs and afterwards it was injected with my husband's sperm. After some days, they will put it back into my womb."

"Ehn, it is like what your elder sister was saying you should come and do in America then."

"Exactly, Mama. I didn't have money back then and I wasn't so enlightened about it."

"I heard it's very expensive." She bent down to turn on the tap and began rinsing her clothes.

"Very expensive."

"So how did you now get the money?"

"My mother-in-law paid for it."

"You told her about it? *Ewooo!*" she screamed and stopped washing. "Have you forgotten what the prophet said about her?"

"No, Mama. She was the one who suggested it."

"You are too trusting Nkechi, just because she speaks English, you think she's not possessed by witchcraft?"

"Mama, she is not a witch. Your prophet is fake. Have you heard what happened to him recently?"

"What happened?"

"It was reported in City People that a girl said the prophet paid for a hotel room for her, where he visits her to sleep with her."

"I heard about that Glory John girl. She be liar. You don't know all these bad, demonic girls out there."

"Mama, the prophet knows the girl. He didn't deny that. Some of the hotel staff said they saw the prophet come to that hotel every night when he was in town."

“That girl is an *ogbanje*. She was sent by mammy water to destroy his works. She seduced him. She is evil.”

This was the official defence the prophet tendered in his church. He had denied it vehemently and all his followers believed him. No one questioned him. Nkechi was not done with her mother.

“Even if he was seduced, he should tell his church the truth. He should confess and leave the pulpit for some time. Instead he is busy denying it. I have seen the video. Their recorded conversation is now on every phone. That girl is not lying. She is saying the truth.”

“How can he come clean when he didn’t do it? They set the man of God up. We know this plan is from the kingdom of darkness and light will surely overcome.”

“Men of God should admit when they have done wrong,” Nkechi insisted.

“Whether he was seduced or not, the fact remains that he is human and can fall like every other human being. You think it’s easy with all these girls from the queen of the coast, frequenting the church like they came to seek God?”

“But he preached this, Mama, all the time, so he should be above this …”

“There is no one who cannot fall into sin. The most important thing is acknowledging you are a sinner and repenting.”

“You are right. Confession and repentance are very important. But I doubt he is genuine. That girl is not the first girl. I think you should stop going there, the man is too controversial.”

“I have heard you,” Lolo said sarcastically. She started squeezing her clothes and putting them in a bucket.

“Mama, I mean it o …”

“I said I have heard you! Stop telling people about it anyway. There are many bad people all around us.”

“I won’t tell anyone.”

“Stop visiting your mother-in-law too, so she won’t be giving you poison.”

“Mama that is enough! Somebody gave me money for IVF. You are calling her a witch. I like her type of witchcraft o!”

“Nkechi, since when have I become an object of mockery to you?”

“I wasn’t mocking …”

“I wasn’t born yesterday.”

“Mama, what if Shola comes and say you are a witch, would you like it?”

“Okay, *ndo*. I withdraw my statement. *Ndo nu. Biko*, don’t be angry. Your mother-in-law is not a witch again because she has given you money o! Let me

go and spread these clothes outside."

Chapter 30

Her last encounter with Pastor Timothy had shaken her to her marrow. It destroyed the last ounce of faith she had in God. After driving like a maniac back to her house, she had walked in solemnly into their bedroom. Tale felt used, useless and helpless. As soon as Kunle saw her, he resumed his plea.

"Stop disturbing me with Boy Scout begging," she snapped at him before she locked herself in the toilet.

He had expected her to return from church mollified. She sat in the toilet for over an hour. Kunle knocked and pretended he wanted to use the amenity.

"Go use the other room's!" she yelled from inside.

I must be dreaming. Maybe the encounter with the pastor never happened. Her phone beeped, it was a message from Pastor Timothy.

Think over it tonight. Let the Holy Spirit guide you. Don't miss this opportunity.

"So, where do I run to now, if the church fails me?" she said aloud.

Kunle who just came from the visitor's room heard her. He placed his left ear against the keyhole.

"Tale, are you alright?"

"Yes, I am okay!" She snapped back at him.

"Are you sure? Because you look terrible and …"

"This man, leave me!" she hollered at him.

Kunle reluctantly left the room. He felt so bad that he caused his wife's hurt. He did not know Tale would hurt this badly and he regretted his actions.

Before she came out of the toilet, she purged herself of all bile and resentment. *It is not in God's hands. Our fate is in our hands.* Tale had made her decision.

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Tale arrived alone at the address Onome's aunt had given her. Onome had planned to come along with her, but at the last minute, an order from a new client in Owerri came in. She had to change her plans.

Ireakari Street at Idimu, a suburb in Lagos, was a long bumpy road dangerously warped by erosion. No. 65 was located at the end of the road. It was a hidden house, surrounded by bushes and uncompleted buildings.

Time and seasons had done great injustice to the once beautiful mansion. Tale could not tell what colour it had been painted originally. She could see patches of blue, orange and even pink on the walls. The corridor was stuffy and poorly illuminated. The paint on the walls inside the house was fresh, some kind of renovation was going on in the building. The photos of babies on the walls were old and of poor quality.

She walked through the corridor and saw other women seated. Some were busy chatting. Others stared at the television. The women were well-dressed. They did not look poor. They were middle-aged—early and late forties. A few looked to be in their fifties.

She muttered greetings to those who smiled at her as she walked to the reception. The receptionist gave her forms to fill and ushered her to a seat. Tale picked the nearest seat beside a woman who had smiled at her earlier. She was pregnant. Tale wondered what she was doing there.

"Good afternoon, Madam."

Tale replied her greeting.

"This is your first time here, right?"

"Yes," she answered.

"I also felt this way when I first came here, don't worry, you will be fine."

"Thank you. You are pregnant already, what are you still doing here?"

"I came for antenatal."

"This place runs like a hospital?"

“Yes, I have exhausted my medication, so I came for more. Besides, I need to speak to the doctor about some other things.”

“Oh, I see. It means you stay around right?”

“No, I came from Lekki this morning. I don’t stay around here.”

“Why couldn’t you use a hospital near you?”

She laughed. “They will give you all the rules. The most important thing is that you get pregnant first.”

“Is it true that everyone who comes here gets pregnant?”

“Yes, that is true. This place is very effective. They use only herbs. If only I knew, I wouldn’t have waited twelve years before getting pregnant.”

“Mine is fifteen years now. I have tried all means. In fact, if I don’t get what I want here, I don’t think I will try again.”

“Don’t worry. Everything will turn out fine. Just speak to Nma. She will help you get whatever you want. Nma’s herbs work wonders. If you want a boy, she has herbs for boys. If it’s a girl you desire, she has herbs for girls, and even if you want a set of twins, you will get them. The only problem is Nma loves money.”

“Money is the least of my problems. My friend’s aunt who told me about this place already told me how expensive it is. But I don’t care really. All I want is a child.”

“I know you don’t care, but I will advise you to go to the bathroom and remove your gold earrings and pendant. Nma doesn’t see rich people and not charge a fortune.”

Tale smiled. She knew the woman was very rich. She could tell by her glowing skin. Now she understood why the woman was not well dressed. She had doubted her initially when she said she came from Lekki, but when she saw her skin, Prada bag and Gucci slippers, she knew it was not a lie. She was wealthy, she just did not flaunt it.

After they exchanged phone numbers, Tale’s new friend went in to see the doctor. She went to remove her jewellery in the restroom like she was told. After a while, she heard the receptionist call her name. She sighed and went inside.

Chapter 31

Kunle's phone rang twice while he was watching Tinsel with his wife in their sitting room, and he did not pick it. Tale had been watching the soap opera religiously for eight years. She loved it and he was forced to watch it each time he came home early. When the going was good, when he arrived home, she would excitedly summarise what had happened, but now she did not care. She just sat there like an ice queen. Kunle's phone rang again, it was Grace. He dared not speak to her in his wife's presence. Tale studied him with a predator's unwavering attention. He pretended he was watching the drama, but he could feel her eyes piercing through him.

The atmosphere had been tense ever since their visit to Abuja, and he did not want to make things worse by speaking to Grace. He waited a while. He prayed she would not call again. He was so nervous that if Tale had moved closer, she would have seen his hand twitching. Kunle was not afraid of his wife, but he did not want to arouse her suspicion further. He was still trying to get her love back. Tale had become cold towards him. Kunle wanted the eighteen-year old he had met at the university's art department again. The exciting Tale. The bubbling damsel. The girl with no secrets. Tale who saw the world through his eyes. But the Tale he was seated with was different from all that. It was like he was in a room with a stranger. The fear of losing her loomed in his heart and this made him sad.

The credits began to roll on the television screen and so Kunle picked his car keys and told his wife he was going to see a friend. Tale did not say a word. It hurt him deeply when she treated him like he did not exist.

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It was a few minutes past seven and it was already getting dark. Murphy Ojemba and Sean Amadi were on Brilla FM talking sports and arguing over some non-sports related issue. Kunle loved the duo and enjoyed their banter. He wished he could listen to their conversation but Grace called again. A few metres away from his home, he parked his car, turned down the radio and picked the call.

"I am pregnant!"

The words hit him like a bomb. He tried to speak but his words did not take flight from his mouth. His palms became sweaty and his phone almost fell from his hands.

"Hello, Kunle are you still there?'

"Yes, I am. What do you intend to do about it?" he asked.

"I am going to keep it." She answered firmly.

"How many months old?" Kunle wiped sweat from his forehead.

"Four months."

"My wife is two months gone already, too," he did not know why he said that but the words tumbled from his lips.

"Oh, she is pregnant, too?" Disappointment was loud in her silence.

"That pregnancy is the saving grace for what happened between us. She didn't even speak to me until she was confirmed pregnant, and now this?" Kunle said, dejected.

"Honestly, I didn't want this to happen," Grace replied.

Kunle could see a plot to tie him down. Grace had thought his wife would never be pregnant. She desperately wanted him. She lured him and he fell cheaply.

"And you didn't tell me all this while? It's obvious you are bent on wrecking my marriage," he blurted angrily.

"Don't start that! How ungracious of you. We both had unprotected sex, both of us are adults. So let us face the consequences."

"What a woman! Yes, we had unprotected sex. But shouldn't you have taken care of yourself? I shouldn't have to tell you that."

"I wasn't wrong after all. I suspected that you are still trapped in adolescence. Now you just confirmed it. This is the same way you reacted years back."

"I am saying you could have handled it better."

“I tried. Believe me, I don’t know what happened. I didn’t mean for this to happen …”

“I think you had it planned. It’s a pity I fell for it. You manipulated me because you knew my wife couldn’t have a child.”

“I should have known you can never change. You are always running away from your problems. Are you afraid of her? Let me know what your fears are. Will she flog you? Are you not the man?” she taunted him.

“Watch your tongue!” he yelled into the phone.

“Man, take note, I am no longer that woman you made miserable the last time.”

Kunle sighed. Despite the air-conditioning in the car, droplets of sweat began to run down his face. He found a handkerchief and cleaned his face. He knew he was in a big mess. Grace continued while he listened.

He was gradually becoming his father. Aside his oldest brother, no one had two wives among his brothers. He was ashamed of what he did and the fact that he had not used protection. It had been a while since he last saw Grace, and he missed her. It had not been his intention, nor was it his fault. Tale caused it all. If only she had not come to Abuja, he would not have been in emotional distress. Had she listened to his pleas, he would not have become an easy prey for Grace when she walked into his room in those bum shorts. He still remembered what she smelt like that night—her moans, the multiple orgasms. No woman made him feel that way, not even Tale.

“Are you still there, Kunle?”

Kunle heard her but did not say anything.

“Your son is on the way!”

The words cut through him like a knife. He did not know if he should be happy or sad.

“Let me think straight, woman!”

“You better think o! After all, your people say that a woman who has given a man more than a child is no longer a mistress.”

“I see. This is what all this is about? You want to be my second wife?”

“Am I not good enough to be Mrs Thompson too?”

“I mean a second wife?”

“A wife is a wife. My people told me to call you to come and do the right things.”

“You obviously forgot to tell them we are not even in a relationship. How can your people ask me to come and do the right thing?”

“I don’t understand what you are driving at …”

“Grace, I cannot marry you. I will take good care of you and our children,” he said flatly.

She began to cry. “I knew you can never love me like you love her. I know I am only good …”

He ended the call. Bad news is not wine, it does not taste better. He made up his mind on how he would solve this new complication. Send Grace and her two children to America permanently.

He was going to his grave with this secret.

Chapter 32

Nkechi and Shola were excited when the doctor told them there was a heartbeat during the scan. They shed tears, hugged and kissed unabashedly while the doctor watched.

“Doctor, what do we do after this?” Shola asked eagerly.

“Well, go back to your gynaecologist. If you don’t have one, we can refer you to good hospitals.”

“I feel very safe here,” Nkechi said.

“This is where our job ends,” said the doctor. “We have a list of very good hospitals if you don’t mind.”

“Okay. We have a very good hospital,” Nkechi said looking at her husband. Shola nodded in affirmation.

“Congratulations once again, but Madam, you need to take things easy now. Sir, you need to watch Madam more and help out sometimes.”

“I am getting her a maid right away,” Shola boasted.

Shola was driving straight to his mom to inform her. Nkechi thought about her mother’s warnings and became afraid. She was not sure what she should do now. Could her mother be right about her mother-in-law’s pretence? Was her mother-in-law really a witch, and only gave her money so she would not be suspicious of her? How would she persuade Shola to cancel the trip? If she did, he would put two and two together. It would hurt him, but Nkechi knew she wanted to protect her pregnancy from every evil force.

“Shola, can we get home first before we go to Mommy’s place?”

“I thought we both agreed to …”

“Yes, I know but I bought something special for her and I would like to give it to her.”

“That is you women’s business. You can give her later …”

“No, it is more appropriate to do so now.”

Reluctantly, Shola made a U-turn and they headed home. As they drove home, Nkechi wondered what she was going to tell Shola afterwards.

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“Mommy! Good news!” Shola exulted.

“What is it? His mother asked, a bit alarmed.

“Nkechi is pregnant.”

“Oh my goodness! Our God is good! Come here!”

She stretched her arms out to Nkechi. Nkechi moved closer into a warm hug. It felt so good to be in her mother-in-law’s embrace. She knew she made the right decision in that moment, no matter her mother’s feelings. Her mother-in-law was a good woman. In her warm embrace, she felt at peace. It was only right for them to tell her it was a success. The woman had sacrificed a lot for them. Nkechi tried to hide her tears.

“Nkechi, I think I need to move in with you now, because I will have to help you with all your chores,” she said smiling.

“I will be fine,” Nkechi replied, still breathless with joy.

“If you need Tonia, you can invite her to help you around the house. If you want the two of us, we are all yours. We will lock up this house and storm your place.”

“Mommy, I will be fine.”

“My grandson is very special. I’m really looking forward to meeting him soon,” the old woman said, laughing.

“Mommy, it’s going to be a girl, I guess,” Shola chipped in.

“I prefer a boy too,” Nkechi said.

“You have caught the Igbo male child syndrome. Just remember you are married to a Yoruba man,” Shola replied.

“You should understand my preference. My mom suffered so much because she didn’t have a son. I watched her cry because she didn’t have a son. She had three girls and all through her life she was always afraid of losing her husband. In Igbo culture, if you don’t have a son, you don’t have children,” Nkechi said.

“I am not particular about the gender of my grandchild. All I pray for is a safe delivery and a healthy baby,” said Mommy.

“Amen!” Shola and Nkechi said in unison.

Nkechi’s phone rang. Her mother was calling but she did not want to pick her mother’s call in their presence. She excused herself and walked downstairs. She had not spoken to Lolo since their last fight.

“Hello, *Nne*?”

“Hello Mama, how are you?”

“I’m fine. Nkechi, why haven’t you called me? I’ve called you times without number, you didn’t pick my calls.”

“Okay ma …”

“Nkechi, why are you so stubborn like your father? Of all my children, you are the most difficult.”

“Mama, what is this all about now? They say I am more like you, not like Papa.”

“Oh, you are saying I am a difficult person, *ba*? You see why I said you are like your father? All others listen to me, it’s only you who keeps questioning me like I want to harm you.”

“Mama I am not saying you are difficult, but I think father turned that way because you kept pushing him.”

“*Ewooo*! I pray the world will not turn you against me o!”

“Amen. Mama, nobody is turning me against you. I will come around when I have the time.”

“Did I hear you right? You will come around when you have the time?”

“Yes, ma.”

“You didn’t mean that. It’s me, Lolo, your mother, who you are speaking

to in such a manner? See what all these Yoruba people have turned you into?"

"Am I the only Igbo person who married a Yoruba man? That's your problem, Mama. You are very tribalistic."

"Nkechi, when a child decides to turn against her mother …"

"I will call you later." She ended the call.

"Who was that?" Shola asked.

"My mother," she said with a frown.

"Why were you so angry with her?"

"We had an argument," she said.

Shola's phone rang. He looked at the screen and then raised his eyes calmly. "Your mom, Nkechi."

"I have spoken with her already," she said firmly.

Shola could read from his wife's expression that she was not willing to speak with her mother. He put the phone on silent mode as it continued to ring.

They were at the door when Shola's mom called in a stern voice.

"Oga, be careful with her. You know what I mean?"

Shola shook his head. "I don't know."

"Okay, *Boda*, let me spell it out for you."

Nkechi knew what was coming. She blushed.

"The last time you were here in your old room, you almost gave me a headache with those loud thuds. Now, she is delicate. She has to be handled with care. Is that taken? No vigorous bedroom exercise."

"Sure mom."

She turned to Nkechi. "My daughter, if he is pestering you, just call me, and I will move you here."

Nkechi nodded and kept her eyed averted, to the amusement of Shola.

Chapter 33

She sat alone by the seashore, watching the waves roll with rage, rising and splashing against the shore, sending white froth racing on the beach. A cool breeze blew and bent the palm trees. Nature was in harmony. Yeni was at peace with the serene atmosphere even though there was not a single human in sight. She noticed an eagle soaring in the sky. At times, it hovered directly above her, and then flew higher again.

A hut in the distance drew her attention, compelling her to walk towards it. She strolled along the beach, oblivious to the shells and cowries that littered the beach and the small crabs that ran crazily on the white sands. Yeni had eyes only for the hut.

She reached it and peered inside. She gasped with surprise. It was her familiar haunt. She was shocked at how beautifully decorated the interior was. The bed was still there. So was the chest where the stranger kept the cowries. She saw three unkempt kids inside: a one-year-old girl crawling with a running nose, a girl with no clothes on, and an older boy who wore no shirt and had sand in his hair. The infant began to cry and Yeni tried to carry the child but she could not move an inch. She beckoned but the child ignored her. She stretched her arms again and felt an invisible barrier. The baby's whining became intense. The two other children crept into a corner and watched her with trepidation. Yeni stood helpless. A beautiful woman walked in and the children gravitated towards her. Surprisingly, there was no barrier between her and the kids. She picked the infant and held her to her bosom.

"What have you come to do here?" she challenged.

"I noticed this hut so I decided to explore it."

"You noticed this hut, your house?" she sneered.

"My house? Who are you?"

"Call me Mother."

"Mother? Are these your children?"

"They are my grandchildren. Your children! You left us. Why did you come back?"

“I don’t have any child, and why do you blame me for leaving you?”

“Stop the pretence! You betrayed us all and went to the other side.”

Yeni watched her eyes as she spoke, she had sadness in them. Yeni did not know what to make of it. What betrayal was she talking about?

“You are betrothed to my son! He loved you with his whole life but you left him for the other side. Anyway, we have started scouting for a new wife for him.” She picked up the toddler and started pacifying her.

That moment, the stranger walked in.

He was aghast. “Oh! Yeni you are back!”

Gleefully, he glided towards her, arms outstretched to embrace her. A force threw him back violently and he staggered. The woman shouted angrily at him.

“I have warned you to let her go! She’s no longer one of us.”

“But mother, I still love her.”

“She is different now.”

The stranger turned to her. “Yeni, please come back to us.”

“No, I don’t belong here!”

She quickened her steps out of the accursed hut. Suddenly, she felt herself soaring, on the wings of the eagle she saw earlier.

Her husband’s voice came through. She found herself clutching the pillow when she came to.

“I have been dreaming,” she said lazily.

“Another dream? I hope it’s not about the stranger?”

“I saw him but this time I told him no and I flew on the wings of an eagle.”

“An eagle? Hallelujah! It’s over.” Tunde was already dressed. “You are having the cerclage today, have you forgotten?”

“No, I remember.”

“Our appointment is for 9 a.m. We have an hour and a half to get there.”

As Yeni got ready, Tunde whistled about the house, glad that their troubles were finally over. Now his wife was his and his alone.

Chapter 34

Tale sat on the bed, busy sorting out the baby clothes her friend sent to her from America. Her husband was checking the bedside drawers for something, she was not interested in asking him what it was. Her mother had warned her about buying too many clothes the babies might not get to wear before they outgrew them, but Tale did not listen to her. Ever since she broke the news of her pregnancy to her parents, her relationship with her mother had improved robustly. She visited every weekend and came with cooked meals. Her mother was excited about the babies, and Tale never mentioned Kunle's love child to her parents. She would tell them eventually, she just did not want them to change their attitude towards him. Onome told her she was foolish to protect her husband. "Families should not be exempted from such secrets," she told her. Tale would not budge.

Her back ached. She changed her sitting position. She was in her fifth month, and the many mysteries of the pregnancy baffled her. Her stomach was not as protruded as it had been two weeks ago. Sometimes her stomach would bulge out like a regular pregnant woman's, and other times, it would shrink. The first time she noticed this and called Nma, she told her it was a normal occurrence with traditional IVF babies. She said the babies sometimes crawled to the back or stayed by the side. Tale had never heard of such before, but she believed Nma. They were her miracle babies and so they were unusual.

Kunle, pretending to be busy on his phone, flashed a quick look at her. For a brief moment, their eyes met. Kunle did not see any reproach in hers before he lowered his gaze. A good sign, he said to himself. The ice between them seemed to have thawed.

"How is Omotayo?"

The question jolted him. He almost froze. He did not even know she knew her name.

"How is Omotayo doing?" Tale asked again, her back to him.

“She is fine.”

“You are surprised I asked about her.”

Kunle did not respond. The question baffled him. Their feud had become a cold war that lingered for months, Tale had never said a word to him about his love child. She had harped more on his betrayal in sleeping with another woman. Whenever he tried to bring up the issue of the child for discussion, she would shut him down, as if it was a taboo subject. “I am not interested,” she would often say.

“Yes, I am surprised you asked after her,” Kunle said frankly in a calm voice.

“I have realised I have no choice. After all, her younger ones are on the way. Take care of her very well o, don’t use me as an excuse to abdicate your responsibility to the girl.”

She took some clothes outside. Kunle was ecstatic. This was the second happiest day of his life in the last six months. The first was the day Tale broke the news to him that she was pregnant. She had come in late in the evening while he was watching a La Liga match between Barcelona and Celta Vigo, an unfinished pack of fried rice and chicken on the table.

“I am pregnant, four weeks old. I feel you have the right to know,” she summarily announced, turned and headed into the room.

In a flash, Kunle leapt out of the chair and, without minding her protests, hugged and kissed her, thrown into ecstasy. Tale, who could not handle the outpour of emotion, broke into tears and in between sobs, divulged that she was carrying twins.

Kunle broke down in tears too, mumbling, “God forgive me, I have wronged this woman.”

The news was the truce. Since then, a semblance of normalcy returned and they managed civil conversations a few times in a day. Their life achieved some equilibrium, the friction caused by his love child gradually eased off. He was happy because he knew his wife would now be happy.

However, he had some unease about Tale’s pregnancy, even though he did not consider infidelity. Tale would never let another man get on top of her, not even in revenge for his unfaithfulness. Kunle wondered why Tale refused to see their gynaecologist. She insisted she wanted another clinic and he obliged her. He followed her there once and felt a little uncomfortable. There was an air of unorthodoxy about the clinic, but he did not complain. He wanted her to be happy.

She had changed. In many ways, she no longer seemed the guileless young woman he had known for many years. She had become unnaturally quiet, cold as ash, hardened. Almost soulless. She had become a stranger. She moved out of their bedroom and they hardly had sex. When they did, it was as if Kunle was having sex with a stranger and not his wife. Her mind was far off. She also stopped going to church. This was the most disturbing aspect. Tale had been raised on the virtues of church attendance, Christian piety and longsuffering in the face of tribulation.

Kunle met Pastor TJ at a wedding occasion once. They sat next to each other and he was surprised that the pastor did not ask about his wife, one of his fondest church members. Later, during the programme, they had time to discuss and the pastor still did not make any mention of his wife. Both men avoided mentioning her name. *Perhaps the disappointment is too much for the man of God*, he thought.

Nowadays, Kunle was a happy man, glad for the stability in his life, but still plagued by a gnawing guilt. He had slept with Grace again. And another child was on the way. There was no way his wife was going to hear about this shenanigan. And as for Grace, that scheming Delilah, there was no way he was going to succumb to her blackmail.

He had thought about ways of making amends on both sides. His wife first. Why not have the twins in America? He had debated it within himself many times. He expected her to be excited. It had always been her dream. Today was the opportunity. He heaved up his bulk and went outside where she was hanging clothes.

“Tale, I know I have wronged you a lot and I really want to make amends.”

She paused, turned around slowly to face her husband.

“Kunle, I have told you, that phase is over. Yes, you hurt me deeply, I have decided to let it go.”

“I would like you to have our babies abroad.”

“No way!” she snapped.

Her vehemence surprised him.

“I thought that has always been your dream?”

“Not now. I want to have my twins here. I don’t want to take any chances.”

“Chances? America has the best medical facilities in the world ...”

“I didn’t get pregnant by American medical expertise,” she differed viscerally, then softened. “Moreover, when I am there, I will be the only one

taking care of the two babies at the same time."

"I can buy a ticket for your mom so she can go with you..."

"My mom and I are not great friends. You know this."

"What about my mom, then?"

"That's even worse. After what I went through at her hands because I couldn't have a child, you suddenly want me to swallow all that and pretend we are best of friends?"

"Okay, Aunty Bisi nko, your mom's sister? I know both of you are close. I can get you a home so you won't have to stay with anyone."

"That would be very inappropriate while my mom is still alive. Besides, you will be spending too much. I don't want to put a strain on your finances."

The finality in her voice did not deter him.

"You know I can afford it. Think about it, anyway."

"You sound desperate to send me away. Are you thinking of bringing your baby mama home while I am away?"

"I won't talk about it again," he said, hurt and humiliated.

Tale derived no joy from needling him. It was simply the best way to discourage him from ever broaching the topic again.

****

She sat down heavily on a plastic chair and felt her heart palpitating. Motherhood was a long journey. Her mind flipped back to her first encounter with Nma. Tale was expecting to meet an elderly woman, the picture in her mind was that of a matron. But Nma was a young woman, not older than forty. Though hardly educated, she was professionally dressed, like a gynaecologist of sorts. The new friend she met in the waiting area told her Nma was a nurse. But from her encounter with her, Tale wondered if she was a nurse or a nursing assistant. Nma was calm and caring. She told Tale to lie on the bed in her office, checked her belly, and subsequently concluded that she had no fibroid.

Afterwards, Nma asked her how long she had been waiting. Tale told her. She listened patiently to Tale's tales, offering her tissue paper to wipe her tears, her face bland, devoid of emotion. She was used to women coming to her in tears.

Later on she asked, "How many children you want?"

Tale was startled.

“Yes na, you go tell me how many children you want. If na two, de medicine go different, if na one, de medicine go different, too.”

“I want twins, if it’s possible,” Tale blabbed.

“*With God all tins are possible, Madam. But you know say de price for twins dey different sha?*”

“How much is it?”

“*One baby na ₦1.5 million, if na twins, na ₦2.5 million.*”

“*I want twins, Nma but ₦2.5 too much, abeg, help me.*”

“*Pikin na God blessings. I no dey like make person dey go up and down. How much you wan pay?*”

“*Make I pay ₦2 million, Nma.*”

“*₦2 million kẹ̀? No. Pay ₦2.1 million make we end am.*”

“*Please Nma, dis money sef na borrow I go borrow am,*” Tale pleaded, playing the script like her new friend had warned her.

Nma finally agreed to two million.

“*Since you want twins, na which kind you want, twin boys or make we mix am?*” Tale had opted for a mix, both sexes.

“*No problem, but dat money small. Na because of de person wey send you come here I go take am.*”

“Thank you, Nma, kindly bear with me.”

“*If you are ready, you can pay and we go start treatment for you. Make you take my account number.*”

“Nma, I’m ready now.”

Nma laughs. “*You know say I no dey collect half payment. Your aunty tell you dat too?*”

“Yes, she did.”

“*Oya, go bank now, me I go wait for you.*”

“I am not going anywhere. I will do an online transfer here, now.”

“*You dis woman mean business o,*” Nma chuckled.

“*My eyes don see plenty. My husband now has a child outside*.”

“*No worry. Everything go dey alright. I go soon come chop your naming ceremony rice*.”

“Amen.”

Tale took Nma’s account number and did the transfer on her phone. A few minutes later, Nma confirmed payment. She commenced the treatment. She opened a clay pot and brought out two eggs, the type laid by free-range chickens. She had a small camp burner in her office. She broke the eggs, mixed them with

some herbs, fried them and gave Tale to eat.

Tale was bewildered.

"*You see, we no dey do juju here. Dis tin I mix for you na eggs and herbs. De eggs go make de eggs in your womb come alive, and de medicine wey I go give your husband you go mix am wit akamu for am. E go drink am. You too fit drink so make him no tink say you wan poison am.*"

They both laughed out loud. While Tale was eating the eggs, Nma went to sort out more herbs.

"*Madam you see, for dis place we no dey make sacrifice or use any juju. I be Christian as you see me so. Na my mama teach me dis job. My mama dey Port Harcourt, if you wan born you go see her.*"

"Are you saying I will not put to bed in Lagos?"

"*Yes na, your aunty for don tell you everytin. You see, as soon as you get belle, you go call me. Make you no use any hospital o. Dese kain children no dey show for scan. Nowhere wey you go carry your belle go, you no go see dem for scan. Dem dey hide well well. Sometimes the belle fit hide sef for your back or side, and de pikin no go show well but dat one no mean say you no get belle. E mean say de children don hide for your back.*"

"But where will I do my antenatal then?"

"*Na here now. Ṣebí you dey see pregnant women here. You go come here every month. We get our own doctors too, and even when you come from Port Harcourt, we get doctor wey go receive you for Lagos. So make you no fear.*"

"I have finished eating the eggs," she said, handing the plate to Nma.

"*If you reach house today make sure you and your husband sleep together dis night after he don drink de akamu with dat medicine. De tin no get taste sef, so even if you no tell am, he no go know.*"

"So, how do I take this one you just gave me?"

"*You don see your period already?*"

"Yes, I finished yesterday."

"*Very good, another cycle don start be that. Your menstruation na how many days cycle?*"

"Twenty-eight days."

"So you will be using it every day for the next twenty-eight days, *after den you go come tell me thank you.* But make sure you are always sleeping with Oga o. *Na dat one go make am work well well …*"

Chapter 35

Nkechi visited her mother two days after her cerclage. The last time they met was some three months back. She had purposely avoided her mother. Lolo was surprised when her daughter did not return her calls. She not only reported her to her sisters and her husband, she even called one of her uncles to speak to her. Nkechi was not angry with her. She had avoided her to save herself from unnecessary heckling. Her mother was very superstitious. The last thing she needed in her current state was negative vibes.

She met her mother sleeping on the couch, a worrying sign. It was unlike Lolo to nap in the afternoon. Nkechi observed that she had gained weight considerably and her mother looked much older.

“Mama, you are sleeping. Is everything alright?”

“I am fine. The doctor gave me some sleeping pills.”

“What for?”

“It’s my BP. It went up again. I also treated malaria.”

“Have you stopped using your anointing oil?” Nkechi asked with a mischievous smile.

“No, I still use it.”

“Mama, I have warned you about anointing oil. Even if you must drink a whole bottle, take it with your medicine.”

“Okay. What may I offer you?”

“I am fine. We are talking about you, I know you believe so much in ...”

“I made oha soup. We have akpu. But the maid is not home to help you

warm it up."

"I am okay."

"How is my grandchild doing?"

"Very fine."

Lolo continued to probe her until she told her about the cerclage.

"You mean the doctors will tie your vagina together?"

"It's not my vagina, it's my cervix."

"Which one is cervix? Will you be able to urinate?"

"Of course, I will," Nkechi said laughing.

"*Na wa o*! These doctors are trying. May God continue to bless them," she clapped her hands in prayers.

Nkechi was walking into her mother's room when she called her back.

"*Bia*, what if you start labour, that place has been stitched together, how will my grandchild come out?"

Nkechi turned back and laughed.

"They will remove the stitches a few weeks before the CS ..."

"CS *gini*? Why is that?" She explained to her mother.

"God forbid! Which one is Caesarean Section again?"

Nkechi knew Lolo abhorred a caesarean section and had once bragged to a neighbour that all her children had vaginal births. Pregnancy had been easy for her other children, and she always told anyone who cared to listen that her daughters all delivered like Hebrew women.

She watched her mom walk into the kitchen. Her gait wonky due to arthritis, she was getting older and her long strands of black hair had turned to big patches of limp grey. She noticed her forehead was getting wrinkled as well. Beneath the veneer of a frail appearance and gentle expression, was a strong character and a streak of stubbornness. Nkechi felt a pang of distress. She wished she could pull off the mask of old age from her mother. So, that she could have the young Lolo back. But that would not happen because she knew this phase was a debt every one owed. A phase some wished they would attain but never did. She was glad she still had her mom around.

Lolo picked a plastic bowl containing Oha soup from the freezer and put it in the microwave. As the microwave continued beeping, Nkechi's mind travelled to her first scan at the hospital.

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They had arrived at the hospital to meet everywhere taken over by pregnant women. The receptionist informed her that Wednesday was for the antenatal clinic. While Shola got busy reading a newspaper, Nkechi joined the pregnant women in a session on pregnancy and delivery and watched the matron demonstrate a vaginal birth with visual aids.

The matron taught them the proper way to push during delivery and it was amusing to many of them. She looked forward to the experience. A friend had told her, “It is painful, but it is the moment you pay your due as a mother.”

After a while, they were called in to see the gynaecologist. A few minutes later, the scan was done, and the foetus pronounced fine. The gynaecologist’s voice took on a professional tone.

“We are going to have to do a cerclage for her. This means we have to stitch her cervix to prevent a miscarriage.”

That was hardly news.

“Also, she has to prepare her mind for a caesarean section.”

That alarmed her.

“Why?” Nkechi almost yelled.

“IVF babies are special. We don’t want to take any chances. Occasionally, something might happen during labour which might necessitate an emergency caesarean section. We try as much as possible to avoid an emergency C-section, but if we have made up our minds about a C-section right from the onset, we won’t encounter emergencies and the risks will be limited.”

She was dismayed and petrified.

“We should pray and fast and put the spirit of CS in bondage,” she heard her mother saying as she dished the Oha soup and fufu in a plate.

Nkechi laughed hard. “Mama, this is why I have missed you greatly. You are cracking me up real good.”

“Nkechi, you will have that baby like the Hebrew women in Jesus’ name! Don’t mind all these doctors o!”

“Mama, CS is not a bad thing now.”

“It’s a bad thing for a woman not to have her child through her vagina. It is a curse. May it never be your portion.”

“It is not a curse. CS is pure science that has saved many women and their babies.”

“Biko, you won’t do CS. My mother didn’t, your sisters did not. So the curse won’t start with you …”

“Mama nobody has cursed me …”

“That’s what you will say. Your uncle is using you to fight me. This Jesus that I serve will help me conquer him. He’s still angry I took my husband’s estate from him.”

“I’m sure Uncle doesn’t even care where you are now. No one has bewitched me or cursed me. The doctor said it’s the safest procedure because the baby is an IVF baby and so they don’t want to take any chances.”

“Don’t worry, I will go back to the prophet if there is any problem. He will give me anointing oil and holy water that you will be drinking till you go into labour. We will put those doctors to shame. After drinking, you will deliver like the Hebrew women, you will see.”

“Mama, don’t go wasting your energy to get me anointing oil or holy water. Just pray for me, I will be fine.”

“You know I am always praying and fasting for you all.”

“Yes, I know, Mommy. I really appreciate you. But a caesarean section is not bad. Complications arise during labour and so doctors advise women to do a CS.”

“But you don’t even have complications yet, and the doctor is saying that. I reject it a million times for you,” she snapped her fingers backwards over her head.

“The medical team is taking care of me. It is only fear that is the problem. I will be safe and we’ll all rejoice.”

“Okay, I will continue to pray for you since you have refused to listen to me.”

“Pray for me. Your prayer is more potent than those prophets.”

“May God keep you for me. I will hold your child soon in Jesus’ name.”

“Amen,” Nkechi replied as she washed her hands and began eating

Chapter 36

Yeni suddenly went into pre-term labour at thirty-one weeks but it was successfully delayed with medications, steroids and bed rest. She had stopped working and was practically living in the hospital. At thirty-four weeks, she felt fine and decided she wanted a natural delivery. The doctor tried to dissuade her, but she insisted. Her husband too suggested that she have the twins by caesarean section. Yeni was stoic in her refusal. She confided in her husband—she would feel like a failure if she did not have her babies the natural way. She settled for vaginal delivery aided by epidural anaesthetic.

Yeni was troubled by a secret fear. The fear of the stranger. *What if he appears and makes the CS go wrong, and I do not survive the operation?* She was more afraid for her babies. She had heard stories of how delivery became difficult for women who had spirit husbands and how they eventually died during a caesarean section.

Her pregnancy had been a difficult one. Aside the horrible morning sickness, she had severe migraines and she was not allowed to take anything other than paracetamol, which was ineffective. Sometimes she took three tablets but it was no use, and there was nothing she could tell her doctor that would convince him to give any other prescription. Her appetite improved as the pregnancy proceeded, but throughout her pregnancy, she could not eat rice. Rice and fish stew was her favourite food, but it tasted like sawdust in her mouth each time she tried eating it.

Yeni's pregnancy was an emotional roller coaster. Sometimes she would feel great and other times she would cry uncontrollably for no reason. Sometimes she had to stay in bed all through the week and miss many social events. She was practically in and out of the hospital, and at a point, her mom had to move in with her to support her.

She went into labour twenty-four hours after she stopped her medication as the doctor advised. She arrived at the hospital a little too late for an epidural because of traffic. So Yeni delivered the first baby vaginally in thirty-five minutes. The little bundle came out smoothly at exactly 12.05 a.m. and weighed 2.5 kg. Yeni's heart swelled upon hearing the shrill cry of the baby. The doctor held up the newborn for her to see. She smiled and became teary before the nurse took her away for cleaning.

The second was not easy. The baby was transverse and the doctors tried to turn her but had to stop trying when her heart rate dropped. The theatre went into a frenzy. They hurried out and informed her husband that she had to have an emergency C-section.

Yeni called in Tunde to send word to the pastor to join them in prayers. She was afraid and exhausted and later dozed off, leaving the doctors to try to save the other baby. She woke up a few minutes later, muttering prayers. Thirty minutes later, the second baby came out pale, not breathing. The doctors went into another frenzy. Yeni heard complaints about breathing issues. Five minutes later, the doctors' efforts were rewarded with a shrill cry, the most amazing cry Yeni had ever heard. The longest, most traumatic moment of her life was over.

Then she fell into a light slumber and beheld an apparition—the stranger stood right by her side with a look of anguish. Yeni held on tightly to her daughters but he had tears in his eyes. He looked at her helplessly and walked out. The vision dissolved before her eyes as Tunde walked in, followed closely by her mother and mother-in-law. A nurse came in with the babies and placed them in her arms. Joy and laughter enveloped the room.

Chapter 37

Nkechi got to the hospital, accompanied by her mother, a day before the scheduled caesarean section, like the doctor ordered. She was feeling antsy. She would have preferred her mother-in-law but Shola insisted on her mother. She

did not need her mother's drama on this very important day of her life. What she needed was assurance. Her mother was a lot more scared about the procedure, and she did not want to be infected with her anxiety.

Lolo, who had embarked on a seven-day prayer and fasting, arrived at the hospital with her spiritual paraphernalia—two different handkerchiefs, anointing oils from two prophets, and three bottles of holy water.

She assured Nkechi that her prophets were all busy praying for her, and that no enemy had any power over her. Nkechi could not hold back her laughter as her mother brought out the different items that would ward off all demons.

She gave her one of the handkerchiefs to keep under her pillow, the second she told Nkechi to place on her belly. She personally sprinkled the holy water around the private ward and kept vigil all night, praying and invoking the hosts of heaven, led by Holy Michael, to sanctify the ward and battle all demons and spirits commissioned by the enemies.

The next day, when the time came, Nkechi changed into a hospital gown and had an IV inserted into her veins. A nurse inserted a catheter into her bladder and monitors were placed on her belly to monitor the baby's heartbeat.

Before she was wheeled into the theatre, her mother made her drink holy water and sprinkled some on her body. The water was warm and salty. Nkechi laughed and caught the look of rebuke on her mother's face. She could feel her mother's fear. Nkechi assured her that she would be back with the baby. She nodded and muttered some prayers. Shola planted a light kiss on her forehead.

The door closed and she was in a white room surrounded by men and women garbed in green overalls and caps and white machines. The anaesthesiologist's face appeared before her. He explained nasally to her what he would be doing. The obstetrician swung into action, checking that the baby was okay.

A few minutes later, the anaesthesiologist explained to Nkechi how she should bend her back. He gave an injection to numb her back first—it was painless—then he inserted a needle into her spinal cord, told her there would be a warm sensation, to be followed immediately by numbness. Nkechi's legs immediately grew heavy, like bags of cement. The doctor assured her it was normal. After a while, the heaviness waned. Then the anaesthesiologist tapped her belly and ribcage to see if the epidural was effective.

Once he was sure, he gave the doctors the green light and the procedure began. Reality dawned on Nkechi. *I am about to become a mother.* She felt a little nervous and emotional. The anaesthesiologist was of great help. He was

chatting with her and this made her mentally prepared for the entire process. He tried as much as possible to take her mind off the process. Another calming effect on Nkechi was the music that was playing in the background—a collection of worship songs. Doctors and nurses were also talking as they worked.

She was alone on the operating table with strangers. Her nerves would have been a lot calmer if Shola was there with her. Like a typical Nigerian hospital, her husband was not allowed into the theatre.

Outside, Shola kept pacing the hospital corridor. His mother and siblings did not help matters. They called by the minute to ask how Nkechi was faring, but he himself did not know what was happening inside. Each time he tried to peep in, a nurse came along to send him back to the lobby. Shola felt anger rising in him. He wondered why he had to be left out of such an important event. He wished he was there with her, to whisper words of encouragement and hold her hands. The nurses nodded that she was fine and hurried past him, each time he asked about her welfare.

At exactly 10.45 a.m., the baby was taken out of her womb. He did not cry immediately. “Caesarean babies don’t cry,” the anaesthesiologist explained, “because they usually have a lot of gunk in their airways since they didn’t push their way through the birth canal. So most of them don’t cry immediately.”

Finally, Nkechi heard his cry, an answer to her prayer. The doctor held him up for her to see. There was absolutely no pain throughout the procedure. The nurse whisked the baby away as she was being stitched up. Once she was sutured, the doctor congratulated her and she was rolled back into her ward. A few minutes later, Shola came into the ward beaming a bright smile and bearing his son, amply swaddled.

It was the sweetest picture Nkechi had ever seen. Overwhelmed by emotion, she burst into quiet sobs. Shola placed their son into her hands. The doctor advised her to move her legs around as soon as she could and left the room.

Lolo, who had gone to buy some things, came into the ward. Her presence changed the chemistry of the room. She was happy, gushing over Nkechi and the baby. Shola handed the baby over to his mother-in-law and said:

“Mama, we forgot your birthday, but this is your birthday gift. Happy birthday.”

Lolo held the baby with tears rolling down her eyes. At last, her favourite child had a baby.

“*Chineke da alu*,” she mumbled over and over.

EPILOGUE

Kunle drove into the hospital premises with anticipation, dying to see his miracle twins. He walked into the ward like a man in a trance, and minutes later, cradled both babies in his arms. He was a happy dad. A few minutes later, one of the babies started crying. He handed him over to Tale who tried to pacify him but he only cried more.

Kunle suggested that Tale try to breastfeed him. She was reluctant but moved the boy closer to her breast to suckle. After a few minutes, the baby gave a sharp yell. He began crying again. Apparently, he was not getting any milk from Tale's breast. Kunle was confused and Tale did all she could, but it was fruitless. Just in time, the doctor walked in and explained to him that sometimes, it took some new moms a while to lactate.

Kunle picked the babies one after the other, peered at them, searching for striking resemblances to him. He could not see any in his children. *Maybe it is too early to tell*, he thought. Unlike the baby girl Grace had last week, even as an infant, her resemblance to him and Grace was striking.

He felt a little uneasy at the turn of events. Tale's babies came weeks

earlier than expected. He also wondered why no one had taken his calls for two days. The doctor and Onome explained to him that Tale had a difficult vaginal delivery and the babies were pre-term. He expected to see the babies in incubators, but they both looked robust, the very picture of health.

He felt something was wrong but shrugged. Now she had her babies and she was happy. That was what mattered most.

I am happy, too. I have four kids.

For both husband and wife, the last three weeks had been full of deception in which providence had been a willing co-conspirator. He had returned home one afternoon to inform Tale about an urgent official assignment in Minna. Tale had helped him pack his bag and bade him farewell. He promised he would be back soon because of her condition. Kunle ended up spending three weeks in Abuja, away from his wife who was in the final weeks of her pregnancy.

Tale was indifferent. She had other plans. Three weeks after Kunle was gone, Nma's call came. Her delivery was near. It was weird to Tale. She did not feel any of the pains associated with pregnancy. No sharp spasms, no back pain, or slight inconvenience of babies changing position as other women had told her. She remembered Nma had told her that these children were different. She was just thirty-three weeks gone when Nma called her to come for the delivery.

She called Onome, who promised to travel to Port Harcourt with her to the traditional clinic run by Nma's mother. Onome called in her nanny to stay overnight. Her husband was not in town, and so it was easy for her to make that arrangement quickly.

They finally arrived at the airport by 7.15 p.m. It was late but they were lucky to get two seats. It was the last flight leaving for Port Harcourt. Their plane finally touched down at 8.45 p.m. They chartered a cab from the airport and the driver drove towards the southern part of Port Harcourt. They made a turn on Aggrey Road and parked in front of a green twin building. The clinic had no signpost or anything to show it was a clinic. Tale noticed that the traditional IVF clinic was more like a residential duplex, and she was sure not many knew what was going on in there. The building was quite impressive, and the area serene.

Tale met Nma's mother, Nana Lizzy. She was tall and had her face well made up for that time of the day. There were dark patches on her face and skin, a result of bleaching creams. Her well-manicured nails were like claws. She was dressed like an Itsekiri woman, donning two wrappers and an expensive lace

fabric. Her shoes were Italian and she wore gold jewelleries. Tale could see that she was quite rich. One of the nurses told her that Nana Lizzy had just arrived from a party when they walked in. Nana Lizzy shared a little resemblance with Nma. She had a loud voice and one could easily sense that she was a very tough woman. Everyone feared her. One minute, she was laughing at a joke, the next minute she was scolding someone harshly—her ability to swiftly switch personalities amazed Tale.

She was ushered into a ward by one of the nurses. After she was well-rested, she changed into an overall and was taken into the delivery room, where she was instructed to lie on the bed by Nma's mother and two other midwives.

She was injected, and soon came labour-like pains. Tale began to scream. The last thing she remembered was blood flowing from her vagina. A few hours later, one of the midwives woke her and handed her a baby boy. Standing by the bedside was Onome, holding another baby, a girl.

"Tale, this girl has your nose."

"Really?" she smiled. "Bring her closer, let me see," Tale looked at her daughter with admiration.

"The boy looks like his father," said Onome, "those lips."

One of the midwives appeared in the doorway. "Oya, you should start packing. You have to be in Lagos in the next few hours."

"But we didn't book any flight," Tale protested.

"We have a car service here that will take you by road to Lagos," the nurse answered her.

"A road trip *kẹ̀*? Won't it be too tedious for the babies?" Onome wondered.

"They will be fine."

"I'm not lactating yet. How do I feed them?" Tale asked.

"*Sebi* you came with baby food, Madam?" Nma's mother came into the room.

"Yes, but I want to do exclusive breastfeeding …"

"You will do exclusive feeding for twins?" the old woman looked at her with incredulity. "You want to kill yourself? You can't do exclusive breastfeeding for these ones. You will have to feed them with baby food."

"Oya, let's get going, so by morning we will be in Lagos," Onome urged.

Tale was still feeling woozy and sore. Onome's next statement brought her out of her lethargy.

"You have seventy-six missed calls from your husband already. He must be back in Lagos. We have to be at the hospital before you call him."

They had driven throughout the night, arrived in Lagos by 4.30 am, gone straight to the hospital and were settled in their ward an hour later. By the time the doctor was making the ward rounds in the morning, Tale was fast asleep.

Kunle got a call from Onome at 9 am. Her call came at the nick of time. He was about to head to the police station to report a missing wife. His reaction was of mixed emotions. He had called his parents, and was irked by his father's lack of enthusiasm. The old man only asked for the name of the hospital and promised he would be there soon. He did not congratulate his son, neither did he ask about the welfare of the new mother. He was saddened. Tale deserved better from his parents, at least, some respect.

Well, all is well that ends well. Everyone was happy. His parents had the second woman they wanted. Still his father had told him, that he would do well to have a child by a woman from his community of birth. "That is how you put roots into the ground." What could that be but a suggestion of a third woman? Kunle had had enough of his father driving him into the arms of strange women. After years of vilifying Tale, she finally had her own children—two at a go.

"Who are you to stop me from going in to see my gransheedren?"

His father had arrived.

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