

# REPLETE



SEQUEL TO COMPLETE

*Goodness Adegbola*

The seamless yet intriguing interactions between the characters will keep you turning the page.

*-Ife Grace Dada, Author of Ayanfe, The Diary of a Nigerian Christian Girl...*

# REPLETE

GOODNESS ADEGBOLA





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## DEDICATION

To you who sees yourself in one or  
more of these characters,  
The Lord sees you. Through the pages  
of this book,  
You will hear him speak to you.





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PART

I





## CHAPTER ONE

### **WE DIE TO SURVIVE**

Birds were chirping in a distance. Their rhythmic, high-pitched calls reminded Nathan of a time he and his brother used to humour each other with imaginations of what the birds might be trying to communicate. The memories felt farther than they actually were. They were pushed far back by tons of events -not as riveting as trying to understand birds- and turns of choices. Nathan knew he didn't have time to reminisce. Lagos hardly left one the luxury of spare time. He had a phone call to make before setting out for the day and if he was going to beat the traffic, he had to make the call now.

As the phone rang, Nathan exhaled, trying to ease his nervousness. Talking with his brother was such a precarious

venture that any wrong gesture could crush to dust the bridge Nathan was trying to build. The other time he called him Ethan, which actually was the name given to him by his parents, he flew off the handle and ended the call. Nathan exhaled again.

*I must not repeat that mistake. Alice. Alice.*

Ethan picked the call.

"Good evening," Nathan mouthed. "it's night over there, right?"

"Should I expect your call every night before I go to bed?"

Nathan chortled. "I guess so."

Ethan returned the chuckle. "How are you holding up? What time is it over there? 4?"

"Yeah, 4:25." Nathan said a prayer in his heart. This wasn't going to be easy at all. "So, what are you up to?"

"About to crash. I have a long day ahead of me tomorrow. I've got an appointment with the plastic surgeon."

Ethan squeezed his eyes shut. He knew it was an intentional jab at his heart, a jab well-aimed and well-delivered.

"Alice, I've got a message for you."

A chuckle laced with cynicism came over the phone. "I think I have a clue. It's about hell and the doom awaiting me, not so?"

"Not so." Nathan swallowed. "God loves you; He wants you back. He wants you all to himself."

"I see," Ethan remarked drily. "This is what you've been building up to with all the phone calls and phony niceness.

Different approach, same old trash."

"What?"

"The church at home weaponised terror to rope me into bondage, threatening me with hell and the wrath of God. But you have come, a polished chip off the old block, with an enticing message of *lurrr* to lure me into the same pit of religious bigotry and bondage. I hear this new version of the bondage advert around here too; the televangelists are always on about this God of love." He dropped a bitter cackle. "You know what? I prefer Mum's version of the bondage ad. If for nothing else, it's more honest in its wickedness."

"Etha..."

Ethan alias Alice chuckled. "It's fine. Call me whatever you want. It doesn't change who I am."

Nathan sighed. "So, I'm permitted to call you Ethan?"

Ethan said nothing and that unnerved Nathan. Something about his brother's passive aggression always did.

"Fine, I'll keep up with Alice. I respect your decision."

"Would that be all?"

"One more thing, will you continue taking my calls?" To that, Nathan got no response other than a click that told him the call was over.

Nathan sighed and picked his laptop bag. "Ethan, you will see the light. The scales over the eyes of your understanding will fall in Jesus's name."

Even if Ethan did come into the light of Christ's saving knowledge, Nathan couldn't help wondering what hope was

left for him. Ethan said he was already undergoing hormonal therapy and soon enough he'll be getting a job for breasts and a sex reassignment surgery. What good would the light of the gospel do to an area as darkly gray as that? Anguish like an avalanche rode over his heart. Ethan was his brother, his only sibling. They grew together, they played together, they sang in the choir together, the chirruping birds seemed to say, 'you tried to figure us out together'. But Nathan knew he couldn't allow himself feel all he was feeling if he was going to make it to work on time. Even though his boss was more like a friend, he didn't want to use that as an excuse for tardiness.



While waiting for traffic to subside, Edward leaned back and regaled himself with the latest episode of Moní's vlog from her YouTube channel.

"Hey there," Moní started with her typical intro. Edward knew the rest by heart. "Welcome to Mo's channel if it's your first time here and for those who are regulars, you're welcome back. Don't forget to subscribe to my channel. Love you!" She blew a kiss. Edward smiled.

Moní started with her YouTube channel a little over a year ago and what impressed Edward the most wasn't even the quality of her content, which was great, but her unwavering devotion to releasing a video every week. Edward knew by first-hand experience that consistency wasn't easy. Whenever Jimmy wasn't around to propel him, he struggled to keep up with his workout routine. Moní was now a mother of two, Şèyí,

four and Seye, two. Seye almost always featured in the bloopers that Moní put as the outro of her videos. That boy was rambunctious. Moní was managing a home, a career, music ministry and a YouTube channel effectively. Edward made a mental note to appreciate her efforts the next time he called her.

“Today, I want to talk about self-centeredness using a personal experience. I’ve talked about how I was Bulimic and down in the dumps for a long time in previous episodes. For the sake of those who are new here, I’m not exactly the typical size six lady. I’m sure you can tell.” She sniffed a chuckle. “But then, I used to be even bigger than this.” A slideshow of Moní’s old pictures played and her voice came over them.

The video came back on with Moní sitting in her study. In the background was a shelf of few books, small potted plants and a YouTube throw pillow. Moní did a little jiggy dance. “I know, I know, progress. If you want to find out more about that you can watch ‘how I lost forty-three kg in three years.’ I’ll drop the link in the description below. Now, back to the discourse of the day, body shaming is a menace I am well acquainted with. There was this one time a woman in a bus demanded that I ‘combine myself.’” She shook her head and wet her lips. “I still find her choice of words funny. Combine yourself... Cause I know by experience how body shaming could be devastating, I’m always quick to speak against it. But somehow, I thought body shaming was a fat people’s problem and an issue exclusive to the female gender. So, you can imagine my shock when hubby told me he also suffered emotional turmoil for the same

reason. Hubby is male, obviously, and not fat... Matter of fact, he's far from fat, so what's there to be ashamed of?" Moní's voice played over a picture of Barnabas standing on the beach, wearing a pair of shorts that showcased his gangling legs; another picture of Moní and Barnabas and cut back to Moní in her study, grinning before the camera.

"But I was wrong. Hubby told me of how he was called names all through his growing years for his stature -or lack of it- names like 'chewing stick legs', 'skin on skel' skel being skeleton and he shared of how a biology instructor made him take off his shirt before the class to show them the thoracic cage because a skeleton model wasn't available. Everyone laughed that day as the teacher turned him around to show the class his floating ribs but it was killing him on the inside. He said he wolfed down food and tried all he could to gain weight but his body was reading off a different script; the script his genes wrote. Honestly, I don't know why anyone will think to laugh at Barnabas' body anyway, he's a hot piece of spice and that's a fact. I'm his wife and my opinion is all that matters." Moní guffawed. A picture of Barnabas in an *agbádá* came on and boy did he look good! "Look at that now!"

Edward shook his head and mouthed, "It's not my sister if she doesn't throw in some play play." Edward gently pressed on the gas pedal as the traffic let up. He glanced at his phone screen affixed to his dashboard by his car phone holder.

"I realised that one could get so absorbed with the peculiarity of one's pain that one becomes blinded to the pains

of others. It's very easy for one to magnify his or her pain and experiences to the point that it becomes the only thing in one's field of vision. And I say this at the risk of being misunderstood. I don't mean to discredit your feelings. Your pain, your fears and whatever you feel are very valid, but as believers, we must learn to receive comfort from God when we are in our pains so that when God brings others going through similar situations along, we will be able to extend the same comfort to them. Scriptural reference, 2 Corinthians 1:3-4. One thing that strikes me about the story of Joseph is that in spite of the tragic and downright unjust events that landed him in prison, he wasn't pulled into self-pity. He was selfless enough to look past his own pains in order to see the pains of his fellow inmates and be there for them."

Edward nodded slowly, thoughtfully. He drove into his company and pulled up in his reserved parking lot in time to catch the bloopers. Moní was screaming, "Seye, keep your voice down, I'm filming for God's sake!"

Edward chuckled, unbuckled his seatbelt and stepped down from his car. He walked into the office building that was right behind the expanse of interlocked floor for exhibiting cars. As Edward made his way to the building, he had to say hello in return to the ingratiating greeting of Mr. Rufus, one of the cleaners whose duty was to keep the premise and cars for exhibition clean and flashing. On his way to his office, he passed the frosted glass cubicle that enclosed Nathan's office, he noticed he wasn't on seat. He continued down the hallway and

ran into him. He was going back to his office with a file in hand. He was working on the report Edward asked him to turn in before the next day. Edward smiled and was about to continue down to his office when he decided not to ignore the deeply troubled look in Nathan's eyes, not after what he just heard on Moní's vlog.

"You look disturbed bro, anything the matter?"

Nathan forced a smile. "I'm good."

"And I'm a pilot."

Nathan bit his lower lip and gave a heavy sigh. "Yeah, I'm not fine. But it's not something we can talk over in fifteen minutes, and certainly not something we can discuss on company time." He tapped the thick-spined file lying on the crook of his arm. "This work won't do itself."

"Fine, why don't you come over to mine after work? We could talk over dinner."

"Are you trying to get free company?" Nathan teased.

Edward gave him a friendly punch. "I'm not a lonely man."

"Right and I'm a pilot." Nathan chuckled. "I wouldn't pass up on free food. So, yes, I'll come over."

Edward gave Nathan thumbs up and walked towards his office. *I'm a lonely, lonely man.*



David pulled up by the shoulder of the road just across from Ed Motors. He stepped down from his Hyundai accent and walked towards a bank. He wanted to make a quick cash withdrawal before he went to see Edward. Even though it was a work day, David could leave D's place to see his friend because he had trusted, trained hands working back at the restaurant. He had worked hard over the past few years to set up a system that was almost entirely self-perpetuating and the reward for that was rest in the future.

While waiting on the ATM queue for his turn, David tapped away on his phone, replying WhatsApp texts that seemed to always stack. Replying messages was fast becoming a chore. Pretty much like doing the dishes. You clear the sink and just when you want to heave a sigh and pat your back, you turn around to see even more dishes mocking you. David was thinking about how he needed to leave some WhatsApp groups that were becoming a nuisance when he felt a powerful arm crook over his neck and yank him off the queue. It was all so swift. David barely had the chance to gag before his captor whisked him off to a corner. David's eyes scanned around. His eyes were screaming the pleas that couldn't come out of his constricted voice box, but people only cast cursory glances his way. They looked the other way, as was the custom of most Lagosians. The tacit rule was: harm is no cause for alarm unless it's done to you. David wanted to shout about how unfair, how brutally selfish this 'paddle your canoe' culture was, but the arm over his neck wouldn't even let him cough. Tears blurred his

vision and just when he wanted to pray, he felt a sharp searing pain in his right flank. It was unmistakable. A blade was being pressed into the side of his abdomen. This time around a gasp escaped.

"Have you ever wondered what your entrails look like?" His captor's voice was soft and chilling, entering directly into his left ear. He didn't wait for him to reply, it wasn't as if David could reply anyway. "Your intestines are red and shiny, covered by omentum. It's like a lacy, yellow curtain. Perhaps you're curious to see this great sight."

David prayed frantically in his heart, moving his lips. *Lord, don't let me die. At least for Ladé's sake and....*

"I could help you satisfy your curiosity. I could splay your intestines before your eyes and let you enjoy the art." A syllable of a dark chuckle. "Won't you like that?" He released David's neck a little. Enough for him to sputter and speak.

"What do you want from me? I can give you my phone, my card, anything. But please don't hurt me." David jabbered nervously.

"Shut up."

David winced as his captor pressed his blade harder.

"I've been sent with a simple message. Leave Eben. If you don't adhere to this warning, your entrails on the floor will be the last thing you'll ever see."

And just as swiftly as he captured David, the man released him and disappeared amongst the crowd of people walking down the street. The only thing David could make out

through bleary eyes was a dark frame pulling on the hood of his sweat shirt. The next thing he saw was blood soaking up his shirt. He was numb until he saw blood. As soon as he did, the sting of pain took hold. He pressed his hand over the wound in his side and hurried across the road into Ed Motors, leaving a crimson trail in his wake.

Edward barged into Nathan's office and tossed his car key on Nathan's desk. "I need you to drive myself and David down to a hospital. He's bleeding out and I'm too shaken up to drive." He looked down at his trembling fingers, Edward wasn't the kind to shake off the sight of blood.

Nathan sprang to his feet and grabbed the key by its fob.

David was left to rest after his cut had been dressed and stitched. On the physician's instruction, no one was allowed into David's ward, but the physician could do nothing about the droning thoughts that kept David awake.

The day he met Eben, he had gone out with the evangelism team on a Tuesday evening like any other. There was nothing peculiar or different about the evangelism invasion into Mushin. In fact, that day, David was feeling exhausted and he contemplated waiting behind in the bus with the evangelism team members who stayed back to intercede. But he knew for certain that he was going to end up sleeping. Moreover, he wasn't listed amongst those who were to stay back that day. He didn't want to use his position of authority as the evangelism unit leader to flout policies for selfish reasons. So, he joined the rest of the team members who went in twos into the slums. He

was paired with Réniké that day and off they went preaching the gospel and praying for people. They took down the details of the new converts in order to keep in touch and follow them up appropriately. And then, Réniké called David's attention to a group of boys who were playing their version of table tennis. They used planks as bats, two benches positioned side by side as table and a piece of wood standing at the centre of the benches as net. The only thing that was like actual table tennis in their little simulation was the table tennis ball. David smiled. They moved closer to the group. The boys were not thrilled to have their match interrupted but they stopped out of respect for David and Réniké. Réniké asked them which one of them could beat her at a match of tennis. They laughed. She was a lady; they were sure she couldn't play. She humoured them by taking the bat. The humour turned to surprise when they saw her thrash three of their bests. They erupted with applause. At that point where their ice had been broken and an amount of bond had been established, Réniké presented the good news. The boys listened and Réniké too was wise enough to keep it brief. While Réniké went on, David sighted a boy with brown eyes that would have been enchanting if they didn't look so dead, a few metres from them. Those brown eyes were fixed on Réniké and he seemed totally hooked by what she was saying. But why was he hiding behind a kiosk? And why did he duck out of sight as soon as David's eyes met his?

David felt prompted to go after the boy. The prompting came with a sense of urgency so strong that David half ran in

pursuit of the boy immediately after he whispered, 'I'll be back' to Rénìkẹ́. When the boy saw David coming after him, he stopped running. He looked scared. He assessed David for seconds, saying nothing, before he sat on the floor.

David didn't know what to say to this boy. He asked the Lord for utterance in his heart. He hunkered beside him.

"Hey, what's your name?"

Silence.

"Jesus loves you and even though I don't know your name, he knows you by name."

The boy didn't flinch, blink or tear his gaze away from the wall he was staring daggers at. "I'm wearing diapers."

David paused to consider what that meant. This boy was at least twelve years old. Perhaps he had lost control of his anal sphincter due to a degenerative disease of some sorts. Hadn't he heard of something similar from a movie?

"A sickness?" David asked. "Listen, the power of Jesus is able to heal y-"

"I'm dirty. A man uses me."

Understanding descended like a piece of cotton, slowly, adrift. David swallowed. "What is your name?"

"Eben."

"Listen Eben, Jesus loves you and nothing you've done or that has been done to you can change that. Jesus stepped into your situation, He took on your sins and guilt, your pain and shame and took them to the cross. There, He finished them and rose again victorious. All you need to do to enter this victory

and new life is accept Jesus and believe in Him."

Eben looked at David again. "So, it doesn't matter to Jesus that I'm wearing diapers?"

David shook his head. "When God looks at you, he's not seeing diapers, he sees a soul precious to him, a soul worth the death of his son."

Seconds ticked by and David wondered if the child understood what he'd said, if he believed. Then, Eben heaved a long sigh and buried his face between his legs, stifling sobs. "Jesus, I accept you. I believe you. Save me. Help me."

David shifted closer to the boy and he could perceive a putrid smell coming from him. He wanted to scrunch up his nose and move away from the boy but he remembered his own words. *Father, help me see him like you do.*

Eben's head came up suddenly. "My mother must be looking for me. I have to go now." He sprang to his feet.

"Where do you stay?" David asked.

"I can't tell y-"

He grabbed Eben's hand. "Please tell me, I need to come see you."

"My mother wo-"

"Just tell me!"

"Eben!" Someone called from a distance.

"That's my mother." Eben's eyes were wide. "Let me go."

"Just tell me whe-"

"Down the street, number 44, face-me-I-face-you." Eben

hurriedly said and wrenched his wrist free of David's grip. He ran off and shouted a 'Thank you' over his shoulder. David allowed himself a little smile. Even though Eben was an enigma, he was now saved. Now, the Holy Spirit was in him. There was rejoicing in heaven over his soul. The first and most important step had been taken. What David didn't know was how capricious the next steps would be especially for him.

After David's meeting with Eben, the Holy Spirit gave him no rest over Eben. Every so often, David would be burdened to just pray for the boy. A mix of concern and curiosity kept Eben in David's mind; he discussed with Ladé and they decided it was best for David to go see the boy. And so, David was back in Mushin, searching out house 44 down the street. It didn't take long to locate the unpainted house that had many a crack on its wall. David knocked, mumbling a word of prayer. The door swung open.

"Who are you?" The bosomy woman who opened the door asked. She wore a yellow tank top and a pair of jeans and her hair was a matted mess. David assumed she was Eben's mum.

"I take it you're Eben's Mum. Good afternoon ma, my name is David and I'm here to see your son."

She looked him over, her left hand still holding the door. "Who are you to Eben?"

"Er- a friend."

She scoffed. "E no dey house." And then she started to close the door.

"Please wait. When can I come back to see him?"

She eyed him, tutted and slammed the door shut.

David exhaled and let his shoulders slump. As he walked back to where he had parked his car, he saw Eben running to him. He turned to him, smiling.

"Eben," David said, "I'm just coming from your house. Your Mum said you weren't at home."

"I was inside and I heard your voice. I had to escape through the back door. Let's go somewhere before my mum starts looking for me. There's so much to talk about."

Before David could say anything to that, Eben was already standing on the other side of the car, waiting for David to unlock the car.

David drove to a nice restaurant but he could notice Eben's tension. He could see that the boy's smile was gone and his eyes were looking through the windshield with the same forlorn expression he had while staring at the wall the other day.

"I want to go back home." Eben mumbled.

"What's the problem? You don't like the restaurant?"

Eben nodded slowly. "He brings me to places like this. I hate fancy stuff. It-" he paused abruptly, drew breaths in three stages and exhaled at once, closing his eyes.

"I understand. Where would you rather we go?"

He shook his head. "Let's just stay in the car and talk, if that's fine by you."

David shrugged. "Yeah, sure."



An awkward silence followed. After which Eben started speaking slowly, letting the layers come undone so David could see him and all he'd been forced to hide.

"I was in Primary 5 when I won the prodigy essay writing competition. Chief Adékọyà Aderògbà was the chairman of the occasion. He awarded me a million naira and offered to sponsor my education for as long as I was willing to be schooled. Even up to PhD level! That day was the happiest day of my life until it wasn't. You see, my mum is one drug junkie who got pregnant and I happened. I came into her life as an unwelcome disturbance and she always told me this. She even told me that she tried aborting me. But after the science fair, I stopped being a pest to my mum, I became a ticket. A ticket to money for weed, a ticket to bragging rights, a ticket to affluent circles. Chief Rògbà took special interest in me after the fair and I was stupid enough to think it was because I was a special child. He'd send gifts and money; he'd come by the house to drop new books for me and whenever he was about to leave, he'd hug me tight and play with my hair. I was nine and naïve, so I just let my heart rejoice over my rare luck. Chief continued tending and grooming me till I became what he wanted. One day, when I was in JSS 2, he sent his driver over to our house to pick me up." Eben shut his eyes. "I could never have imagined anything so violent... Anything so degrading. When he was done, he cleaned me up and sent me home. That day, I felt like a corpse; cold and blue, just like novels describe them. I was dead since then."

David was struggling to internalise all of it. He breathed through his mouth. Memories of Aanu came back to him. He'd thought what he experienced was the worst thing that could happen to a young boy. How wrong he'd been.

Eben looked at David. "You are crying."

David didn't try to wipe the single drop.

"You are crying..." Eben repeated. "for me?"

David pulled himself together. "Eben, I'm so sorry any of this happened to you. I need you to believe me, none of it is your fault. That's first. Secondly, it's very wrong. Very wrong and you don't deserve it at all."

"Mum says we die to survive." Eben's gaze was back on the windshield.

"Wait, she knew of the abuse?"

Eben shrugged. "I don't know. Whenever I return from Chief's mansion, she avoids me, she takes more weed than usual and cries herself to sleep... She never asks what I was doing while I was away. She never says anything. She takes the gifts he sends thereafter and calls to thank him. And then, she says, Eben, we die to survive."

"She's looking the other way." David whispered.

That broke Eben. He came down in tears and curses, pounding on the dashboard. David held him, constraining and hugging him. Eben snapped out of David's arms, punching his neck.

"Don't touch me!" He repeated the sentence with a lavish garnish of cuss words.

David was taken aback by the sudden burst of temper but he tried to understand Eben. His mother's silence, her acquiescing limpness was a greater assault to his mind than whatever the Chief did to him. Eben didn't regain composure until about fifteen minutes later and when he did, his face was a blotchy mess of sweat, mucus and tears, and when he spoke his voice was hoarse.

"I'm sorry," He said.

"Don't be," David replied. "you have every right to be angry."

"After the day you preached to me, I've been seeing you in my dreams."

"Really?"

Eben nodded. "After the first time we met, I didn't know what to do with my new faith. I asked Jesus what was next but I didn't hear anything then I slept and you came in my dream, wearing the same blue T-shirt and grey trouser you wore the day you preached to me. You told me to ask my Mum for a Bible, you said she has one long forgotten in her dresser. You told me to start studying the Bible from the new testament. You told me to pray to God in Jesus's name. You said I should make reading the Bible and praying habitual, a daily affair, that I should expect to hear from God and then I woke up."

David's eyes were wide with wonder.

Eben chuckled. "Here's the interesting part: I wake up and I go to Mum's room, I ask her for a Bible. She's hungover and only half awake but she drags herself from the bed and

searches around aimlessly. Eventually, she goes to her dresser and pulls out a dusty, brown Bible. How did you know that?"

David smiled. "I didn't. That was God. That was the Holy Spirit speaking to you through the man you are familiar with."

Eben nodded. "I started studying the Bible from Matthew like you told me--"

"Like God told you." David chipped in.

Eben chortled. "Yeah, like God... Wow! God actually took out time to talk to me? Who am I?"

"You are his son, his beloved, the very apple of his eyes. He cares for you, genuinely."

Eben paused to consider that. "As I was reading the Bible, I didn't understand some things but whenever I sleep, you come to explain scriptures to me. It's always so simple when you explain it, so refreshing and when I wake, I hurry to grab my note to write everything you said to me because they are so precious, I don't want to ever lose them. It made so much sense when I read a parable in which Jesus likened the kingdom of God to a man who found a treasure and sold all he had to buy the land. I would give everything I have over and over again for this priceless relationship with Jesus."

Eben was speaking with such passion that left David in awe. The young man was edifying David, without even realising it.

"You don't feel like a corpse any longer, do you?"

"Hell no!" He exclaimed, throwing back his head and

laughing. "Jesus has given me life..." His smile dimmed and he sighed. "but there are other days when I don't see you in my dreams. There are nights when I see myself on Chief's large bed, nights when all the memories of the things we did play before me and when I wake up, I don't feel like anything has changed. I feel like I'm fooling myself with the whole Jesus thing. At such points, I still feel like a corpse."

David nodded. "Now, that's the Devil trying to bring up your past to obscure your vision of the glorious future you have in Christ. Your old man was crucified with Christ, Eben! That corpse, that lifeless, abused you died with Christ and when Christ rose up, you rose with him as a new creation. You don't have to die to survive because Jesus already died for you. He died for your sins and rose for your justification and salvation. He did that not just to give you a mere survival, but to give you life, life eternal and abundant. Whenever the Devil brings up your past, open your mouth to declare what God's word has said about you!" David opened up the glovebox compartment, picked out a piece of paper and a pen and scrawled scriptures pertaining to the believer's identity on the paper. He handed the paper over to Eben. "Read the scriptures over and again till every fibre of your being comes to terms with what is already done in your spirit."

Eben took the piece of paper from him and thanked him before he folded it neatly and shoved it in his pocket. He went on to share the incident that happened the last time the Chief sent for him. Eben narrated how he had prayed that God would

protect him, even though doubt filled his heart. Chief's driver came as usual and Eben's Mum handed him over. Not long after the driver took off, the car developed a fault and stopped in the middle of the road. Eben had to push the car from behind while the driver manoeuvred the steering with a hand and with the other pushed the car so it could be moved from the middle of the road. The driver called his mechanic who arrived in a heartbeat with a green overall and a sac containing his tools. The mechanic came to the already open car bonnet, he observed and fiddled around, trying to diagnose the source of the fault. After thirty minutes of the mechanic hollering 'start the engine, raise it', tinkering under the hood of the car and making speculations, he turned up dry. When he left, the engine wouldn't even turn over. Chief called the driver. He was waiting, he hated waiting. The driver managed to explain the situation of things and Chief Rògbà said he was going to send another driver to get the boy. On the driver's way to pick Eben, he was involved in an accident minor enough to leave him with no major injuries, but major enough to land him in a hospital. That night, Eben walked back home unscathed. He knew it was a miracle. That was the last time Chief Rògbà sent for Eben, he was probably still reeling from the damage to two of his cars and a member of his staff, but Eben feared that as soon as he regained stability, he'd come for him with a revenge. David assured him that God, who was fighting for him, was more than enough to contain whatever situation might crop up in the future. But secretly even he feared for Eben.

"I want to go to a *buka* and get my fingers dirty. It reminds me of simpler times." He paused, putting a finger on his chin. "Simpler times, that should be the title of my next poem."

David smiled and started the car. "Perhaps you'd teach me how to write."

Eben tutted. "I can smell it on you, you'll make a terrible writer."

David winced. "Not nice."

Eben laughed. "Giving up early is sometimes the best choice. You and I know you have no real interest in writing."

They pulled up in front of a local eatery with a signpost that boasted, 'Your belly's idol'. David found watching Eben eat both amusing and embarrassing., the way he licked his fingers occasionally with a smack a little too loud, the way he hissed particles out of the spaces between his teeth, and the way he threw and caught eba bolus before dipping it in soup was humorous. When Eben caught David staring, he smiled, swallowed a morsel and mouthed, 'simpler times.' A dismal smile upturned the corner of David's mouth as he realised Eben might never appreciate eating in his restaurant because of the PTSD resulting from another man's selfishness and depravity.

From Your belly's idol, they headed back to Eben's. By then, dusk was already putting a tinge of orange across the sky. No sooner had David stopped his car than Eben's Mum came to confront him. She came seething.

"Where did you take my son to?"

"Nowhere he wasn't willing to go." David retorted as he got out of his car and closed the door. Eben got out and made a beeline for the backdoor, ignoring his Mum.

The woman tilted her head, and David couldn't help noticing how that pushed her already prominent bosoms forward. He also noticed her darkened lips, the pockmarks on her face, a testament to smoking.

"Listen very carefully to me," She started, jabbing a finger in David's face. "I don't know who you are and I don't care! Don't ever come near my son again! If you do, I'll call the police on you."

"Oh, go ahead. Call them. I'm sure they'll find something more interesting to pursue when they arrive. After all, I'm not the one pimping my son out." As soon as he said it, he wished he hadn't. *What were you thinking?* The realisation of what had distracted him from better reasoning made him ashamed.

Her eyes flashed and she clenched her teeth. "I don't know what you're talking about," came her gruff, belated response. "Stay away from my son." She stormed into her house.

David stood there by his car, rooted to the spot. This woman was a mess. But something about the mess she was reminded him and brought to the surface the mess he used to be. This wasn't the first time David's old man would try rearing its head, but it was by far the strangest. After coming to Christ and his release from the prison, he thought that his salvation



and the months of celibacy imposed on him by being in prison would have rid him of lust. He was wrong. He had to learn self-restraint and overcoming temptations by the help of God's word and His Spirit. Being accountable to Terrence also went a long way to help him in those early years. But this attraction to Eben's mum surprised him and at the same time scared him. How could he be feeling this way about a woman who was pimping out her son when he had the sterling Ladé for a wife?

But David didn't tell Ladé about his attraction to Eben's mum nor did he tell her that the picture of her yellow tank top strained by her bosom popped in his mind every now and again. He decided he could fight the temptation on his own. How could he own up to lusting after that kind of a woman? How could he? He: head of evangelism unit, six years free of sexual immorality, vibrant believer and man of God, successful restaurant CEO. No, he had to handle it on his own.



## CHAPTER TWO

### **INEFFABLE**

Now, lying on the hospital bed and hearing the steady drip of the IV line, David knew Eben's mum was the one who tipped the Chief off about his involvement with her son and the Chief sent his hitman after David to drop a note of warning. David's head swam. His emotions were jumbled. He remembered the reason he wanted to see Edward in the first place. Ladé was pregnant again and David was very afraid. Afraid of another miscarriage; afraid that Ladé was thinking, like he was, that he was the cause of the previous miscarriage; afraid that they might never carry a pregnancy to term and mostly afraid because he didn't know what Ladé was feeling and he didn't want to do or say anything to hurt her. There was a tape that read 'keep off' sealing off the subject of the miscarriage.

Perhaps it was because David never ventured to broach the topic or because Ladé's body language told him off, perhaps it was because not talking about it was the easier option. Neither of them wanted to have the wound out in the open, so they put a cloth over it and acted like it wasn't there. But it was. It was there, alive and festering, eating away at their union and intimacy. It was there growing between them like a gulf. Each of them was trying to handle it in their closets and trying to figure out how the other was handling it. They hadn't even got a hang of the spontaneous abortion that happened and yet again, another foetus was growing in Ladé's uterus. *Does she somehow loathe me for getting her pregnant?* David wondered. But they both agreed on a family planning scheme. Ladé chose the pill and she used it religiously.

David had a powerful man on his tail and his marriage was starting to seem like a lacklustre block of burden. David lifted his left hand and looked at his ringed finger. He allowed himself a chuckle as he waxed cynical. Who was he kidding? Who was he to think he could be a family man? He spent all his youthful years hopping from one lady to the other, how silly of him to think a sudden turn around would change his leopard spots. Jumoke and Delani were divorced already. 'Irreconcilable differences' was what Jumoke called it. If his brother, Delani, who was by far more cut out for the ideal of a responsible man couldn't keep up a marriage, David was a ludicrous joker to think he ever would. Of course, he'd desire a loser like Eben's mum. Of course, he'd cheat. It was bound to

happen. It was ingrained in the very core of his being.

Moments later, Ladé came in to check on David. She was swamped with concern and worry and David found that laughable.

"Remember when you told me I was playing the Mum because I was worrying too much? Now, you're the mum."

Ladé gave him a slight push. David exaggerated his groan.

"Oww, I'm sorry." Ladé was doting again, touching him delicately.

He burst into laughter. Ladé couldn't hold back a smile.

"I want to leave this place."

The doctor had assured Ladé that David could be discharged the same day. Ladé paused, taking some time to reflect. She perched beside David on the bed and faced him. From the three years of their marriage, David had come to learn that whenever Ladé had something pressing to discuss, she had a proclivity to sit close and look him straight in the eyes. David sat up.

"When Edward called to tell me you had been hurt, I had a real scare," she looked down and let out a terse laugh. "I thought I was about to become a widow."

"God forbid."

"I am reminded of how important you are to me. How important what we share is."

David nodded slowly. "When I was in my captor's arms, you were the first person on my mind, and then..." David

looked down to Ladé's midriff.

"About that, I think we have a long overdue conversation concerning the..." Ladé swallowed. "the mi-"

"I get."

"I was watching Moni's vlog yesterday night and I realised that I might have been self-absorbed? There are just some things that nothing prepares one for. And it seemed unreasonable for me to feel so attached to someone that hadn't even started living in the world, or to feel such grief about the death of someone I hadn't really met. I just didn't have the words... I still don't. I don't even know if it was someone yet... I-"

"It's not at all unreasonable, Mfon." David reached for Ladé's hand with his left hand that was connected to an IV line. "What you feel is legit. Legit enough to be acknowledged and given room. The baby was a part of you... of us. It's okay that we feel what we feel and yes, the baby lived."

Ladé nodded, feeling a surprising release. "Tell me, David, what did you feel?"

David sighed. "I feel like it happened because," he stopped short. "and I shouldn't feel that way cos there's forgiveness of sins and new life and all of that..."

"But..." Ladé prompted.

"I can't help thinking that the miscarriage happened as a result of something I did in the past or as a cumulative resultant effect."

Ladé looked at him funny and at the same time both of

them burst into a laugh.

"Yeah, that's ridiculous and biblically unintelligent." David admitted. "Jesus paid in full for my sins." David uttered more to remind himself than for any other reason.

"Perhaps if I ate more greens and drank more water; maybe if I didn't exert myself so much during that period, if I--"

"Stop it already." David said gently but firmly. "It's not at all your fault."

Ladé nodded. "Why didn't we talk about this since? Going forward, we will discuss everything and anything that needs communication."

"In that light, how come you got pregnant?"

Ladé smirked. "I guess we had sex."

David shook his head, smiling. "You're on a contraceptive."

"I stopped. I wanted to give it another try."

"And you didn't think that was a decision that should involve me?" David asked, face drawn.

"Yeah, I should have told you. I'm sorry."

"What would be your reaction if I cheat on you?"

Ladé's eyes narrowed. "I don't know," came her belated response. "I don't sit around preempting negative scenarios cos I understand that my heart is a field and the only seed I want thriving on this field is the seed of the word."

David looked down and twiddled his finger. "I am afraid I'm bound to fail you."

"I am afraid of the kind of thoughts you've been

nurturing in your mind. Tell me everything.” Ladé urged.

David shook his head. “I feel like I’m sinking, Mfon, these days my faith is failing. I’m not really sure of what I believe any longer.”

“Two are better than one, if one falls the other will lift him up. You know I’ve also had my moments of anxieties and fears and at such points, God used you to help me find my footing again. Honey, you can be naked before me without feeling shame. It’s how God intended it to be.”

“But it’s shameful that I’m desiring Eben’s mum.” David blurted and sighed.

Ladé said nothing for some seconds and then eventually she asked him how long since he had been feeling that way towards Eben’s mum. David responded truthfully.

“But you usually tell me as soon as you feel attraction to any lady, why did you keep this to yourself?”

“Shame... and I was starting to feel like I was wasting my time trying to be who I’m not.” He sighed. “I’m sorry, I really am.”

“Temptations are bound to come and temptation is not sin. What can result in sin is a bad management of temptation. God has supplied all we need for life and godliness and part of that is a transparent relationship between us as life partners. The Devil sees all that the Lord is doing through our home. It’s expected that he’d fight tooth and nail to carve a chink in our armour. That’s why we can’t be caught sleeping. We must stay alert, sober, watchful and prayerful. Just imagine the indelible

damage that will be done to the heart of Eben if, God forbid, anything ever happens between you and his Mum."

The very thought made David shudder.

"Exactly. And that's what the Devil wants. The Devil plants a seed of temptation in our hearts and turns around to isolate us through shame, knowing full well that an isolated soldier is an easy prey. Another thing he uses to isolate a believer is a prideful confidence in the flesh, a feeling that says, 'I can handle this on my own.' But we are the circumcision who worship God in spirit, we rejoice in Christ Jesus and we put no confidence in the flesh." Ladé held David's hand. "Today, we have learned that we are a team and whatever we face, we must face together. A threefold cord..."

"is not easily broken."

"The weapons of our warfare are not carnal, but they are mighty through God to the pulling down of strongholds. We must be intentional in casting down imaginations and every high thing that exalts itself against the knowledge of God. We bring every thought into captivity to the obedience of Christ. Every imagination or thought that does not line up with what the word says of us..."

"We cast down!"

Ladé nodded, smiling. "Every thought that is trying to be stubborn and rebellious against our true nature which is that of Christ..."

"We take captive and bring to the obedience of Christ!"

David responded, feeling a surge of energy in his spirit. He



broke into tongues. Holding hands, the two of them prayed. They prayed for their hearts, they prayed for their home, they prayed for Eben.

"I caught you tripping, sir," Ladé confronted David as soon as they finished praying. "you were *scoping* me while we prayed."

David's eyes glittered. "You'd only know that if you were scoping me too."

Ladé tsked. "My eyes were closed but I could feel your eyes on me, plus your fingers were doing that silly twitch thing they do whenever you're burning with desire."

David pouted. "Now that I've been caught with my hand in the cookie jar, you know that I want some cookies." He winked. "All the more reason I need to leave this place."

Ladé rolled her eyes. "You're recuperating, David, you can't possibly be thinking o--"

"Is it your recuperation?"

Ladé shook her head and stood up. "I have to get going so I can get an early start on dinner. When the doctor discharges you, Edward will drive you home."

"Alright, run along and prepare the way for me." He giggled.

"That doesn't even make any sense."

"But you know it does." David drawled with a sly wink.

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Nathan told Edward about his brother while they sat on a bench in the waiting room. Edward almost regretted asking

Nathan to share his burden because now that he did, Edward felt grossly unprepared to help in anyway. It all seemed so bizarre to him and all the more so when Nathan said, "I think you have some things in common with Ethan, perhaps you'd know how to reach out better."

Edward flinched. "I beg your pardon? I'm not homosexual or anything like this Ethan or Alice."

Nathan looked at Edward and looked away, saying nothing.

*Did I say something wrong? Have I pushed him away?*

"I-"

Nathan stood up, cutting Edward off. "There, your friend."

Edward turned to see David approaching them. Nathan was snapping the chapter closed, could he blame him? Edward imagined himself in Nathan's shoes and how he would've felt if he got such a curt response from someone he was trying to open up to. Edward wanted to smack himself in the face.

*Oh, Moní! See where your counsel has landed me.*

"Gentlemen, shall we?" David said when he reached them.

In the car, on their way to David's, Edward drove and Nathan looked through the window, not making a sound.

"Edward, won't you introduce us?" David piped up.

Edward chuckled. "The situation earlier didn't leave room for pleasantries. He's Nathan, an employee and friend and the man with the wound is David."

"That's all about me?" David feigned shock.

Nathan chortled. "Nice meeting you, Bro David."

"Likewise." David responded. "So, Mr Nathan, prophesy to me."

Nathan let out a half-hearted laugh.

"I'm waiting." David said.

Behind the wheel, Edward was sniggering.

"You want me to ju-" Nathan stopped, smiling. "He says you should stop clinging to memories he doesn't have of you. Their sins and iniquities I'll remember no more."

David nodded. "Word. On the spot and spot on. Celebrate grace."

Edward laughed. "Amazing. Prophet Nathan to king David. Now where do I fit?"

"The king's butler of course." David quipped.

"I don't blame you."

And so, Nathan and David struck it off pretty well as acquaintances, a relationship that would eke out into friendship, easily.



"Here I was thinking you wouldn't call today." Ethan said.

Nathan sighed. "Yesterday wasn't particularly pretty for me."

"Traffic?"

"That's the usual around here. A colleague's friend sustained a minor knife injury and the most part of my day was spent in a hospital. I don't know if you remember..."

"That you hate hospitals? Of course, I do."

Nathan chuckled. "Thank God for delivering me from all that recurring ear infection that plagued my childhood."

There was silence. Not the typical awkward and strained silence that punctuated their conversations, but something warmer. A pause in time to reflect on memories.

"I can't enter a hospital without thinking about those days." Ethan said eventually.

Nathan smiled. Ethan was the one that accompanied him to the little clinic in their town most frequently.

"Speaking of hospitals," Nathan swallowed. "How did your appointment go?"

"What app... oh, that, it went well." Ethan lied. "Your friend, the one who got stabbed, how did he come about that?"

"He's actually a friend to my boss," Nathan sniffed a chuckle. "Well, I don't know exactly what happened but robberies in broad day light are not exactly surprising in Lagos. Perhaps he wasn't complying."

"Crazy place."

Nathan asked. "Not all bad, Nigeria still has its allures and I'm sure you know this."

"Mum's *gbẹ̀gìrì*, I miss that."

The duo laughed. It was a welcome surprise that they could have something to laugh about together, in spite of their

differences.

“She'd love to hear you say that.” Nathan mumbled.

“Yeah, right. You know she wants nothing to do with me.”

Nathan tilted his head back, knowing it's true. He sighed. “Thank you for the call, *ẹgbọn*, might just be the highlight of my day.”

Ethan bit back the first reply that came to his mind and said, “I didn't call, you did.”

After dropping the phone, Ethan's mind was bent on taking him back to the years in Gbọ̀ngàn. It all started with Tájù. Tájù, the tallest boy in class, the one that knew the right thing to say to get anyone cackling. They had been in primary one and at the time and Ethan was five. The day Tájù went from being the tall boy that intimidated Ethan with his easy, winsome charm, to being an object of affection was a sweltering Monday afternoon during break time. Ethan was watching other students dart around on the playground from the window of his classroom. He had given up on trying to fit anywhere. He was horrible at the games the boys played and nursed a secret interest in the games the girls played, an interest he couldn't dare explore without being called names. Not like staying away from playing with girls spared him anyway, he was still called names for how he walked, his gesticulations, his propensity towards girls' talk. 'Sissy' and 'woman wrapper' were his names, and once, when Julius, the boy in primary five who gloried in being known as the smartest kid on the block, wanted

to flaunt his proficiency in English, he called Ethan a limp-wrist.

So, watching his mates have fun was the closest he got to having fun but sometimes, when luck smiled on him, Lydia will join him at his desk to narrate stories to him and fill him in on the latest gossip circling around town.

That Monday afternoon, Tájù was playing soccer with some other boys and when he scored a goal, the boys came around to ruffle his hair, hug him and carry him on their shoulders. In that moment of excitement and revelry, Tájù poked at another boy's groin playfully. The boy returned the poke and the game went on. But the picture stayed with Ethan, the other boy poking back at Tájù. Ethan suddenly felt a curiosity to try same, the thought flitted across his mind like a butterfly over a hedge of flowers, and like a flitting butterfly, it fascinated Ethan. Just like he would a flitting butterfly of interest, he pursued the thought, imagining what it would feel like to touch Tájù. He didn't know the name to call this new interest, he even didn't understand why he felt that way, but he knew he desired to poke at Tájù just once. It was there in his thoughts all through the day and featured in his dream once or twice.

The day he got to fulfill his fantasy, he felt a rush of excitement and adrenaline, because somehow, he knew in his heart that sneaking a touch while he was alone with Tájù in the school toilet, wasn't right, even though Tájù didn't object. It didn't happen just once. It never happens just once; Ethan knew that now. He and Tájù fondled often but they never said

anything about it. It seemed like a guilty pleasure both of them indulged in while looking away. They had a way of telepathically communicating what they couldn't with words. A wink, a tilt of the head, an 'excuse me sir, I want to go and ease myself.' This continued until third term of primary two when Tájù suddenly stopped showing up in school and Ethan later learned that his father got a job in Lagos and the family had moved. Ethan felt a mix of loss and relief.

After Tájù was a respite of about a year, a period in which Ethan thought what he had with Tájù was a one-off, silly adventure that wouldn't recur. But not long after they resumed for first term of primary four, Felix, a primary six student bought him snacks from the kiosk and passed a remark about Ethan's shoes. Ethan rejected the snacks because of home training but what his home training couldn't restrain him from jumping on was the glimmer in Felix's eyes as he tickled the curve of Ethan's legs, where his school shorts stopped. It went on with Felix till the session was over and he too travelled out of town to get his secondary school education in a federal government boys's school.

Chibi owned a clothe shop in Gbọ̀ngàn and everyone knew him as '*ọmọ Ibo aláṣọ*', many disliked him just for the success of his business. How dare he come from the East to thicken his purse off the meagre fortune of the locals? But their sentiments were immaterial, because in spite of them, they still shopped Christmas clothes for their children from *ọmọ Ibo aláṣọ*. Chibi was the first person Ethan encountered who spoke freely

about what they did in his dark warehouse. It made Ethan embarrassed at first, but as time went on, it made Ethan ease into the life Chibi made seem like a norm. Chibi was wiser in the ways of the world and he gladly plunged Ethan deeper. He was the one who introduced Ethan to gay porn. He had an inexhaustible stash of the 'blue films' and he always welcomed Ethan into that inner room of his warehouse that smelled of old cartons and dust. There, they practised everything they had watched. Chibi's brazen manner and coarse jokes enamored Ethan and bolstered his confidence. What he considered an ineffable abomination, Chibi rocked with a flourish. The priest at their church always talked about the unimaginable filth of Sodom and Gomorrah with a scrunched-up nose and a dramatic lilt. But Chibi had money and everything he wanted. Why wasn't God pelting him with fire and brimstone?

By the time Ethan realised what was hidden behind Chibi's faux confidence, it was already too late; deadly lines had already been crossed.

The stirring in Ethan's bed called him back to the present.

"You're not sleeping?" The man in his bed rasped, turning to face Ethan.

Ethan looked away, feeling a little pissed for having his journey down memory lane interrupted.

"A penny for your thoughts?"

Ethan shook his head. Why was Nathan's call affecting him so much? Why was Nathan shaking up memories of the



past in Ethan's heart? Was he doing this on purpose? Was he trying to get into Ethan's head in order to make him vulnerable to more religious dung? Ethan jerked his head up, defiantly.

*You've failed, Nathan.*

Old defenses rose in his heart, and he vowed never to pick Nathan's call again. He turned to the man in his bed, an old flame, the oldest actually.

*"Tájù, what we have has aged like fine wine."*

*Has it really? Moments of exhilaration then emptiness. Same old, same old.*

Tájù kissed Ethan's palm. "I'm glad we've found our voice outside a society that buries one's voice before one knows how to speak."

Ethan nodded, recalling the horrors and fears Tájù said he faced back at home because of his sexuality.

*All religion ever does is rope one into bondage. I've broken into my freedom; I won't let anyone lure me into a pit of ignorant bigotry.*

"Since it seems sleep has chosen to elude us, let's make the most of the night." Ethan said, rising from the bed. "Let me get wine and glasses, our freedom is worth celebrating."

Tájù held him. "There are other ways to celebrate."

Even as Ethan responded with a simper, he couldn't deny the deep-seated dissatisfaction and question that nagged at him. A question that had been a knot in his heart for years: *is this all there is to life?*



Nathan was approaching an imposing edifice that made shy the structures surrounding it. The gate of the mansion was large and ornately designed but this mansion was heavily guarded. In front of the gate, an array of nothing less than six thickset men stood with arms eager for action crossed to emphasize their chests and faces that seemed to have never known a smile. They wore black leather jackets, over T-shirts of the same colour and Nathan was certain that their boots would reek for eons if they should take them off. Nathan approached the gate carefully. He was sent with a legitimate message to the man of the house. Surely, these bouncers would let him in.

Nathan wasn't allowed to explain himself before one of the men with a feral scowl grabbed him squarely by the shoulders and flung him across the street as though he weighed nothing more than a bag of wood shavings. Nathan shrieked as he careened through air before landing with a painful thud on his haunch. It took some seconds before he regained balance and his vision came into focus, but when it did, the mansion was no longer there. What stood in its place was a manacled man in rags, but the face was unmistakable. It was Ethan. It was a lucid dream, a dream in which he knew he was dreaming but nonetheless frightening.

As soon as Nathan woke up, he knew the meaning of the dream. He fiddled around on the bed for his phone. He searched on Google for the scripture that was floating in his

mind. It didn't take long to find it, Matthew 12:29.

*"Or else how can one enter into a strong man's house, and spoil his goods, except he first binds the strong man? And then he will spoil his house."*

Nathan dropped the worn leather-bound Bible in his laps. This Bible had been handed down to him by his father. Even though the man was blind, he treasured the Bible and it was customary for him to sit on the balcony of their unflattering home in Gbongàn every evening and have either of his children read out the Bible to him. The peaceful mien that always settled over Elder Gbádébò Mákànjúplá's face whenever the Bible was being read to him was an indelible stamp on Nathan's heart.

*Who reads the Bible to Dad now that both of us have left home?* Nathan wondered only briefly as his thoughts bounced back to their initial course. The dream. The scripture. The meaning was all too glaring. His brother's soul wouldn't just fall into his laps. Satan wouldn't give up on his captive without a fight. Nathan had to contend for Ethan's soul.

He sprang up from the bed and started praying in other tongues, ready to wage a good warfare but almost as soon as he started the prayers, the Holy Spirit intercepted him.

*Forgive Edward.*

Nathan sighed and said, "Lord, I choose to forgive him, help me."

He continued interceding for Ethan and then he studied the Bible before he started his day. It dampened Nathan's spirit to find that Ethan had blocked him on WhatsApp, but it didn't

entirely come as a surprise, not after the revelation he'd seen. He saw a WhatsApp message that brought a smile to his face. It was from Réniké and it read, 'I enjoyed the first date... A second is in order. So, I'm asking to take you this time.'

Nathan quickly thumbed a reply. 'A proactive Queen...' he added the hands-up emoji. '...I stan. Where are you taking me and when?'

Her reply came immediately he entered the office building. 'D's place. What time works for you?'

Nathan had a big grin on his face. He saw Edward.

"Morning, boss."

Edward raised a hand to stop him and hurried to him. "Bro, what I said the other day at the hospital was wrong and I'm sorry, shey you go forgive me?"

"On the condition that I get a raise."

"Isn't that bribery and corruption?"

Nathan shook his head. "It's fine... Guess who asked me out on a date?"

Edward furrowed his brows. "Asked you out?"

"Yup. Hint: I asked her out the first time."

Edward gasped. "No way... That babe from the EST event? Dude, how do you do this thing? Come and teach me abeg, it's like I've forgotten how to get into a relationship."

Nathan laughed. "Or you've not yet met the one."

"Where is that one hiding for God's sake? Time dey go now."

"Shey you will ask God that question?" Nathan

retorted. "This Rénìkè' sef, I'm not sure about her yet, I'm just, you know, testing the waters."

They pushed small talk a little more and parted to attend to their official duties. As Edward walked back to his office, he had to admit that he was not being completely honest. What was holding him back was partly his own fears. Edward had been reeling since Audra. Audra left him over six years ago but with her left something in Edward: hope. Two years back, Edward ventured into a relationship with Amara. He liked Amara and when he prayed about her, he had a go ahead. He discussed it with the Nwafors and he started talking to her. It was exciting at first, it felt nice to have someone to share his daily experiences with. Amara had a flair for straight skirts and billowing blouses and Edward loved how she looked in them. He loved her industry and mettle. She ran two businesses and a day job. She shared Edward's passion for teenagers. He recalled how both of them had planned to organise meetings for teenagers, buzzing with excitement as they thought of different programs they could throw in to make the meetings engaging and well rounded.

Every day, Edward woke up grateful for the gift of Amara but after a few months, Edward became uncomfortable with the ease of their relationship. He had been holding his breath all through the early phase of their relationship. Without realising it, he was waiting for a firecracker, for a snag, a challenge. It was the norm. The good comes before the real. Real had to be bad, or if one was lucky, coloured with bad.

When he saw nothing on the surface, he started digging around for something. Frantically clawing around with questions and attitudes till he found something.

Gidi Believer's Conference was an annual weekend retreat for Christians in Lagos. Amara sent the flier to Edward on WhatsApp and told him they had to be there. One of her favorite ministers of the gospel would be coming from the North to minister in the conference. They sat together during every session and compared notes during the breaks, nibbling on snacks. On the last day of the meeting, the evening session was for impartations and the flow of spirituals. While the choristers sang and the man of God was ministering to people, Amara fell under the power. Now, that wasn't unusual, even Edward had swayed a couple of times and felt electric sensations course through him as he prayed and sang. The atmosphere was heavily charged; it was not surprising that someone would fall. But Amara's ear-piercing shriek got the minister's attention and he stepped off the podium, mouthing 'thank you, Holy Spirit' as he approached her. He came to stand before her, by now, Amara had become hysterical on the ground. Whipping her head left and right, making a mess of her hair, jerking her legs furiously, flailing her arms. An usher covered her up with a shawl and two others tried to restrain her. The minister put the mic away and spoke over Amara. "That satanic pattern is broken right now in the name of Jesus!"

Edward watched as a guttural male voice spoke through Amara. "Leave me alone. Onuoha gave her to me, leave me

alone.” Edward pinched his thigh to be sure he wasn't dreaming.

“She is the temple of the Holy Ghost; your time is up. Get out in the name of Jesus.”

Amara's slithering became more intense, her cry more reckless. The minister turned away from her, his work done. He went to the next row and ministered to a brother. Amara continued thrashing on the floor, then she let out a loud burp before she went still. Edward's stomach became water and he had to hurry into the convenience to empty his bowels. In the toilet, he felt new sensations that had nothing to do with the power of God.

When the meeting was over, it was with great excitement that Amara volunteered the information about her deliverance to Edward. Her Dad had been a cult member; a ruthless killer that was known in Abakaliki for his notoriety. Amara also said there was a pattern in her life that troubled her ever since her Father died. A dream that came yearly in which she saw her father standing across a river clothed in a bloody coat of fur and beating a local drum. She would then find herself wading through the water. Next, she would be at the shore, having sex with her father. As she spoke, Edward was glad she wasn't looking at him, otherwise she would have seen his shudder.

Edward calmed his gut and reminded Amara of the authority she had in Christ. She could exercise that authority to halt every negative pattern in her family. She was a child of God,

redeemed from the curse of the law and engrafted in the lineage of Christ. Amara nodded. They prayed together and both of them knew there that the siege was broken. Amara broke into singing and worshipped God but Edward's heart was troubled. He didn't sleep the entire night. All he could think of was that Amara had such dark baggage. What if it resurfaced? Did he want to spend his life grappling with her issues? How much of her father's sinister traits were locked in her genes waiting for the right chance to find expression? Would this stain of her family spill over to her children? He couldn't get the image of her writhing on the tiled church floor, scattering chairs, and drawing attention out of his head. The malevolent voice that spoke through her rang in his ears and in contrast, he thought of her gentle, feather-to-the-ear-like laughter. That evening was the day Edward checked out of that relationship in his heart. But the break-up didn't happen until four months later.

The memory of the day they broke up lanced across Edward's heart. Amara had organised a fundraiser for a building project and while others chit-chatted over drinks and small chops, Edward held his punch in hand and watched Amara move around the room in her halter dress like a ball of grace. It was one of those days when he was caught up in her wonder, when he momentarily dissociated her from the hulking beast his mind presented as her father. That night, Edward wanted to hold Amara. That night, he longed for her and was eager to marry her already.

The guests left one after the other, but Edward waited,



standing in the middle of the hall, holding Amara's hand. He leaned down and whispered, "You are so amazing at what you do."

Amara looked up at him and she pinned him with her eyes for a long time. Edward became uncomfortable. He broke the eye-contact.

"I should get you some spring rolls. I doubt you've had anything all day." Edward wanted to escape with that but Amara tightened her grip on his hand.

"Is that really what you think of me?"

Edward nodded. "Yes." And it was true. He thought she was phenomenal and inspiring. He admired her for that.

"But is that all you think of me?"

"I- I don't quite get that."

Amara sighed and let his hand go. She looked straight on. "It's been a beautiful evening,"

Edward sighed, relieved to be away from the thorny path their conversation was towing. "You pulled this off."

She looked at him again and smiled. "I should be happy."

Edward didn't say anything. He didn't want to probe. He would rather stay with the illusion of placid waters on the surface. But Amara was done circumventing the chasm that was growing between them.

"Sometimes, I feel like after I told you about my Dad and all of that, you stopped seeing me the same way. But then I think I'm being paranoid. But then again, you never ask me anything

about him or the dreams or my mum... my siblings. And you should be curious. Anyone will be curious. So, it's either you don't care--

"I do care about you, Amara. A great deal."

She nodded. "I know... but do you see me the same way?"

Edward was tongue-tied. The silence was thick.

"If you don't see me--"

"Amara, don't, please. You are not your father."

"Are you saying that because you believe it or because it's what you're meant to say?"

"I don't even know any more. These questions are hard."

Amara nodded and rubbed her eyes. "Let's end this relationship."

"Please don't say that."

Amara looked at him and shook her head. "You know you've not been here for a while. Let's stop deceiving ourselves."

Amara walked away. Edward didn't follow her. He went into his car and cried, listening to words of R. City's song play in his heart.

*If I showed you my flaws, if I couldn't be strong,*

*Tell me honestly,*

*Would you still love me the same?*

Amara was married now and the last time Edward talked with her, she confirmed that the affliction never reared a

head again. Amara was married. Audra was married with three children. The world around him was spinning, progressing, but he was there, with his feet in lead blocks.

*It's useless thinking about what could have been. Snap out of it, Edward.*

Edward thought about what happened with Nathan the other day at the hospital. He got Nathan to trust him with the burden on his heart and when he heard it, he shrank back, leaving Nathan more injured. Wasn't that what he did to Amara? The difference in Amara's case would be that he was the one who ended up more injured.

*How you steward trust and information matters to me.*

Edward knew the Lord was scolding him. He sat on the floor in his office and bowed his head, his heart heavy. He missed out on the blessing that Amara was because he chose to shrink into himself. It was a trauma response, the abandonment issue from his past expressing itself as fear of commitment, but nonetheless inexcusable.

"Lord, I'm sorry."

He put a fist over his mouth.

"Have I missed it permanently with regards to marriage?"

*It's true that I'm a God of second chances, but I will have to tend and prune you well so that you won't mess up your blessing.*

Edward nodded. He was the cause of his own delay. His slow responsiveness to the Lord's dealings was the reason for the delay.

With an open heart, Edward mouthed, "I am ready. Vinedresser, prune me, dress me. Prepare me for what you have prepared for me."

In response to his heart cry, the Lord dropped an assignment on his heart.



## CHAPTER THREE

### UNCHARTED

Edward hurried to meet Nathan. "Bro,"

Nathan turned to him. "Boss, what's up?"

Edward smiled. "I want to ask for Ethan's contact."

Nathan's smile waned. "Why?"

"You know what you said the other day about us having some things in common,"

"Never mind. It's a bad idea."

"I just feel God would have me reach out to him."

"Look, Ethan blocked me on WhatsApp. There's no point. We can only pray for him."

Edward nodded, disappointed. He shrugged. "No wahala. So, are you ready for your date tonight?"

Nathan rubbed his palms together. "I'm going home to

freshen up before I head to D's place."

"Oh, you know David runs that place, right?"

"I heard. But I've never been there before."

"I'm sure it won't be a letdown."

"I hope so."

Nathan left. Edward stood for a while thinking about the new burden to reach out to Ethan that had been laid on his heart. He decided that he would have to find Ethan on his own. He whipped out his phone and searched Ethan on Instagram. It brought up countless suggestions. What was Nathan's surname again?

He searched Ethan Mákànjúọlá. No match found.

*What is it Nathan called his brother's new name? Angela?*  
*No... Alice. Yeah, Alice.*

Edward searched for Alice. Countless suggestions.

He searched Alice Ethan. No match found.

*This is pointless.*

He tried Facebook. Ethan Mákànjúọlá brought up an old account that looked like it had gathered cobwebs over the years. Hoping against hope, Edward sent 'Hello there.' Via messenger.



Nathan walked through the revolving doors of the restaurant, smiling. Rénìkẹ́ sighted him almost immediately, and looked away. The tentative way she worried her lower lip made Nathan giddy. He got to the table and settled across from

her.

“You look beautiful.”

Rénìkẹ́ scoffed. “You don't look bad yourself and I forgive you for being twelve minutes late.”

“I forgive Lagos traffic too.”

They made meaningful conversations about the difficult times they had faced in the past. Nathan was so embroiled in Rénìkẹ́'s tale that she had to remind him to eat before his meal grew cold. From the corner of his eyes, Nathan spotted David spying out on them. He did a double take and shook his head, stifling a grin. David wiggled his brows at him and raised his thumbs through the slated shutters.

“See that guy.”

Nathan turned his head in the direction Rénìkẹ́ pointed with a jut of her lower jaw. He saw a couple walking to a booth. The first thing he noticed was that both of them were waltzing.

“He's gay.” Rénìkẹ́'s eyes were fixed on them.

Nathan swallowed his sudden anxiety. Why was his heart thumping because his prospective wife thought a random guy was homosexual? Why was Rénìkẹ́ profiling him thus?

“Look at the way he hangs his hand; see the way he's laughing.” Rénìkẹ́ scoffed. “He's trying to suppress it; he might have his poor girlfriend fooled, but I can see right through him.”

In a way that was disconcertingly embarrassing and poignant, this guy reminded Nathan of Ethan. He had to steer Rénìkẹ́'s attention away from him.

“So, how did you pull through that whole debt scenario

after the business crashed?"

Réniké didn't look away from the duo. "Have you ever had an up-close interaction with any gay before?"

Nathan let out a grunt that could be a yes or a no.

"Huh?"

"Who hasn't?" Why was Nathan feeling defensive?

"Fair point. The media doesn't even help these days. Our world is trying its hardest to make them seem normal."

*Aren't they? Are they aliens?*

"I pity that poor girl. She'll probably think she has found true love... I won't be surprised if that guy is using her to get close to her brother."

*Brother.* It was becoming more and more uncomfortable for Nathan to stay still. He excused himself, saying he had to use the bathroom.

Nathan sat on the toilet bowl, emptying his troubled bowels and wondering why his beautiful night out with Réniké was turning into pure torture. As hard as he tried, he couldn't sort his emotions.

*Why am I so troubled by her condescension?*

*Is it truly condescension? Isn't homosexuality sin? Am I compromising the standards of scripture because my brother is the one sinning? Doesn't that make me a hypocrite?*

*No, she's being condescending. Jesus hates sin, not sinners. He has called us to preach the gospel to the lost, not point fingers of accusation at them.*

*Why then did I run away when I was supposed to correct her?*



*I am a coward.*

*Is it even fair that people just look at a random stranger and because they act a certain way, or because they gesticulate and sashay, conclude they're gay?*

Nathan recalled all the times people made derogatory comments about his brother's sexuality because of his personality, while they were very young. He remembered a day when he was in primary two or was it primary three? He had been playing soccer with his friends- all of them shirtless and sweaty- in the middle of a street, when Kúnlé said, 'Natty, why is your brother like that?'

Nathan trapped the ball under his right foot and faced Kúnlé. "Like what?"

"He go dey do like woman..." Enoch pointed out.

"Yes o. Why is he not here playing ball with us? E fit dey play ten-ten with girls now."

"Why doesn't he ever sit with other boys like him during break? Why does he like girls so much?"

"Why is he always tying his cardigan around his waist?"

"Or making dolls out of his cardigan?"

"You people should leave him alone." Nathan kicked the ball to Enoch.

"Are we even sure he's a him?" Kúnlé said and everyone burst into laughter. People fueled the joke with their own comments. Nathan knew his brother could hear everything. He knew because Ethan had agreed to wait for him while he played ball. He was seated beside a nearby shop drawing comics in his

exercise book. Nathan bit his lower lip and went to where his brother had been. He saw Ethan running home. Nathan picked his bag and followed his brother.

“Jesus, why has my brother always brought a plague of endless questions? Why does he show up at every turn of the way to dampen my happiness?”

Someone knocked on the toilet door and that jolt made Nathan realise that he had lost track of time. He must have kept Rénìkẹ́ waiting. He quickly cleaned up, got dressed and rejoined her.

“That took a while.”

“Pardon me.”

Nathan was relieved to see the couple had gone. He carefully steered their discussion as it meandered, ensuring they did avoid the effeminate stranger and anything remotely close. Once they stayed away from anything that would trigger memories of Ethan, the night was palatable.

When Nathan got home that evening, he wished he had said something at the restaurant. He felt like he had failed his brother. He decided to distract himself with a movie. He turned on his laptop and settled for a horror movie. He needed something that would engage all of his faculties and leave no room for Ethan, the guy from D's place or Rénìkẹ́'s homophobia. He was getting absorbed in the movie when his phone started ringing. It was his Dad. Nathan was surprised.

“Good evening, daddy.”

“Èyítáyò,” The older man chuckled. “how are you?”

Nathan smiled as he adjusted to a sitting position.  
"I'm... well, I'm okay."

"You are not calling home these days; I hope you are not forgetting us already?"

"Haba, daddy. I can't forget you or mummy now. I apologise for not calling as much as you'd want, but daddy, we spoke just the day before yesterday."

"We did?"

Nathan smiled and as quickly as his smile appeared, it vanished. What if his Dad was actually becoming senile?

"Daddy, remind me, when was the day you became saved?"

His father sighed and Nathan knew he was thrilling at the memory. He always did.

"The 8th of August, 1981. That beautiful afternoon, I was walking down..."

Nathan chuckled. "Daddy, I know the story by heart. You've recounted it countless times."

Elder Mákànjúqlá chuckled. "But you asked."

"I just wanted to be sure you are not forgetting things."

Elder Mákànjúqlá said nothing.

"Daddy?"

He sighed. "It is well."

"What's the problem, daddy?"

"I said it is well."

"You only say that when there's a problem. Daddy, talk to me."

“Stop worrying your small head *jo*. Your mother is here, speak with her.”

As they passed the phone, Nathan could hear their muffled banter. His Mum was saying something about Nathan forgetting them. Nathan shook his head.

“*Ọkọ mi!*” His mum enthused.

“I’m the only *Ọkọ* you have, woman.” Elder Mákànjúolá chipped in.

Nathan laughed. He knew he was on speaker. “Daddy, there is *Ọkọ mi* as in my husband, that’s yours. Nobody is contending with you. But then again, there is *Ọkọ mi* which means my dear, now that is mine.”

“I’m her husband and her dear. Keep off, young man. Go and look for your own wife and dear. We are waiting for her.”

Nathan laughed.

“Who is laughing with you? As big as that Lagos is, you’ve not been able to see one woman to marry?”

He thought of Rénìkẹ́. “Daddy, it’s not as easy as you think.”

“Oh, marriage is now rocket science, àbí?”

“Some would argue that rocket science is as simple as ABC when compared to marriage.”

“Daddy Èyítáyọ̀, let me speak to this boy now.”

*Daddy Èyítáyọ̀... That broke Nathan’s heart. He wasn’t the first born. Before the great crack happened, everyone called his parents Daddy Sínà and Mummy Sínà.*

“Èyítáyò, when are you going to come home?”

Nathan sighed. “Honestly, I don't know.”

“Come next weekend. Àbẹkẹ is getting married. You remember Àbẹkẹ now? Your close childhood friend.”

“Mummy...”

“You must come oh. Why do you want that city to swallow you up? And you know you are the only child we have.”

*No, I'm not.*

“I can't make it, mummy. I have a work retreat for next weekend.”

“Èwo tún ni work retreat, bàyí nítorí ọlórún (which one is work retreat again for God's sake)? Isn't retreat for church, àbí Daddy Táyò?”

“Kò yé mi o (I don't understand oh).”

Nathan chuckled. “I'm sorry, maybe sometime next year, I'll find a way to come home. I'm really occupied here.”

Another moment of silence.

“I will talk.” His mum said.

His Dad was trying to shush her.

“Your father is dying.”

“I... I don't understand...”

“It's cancer. Prostate cancer. We discovered it late. It has metastasised into his bone.”

Nathan jumped off his bed. “Jesus! Mummy what are you saying?”

“Èyítáyò,” His father spoke ever so calmly. “Relax.”

"Daddy, for God's sake! How am I supposed to relax?"

"It is well."

"But it is not. For how long have you known this?"

"About two months now."

"Two months!" There was a trill to Nathan's voice. His eyes suddenly felt gritty like there were fine stones trapped between their lids. "why have you kept this from me this long? Why?"

"Èyítáyò, your father has said that his wish is to have his sons around before he dies."

Nathan blinked.

"Sons?"

A tentative pause. "Yes, the two of you."

Nathan did not know what to say.

"Are you hearing from him?"

*Mummy, come on, you can say his name.*

"Yeah... I heard from him about a week ago."

"Does he have any plans to come to Nigeria any time soon?"

Nathan didn't say anything.

"We could come and meet the two of you in Lagos, you know..."

*Because you are too ashamed of him to receive him in your home?*

"Are you going to try to convince him?"

Nathan let out a guttural grunt, still speechless.

His mom sighed. "You are a good son, help us talk to

him.”

And that harmless statement rubbed Nathan off the wrong way. This supposed compliment was the trigger that got Nathan to release his pent-up distaste.

“And who isn't?”

“What?”

“If all you're going to do when you see Ethan is to throw around disapproval, I think it will be a lot better if we leave him be.”

A thick silence followed. Nathan squeezed his eyes shut, the fine pebbles still burned. On the other end of the line, Mrs. Ọláyínká Mákànjúọlá put her fingertips to her temples and wet her lips, smarting.

“Even if I can't see him, I want him to see me one more time. I want to talk with him.” Elder Mákànjúọlá said, his tone sombre.

Nathan's throat burned, the pebbles seemed to have migrated there.

“I want to talk with him even if it's only once. It's my Simeon desire.”

“I don't think you will ever get that chance with him.”

*He's not even a him anymore. Kúnlé's joke from all those years cut Nathan's heart. Along with it came another question. I think it's unfair that people always profile effeminate people to be gay... but is it still unfair if they prove the profiling true by their eventual decisions? Is it a prediction cause and effect thing or is it just plain natural cojoined attributes? If it's natural cojoined attributes,*

*how come it's considered unnatural when it starts finding expression? Why did everyone make a point of predicting Ethan's sexuality when the only sign of it was effeminacy and then when it became glaring, the same people acted shocked, like it was newsflash?*

*Nathan, stop! This is not the time...*

"Èyítáyò, I think about him every day. I don't know... I don't know..." His Mum let out a sigh. "no matter how I try, I can't hate him. How can I? How? I waited six years before I had him."

"You might not hate him, mummy, but have you loved him?"

To that, she said nothing.

"I know I did things I probably shouldn't have."

"Probably? You sent him to the mountains for seven days, mummy. He was there in the rain without food or any supervision! And when he came back, something about him changed. Something happened..."

Yínká Mákànjúolá was breathless as Nathan's words provoked killer memories. She knew what happened on those mountains... Ethan threw it in her face but what was most sickening was the memory of her own response.

"Stop it, Táyò." His father said.

Nathan drew a shuddering breath. "I'm sorry."

"Look, we regret these things and I know regret changes little, but you have to believe me when I say we didn't know better. Try to look at things from where we stood, we were thrown into a case so different from the norm, so embarrassing



and it was all over the town. We had no prior knowledge of things like that... We had no examples to follow. We just found ourselves in the middle of an uncharted terrain." Elder Mákànjúqlá sighed. "Please, help us tell Ethan we love him... okay, you already made it abundantly clear that we've not modelled love..."

"I didn't mean it that way..."

"No, it's true. Just please, let him know we don't hate him. He's first our son before he's anything else."

Nathan squeezed his eyes shut. *He's transitioning, Dad. He's not your son any more.*

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Mo's vlog: Perfect parents

"I recall the day my Dad mentioned the suicidal thoughts he had been contemplating. Being the preacher that he is, he had to gauze it with scripture parlance. He said something like he had been praying Elijah's prayer, for those who still haven't gotten it, he was asking God to take his life. That bit of information threw me off because up till that point, it never occurred to me that it was possible for my Dad to have grappled with the same issues I wrestled. I have a history of depression, I knew depression has been proven to have hereditary links, yet it struck me as absurd to think that my Dad was depressed.

Why was there that missing link in my mind? That's the question I'll be trying to throw some light on today.

Depression, anxiety and related issues are not new conditions per se, they are as old as human existence, but

because our generation is more vocal about these issues, because in our day, awareness is rising, we have a tendency to think these issues are exclusive to us.

Have you ever stopped to think that maybe your father's fierce demeanour is a mask for a frustrated, worry-sick heart? What if your mother suffered post-partum depression? I know it might be quite difficult to conceive seeing that we've come to believe that our parents come from a stronger generation and that mental health issues are brittle people's problems. Lies. When we begin to probe the root causes of our parents' behaviours, we begin to understand their humanity. The humanity of our parents is something 'respect culture' obscures unwittingly. A lot of parents feel the need to project an immaculate image of themselves before their children in order to gain their respect. So, a lot of us grew up hearing our parents say they came first when they were in school and we wonder, if all parents came first, who come carry last?" Moní paused to guffaw.

"Parents feel the need to be sterling before their kids and in all honesty, I understand that feeling to an extent. I'm a parent myself and being a parent has opened up my empathy for other parents and reduced my swiftness to criticise. The day my first daughter, Şèyí, told me that I had a habit of raising my voice at Daddy, I became immediately defensive but I could feel the Holy Spirit convict me in my heart and I knew deep down that her statement was true. But it just didn't sit right with me that my flaw was apparent to my daughter. Eventually, I told her I'd

heard her and I was going to work on it.

I discussed with Barney and we talked it over amidst jokes. Why have I said all these? When we start debunking this toxic social construct that parents have to be perfect and we start considering the possibility of our parents closeted battles, we would be able to give them grace.

For the most part of my life, the relationship with my parents was strained to the point of being almost nonexistent. And even now, sometimes I still find myself groping as I relate with my Dad. For those who don't know, my Mum has passed. But one thing that helps me maintain kindness and consideration towards him is what he told me about his struggle with sadness and regret.

To my fellow parents, I know that most of us had a mental plan to be perfect parents to our children, but I'm here to tell you all that I'm washing my hands- Pilate style- off this thing." Another bout of laughter. "But seriously, it's too much pressure to live with... Parenting itself is already filled with surprising challenges at every juncture in the growth of your children, you can do without the extra pressure of being picture perfect. I've come to make peace with the fact that being a perfect parent is an illusion. But I want to be a good parent; I want to be available; I want to be accessible; I want to be a spiritual cover for my children. I am no longer afraid of my children seeing my flaws because no matter how hard I try; they'll still see them anyway. But I want them to see that I'm working on my areas of weaknesses, it will help them know that

their own peculiar flaws and weaknesses can be worked upon by the help of the Holy Spirit and that God loves them in spite of those flaws. I want them to see that perfection is not a prerequisite to receive acceptance, especially from God. I want them to know that in Christ they are made perfect and that through Christ they are daily being perfected.” Moní paused and heaved a long sigh.

“Finally, I want to be a thoroughly sincere parent. A sincere parent is by far more relatable and practically relevant than a perfect parent. Let me end by posing an action point to you: try to put a call through to your parents today, genuinely ask about their emotional and psychological welfare. Truth is they might not open up but the fact that you cared to ask would at least count for something. And you might be shocked at what your digging of love would unearth. Till I come your way next week, keep enjoying Jesus.” She waved at the camera and brightened as she remembered... “Oh, guys, I have exciting news! A new single is in the works and it's coming soon. I can't wait for you all to hear it. Keep your fingers crossed. Ciao.”



After Nathan watched the video, he sent the link to his Mum on WhatsApp. It had always been the other way round; it was usually his mum sending him heavy videos that had something to do with end time signs or 'urgent warnings' that had been recycled on the internet. She sent an effusive bunch of

incongruent stickers before she called him to let him know how much the video resonated with her and how gracious he was for extending a gesture of kindness by sharing the video. Nathan smiled as he dropped his phone. He didn't notice when Edward entered his office.

“I found Ethan on Facebook.”

Nathan lifted his head. “Young people rarely use Facebook these days, not to mention a young person like Ethan.”

“I thought about that, but then I decided to give it a shot anyway. I dropped a messenger text and left it with little hope. But after two days, I got a reply from him.”

“Surprising...” Nathan leaned back, feeling protective. “What exactly do you want with him?”

Edward sighed. “I just want to follow God's instruction. He told me to extend his love to Ethan.”

Nathan pursed his lips. He didn't know how to take this. “And how is that going?”

“He seems very guarded and honestly, I understand that. Church hurt has that effect on people. But I want to know what really happened to him.”

Nathan shook his head. “I can't trust you with that.” It was a plain, matter of fact statement.

“I'm on your side, Nathan.”

Nathan rubbed his temples. “I don't want to talk about it.”

“Fine. I'm going to start by opening my own story to

Ethan. The Holy Spirit spoke to me from Matthew five, fourteen to sixteen. The message translation says something about keeping an open house and being generous with our lives. By opening up to others, we will prompt people to open up with God."

Nathan searched out the scripture on his phone, to confirm what Edward was saying.

"I'm beginning to feel exhausted. I don't know how much fighting power I have left in me." He remembered the dream. The scene that flashed across his heart was where he was flung from the mansion.

"Which is why I want to suggest a weekly fasting and prayer for Ethan. I know by firsthand experience that mental strongholds don't thaw easily. The only solution that can disintegrate such holds is intercession and the power of the gospel."

Nathan nodded. "I can't help but wonder why you are suddenly committed to this. What do you stand to gain?"

"That I'm saved today is the outcome of other people's tenacity in interceding and witnessing to me even when I was hurting them in my blind bitterness. I owe this to the body of Christ. Everyone who has ever enjoyed the dividends of intercession has an obligation to intercede for another."

"That is a wide sweeping arc, covering every believer, seeing we have a high priest who continually intercedes for us unto the father. Not to talk of all the other human intercessors God has raised for us at different points in our lives."

"You get the drift."

Nathan smiled.

Edward stood up. "See you later, man."

Nathan nodded a fraction of an inch, a clear communication of his gratitude. He could feel the burden ease off his shoulders now that God had brought someone along with whom he could bear the weight.

\*\*\*\*

David walked into his home and let out his breath. It had been a long day.

"Mfonobite, I'm home!" He announced with more gusto than was necessary.

Ladé came out to meet him, face drawn.

"What's that face?" David asked, opening his arms to her.

They embraced and Ladé bit David's ear.

"Ouch." He recoiled and chuckled. "Why?"

"I've told you to stop calling me that. I guess I'll have to take the name literally now."

David shook his head and walked past her. "Did I tell you that Nathan and Réniké came by the restaurant the other day?" He didn't wait for a reply. "You should have seen them. They looked totally smitten by each other..."

Ladé followed David to the kitchen. "You told me and I'm happy for them but guy, I have a craving."

David sighed and turned to her. "What is it this time? Let me guess, freshly roasted donkey meat?"

"Very funny. I want bread... Agége bread."

"Ladé, for God's sake! Why didn't you call me to get it? Why didn't you get it on your way from the office?"

Ladé pouted. "The craving started not too long ago. Please now. Let's just drive there together."

"I'll go alone, stay at home and rest. I'll be back in a heartbeat." He was on his way to the dining table to grab the car key. "Pray that traffic doesn't trap me."

Ladé leaned against the kitchen doorjamb, smiling. "Thank you."

David was driving through a clear road when something caught the corner of his vision. He did a double take and slowed his car to a halt. His heart rate picked up.

Stepping down from the car, he called out to Eben who was running with a knapsack over his shoulder. The boy turned to him; he was panting.

"Where are you headed?"

"Your house."

"You know my house?"

Eben shook his head. "But you mentioned that you stay in this area... I had no other option." There was a strong lilt of desperation in the boy's tone.

"Enter the car."

Eben started spilling his gut about how Chief had been looking for him. How he had been trying to hide and he knew he couldn't stay in that house if he was going to get away from the predator. David swallowed. The image of the man pulling



on his hood flashed across his mind. The trail of blood. His cold whisper.

*If you don't adhere to this warning, your entrails on the floor will be the last thing you'll ever see.*

*I can't take him in... I can't risk it. I have my life to worry about, I have a wife... a pregnant wife. Holy Spirit, which way?*

"Please take me to your place. I don't want to go back to being with Chief. If I ever go back, I will never come out."

"Eben, I need to tell you something." He told him about the experience he had with the Chief's hitman. "He knows about me; I think your Mum told him and my place would be the first place they'd check once they find that you're missing."

Eben put his hands on his head. "Where do I go?"

"It has to be somewhere far and improbable... somewhere like Kano." It came to him as he was speaking and once it came out of his mouth, he knew that was what he had to do. He had to find a way to get Eben to Auntie Şhaléwá and Uncle Farouk that night.



David got home past eleven that night. When he walked into his home, he met his wife with company. Two men were there in the living room and Ladé's face was ashen with sweat, her eyes bearing questions.

"Where are you coming from?" The one with hooded eyes asked.

David took a moment to gather his thoughts. All he could think about was the day he stood like this before Adamant and the rest of Wings, clueless and petrified. He lifted the nylon containing bread.

“My wife had a craving and I had to get this.”

The men looked at each other. David could feel Ladé's eyes on him, he could almost palpate her curiosity in the thick silence.

“Eben is missing.” The other one with ripped jeans announced.

“He is?”

Ladé knew at once that David was hiding something. His theatrics was poor and she feared that these men would see through him.

“Since when? Where was the last place he was seen? Have you contacted the police?”

Ladé willed David to shut up. His little drama would only give him out faster. Her panic burgeoned within her till she thought a branch of it would wind itself around her windpipe and asphyxiate her. She held her breath as she observed ripped jeans and hooded eyes. Ripped jeans had his eyes fixed on David. A second passed- Ladé was sure they'd catch David's lie and kill him for it- another second passed. Ripped jeans stood up.

“We thought he'd come here.”

Hooded eyes stood up too but not before he stealthily planted a small device in the corner of the sofa he occupied.

"Mr David," Hooded eyes said. "we've met once and I made you a promise then. A promise I wouldn't hesitate to make good of. Think about your wife, think about the child that you'll never meet if you don't act right. If you see Eben or you know where he might be, tell us." He held out a piece of paper to David. "Call me if you discover anything. We sing the labor of our heroes past in the national anthem because heroes are always history."

Both of them walked out. Once the door clicked behind them, Ladé opened her mouth.

"My God! Da-"

David signaled for her to keep quiet. He quickly cut her off.

"I know... We need to pray... We are in danger."

Ladé frowned, confused. She opened her mouth again. David put a finger over his lips, frantic this time. He went to the sofa hooded eyes was on. He had noticed his hand movement and he suspected there was a recording device somewhere. It didn't take time for David to find the small device. He lifted it for Ladé to see. Ladé's eyes widened.

"Ladé, we need to pray. Let's just begin to pray in other tongues." David started praying. Ladé was still flustered and confused. David picked his phone and connected it to the speaker in the living room. He started playing a prayer charge. He grabbed Ladé by the arm and led her to their room.

"David, what are you hiding?"

"Please don't freak out."

"I won't."

David swallowed and nodded. "I met Eben on my way..."

"My God! You did what?"

David looked around. "Shh... Bring your voice down, there's a mic in the living room."

Ladé was pacing the room. "David, this is where we draw the line. We cannot play Messiah. By the way, where is the boy?"

David sighed. "On a night bus bound for Kano."

Ladé squinted. "Aunty Şhaléwá?"

David nodded. Ladé shook her head.

"You..."

David smiled. "I can't take credit for that move *sha*. I know the Holy Spirit inspired me."

Ladé went to sit on the bed, massaging her temples. "I have a headache. I was so scared sitting across from those men. David, are you sure we are safe?"

David sat on the floor beside his wife and took her legs in his laps; he kneaded the sole of her feet gently.

"Honestly, I'm scared too. I didn't want to help him when I saw him but I couldn't turn him away either. Not with his desperate pleas, not with that look in his eyes. I couldn't leave him to the predator God saved him from."

"Those guys tried to bug our house. What if we didn't discover that mic?"

David remained quiet. He wondered why he always

wound up in corners like this. This was reminiscent of the whole fiasco with Sam, Sparkles and Wings.

“And I hope we're not going to implicate Auntie Şhaléwá and her husband.”

“I don't have all the answers, Mfon, but I tried to bring Uncle Farouk up to speed on the Eben situation and they agreed to take him in. Uncle Farouk said Eben's case was the kind Auntie Şhaléwá's NGO loved to take on. Babe, instead of worrying over what could go wrong at every step of the way, why don't we trust God and leave him to handle what we can't control?”

Ladé wasn't listening to David. She stood up. “We have to destroy that mic.”

“If we do that, we'll lose our leverage, we won't be able to control what our opponent knows and we'll lose the chance to throw them off.”

Ladé nodded. “I get you... If they're listening, let's control what they think we know. Starting with going back to the parlour to pray.”



## CHAPTER FOUR

### IT'S COMING OUT

Ethan felt stressed the moment he received Kwame's text even though it was just 'hey'. He knew Kwame was texting to know if he had gone to the gender identity clinic, if he'd started taking his testosterone blockers and estrogen. When Ethan tells him he's deferred his doctor's appointment again, Kwame will go on with the whole 'it's meant to be' tale, as if Ethan hadn't heard it enough times. Kwame will tell him he's overthinking; he'll tell him to follow his heart and not lean to the pressure of upbringing, but what Ethan couldn't say was that even that in itself was pressure. The fact that Kwame and everyone in HR were breathing down his neck to get the process started, was stressing him out.

He turned off his data and settled into his thoughts. He

was overthinking. He should stop overthinking and do what he had to do. Wasn't this what he desired since he was a child? Didn't he feel like a misfit, like he was tossed in the wrong container when God/nature/the universe was sorting people into cases? Why this unease? As a little child, his guilty pleasure was wearing his mom's dresses and trying on the lipstick Lydia snuck to school. He'd always thought his life would be better, more simplified if he simply corrected the error of random assortment that resulted in his gender.

After seeking asylum and getting the warm reception from the community, he got into conversations with different people. They were kind to him, they helped him secure his current job with the agency when he showed them his hand-drawn comics. When he joined Strator's Agency, he was bursting with joy and life. He was finally living out his dreams. He attended parties organised by members of the community, partook in the orgies, shared impassioned takes when conversations started and made friends easily. It was a fellowship, a family, a dear bond. These were people like him. Finally. He was not mad; he was not odd. He was not everything he'd been called. In the safe space of the community, he enjoyed acceptance. He'd met Kwame at the office a couple of times, but they'd never had any interaction until Ethan ran into him at an open field party where he was smoking pot with some other people. In the wild swirl of drinks, drugs and unhindered passion, Kwame and Ethan got talking, a conversation that became the start of a good friendship. It was Kwame he told of

his desire to transition and Kwame told him that the company could sponsor the whole treatment. Ethan was shocked. Why would the company do that?

Kwame explained to him that it would show the company accepted and supported the community. Helping a member of the community who sought asylum from a crazed country that butchered gays was high humanitarian service. For sponsoring his transitioning, the company would get a burnished image and grants. It wasn't really charity; it was more like a strategy.

Together with Kwame, he drafted the proposal and sent it to his boss. The boss took his time before giving his approval, saying they had to secure a grant first. The day Kwame delivered the news that the proposal had been approved, he visited with a bottle of wine and a manilla envelope of pills. They got high and made jokes about how Ethan's parents would react when he visited them in his glory.

But since Nathan's intrusion, since he started calling and preaching, Ethan became uneasy. Even after he blocked his brother, the dysphoria persisted. He started researching. He sought out the testimonies of people who had transitioned. He saw how their stories resonated with him. They didn't realise as children they were not the gender they were meant to be. The mockery and verbal abuse. Then he started reading on non-binary people and this sparked a new train of thoughts in his head. What if he got the transitioning and he started feeling like he wanted to detransition? More research showed that some



people experience that. Now, that scared him. He found that trans people had a higher susceptibility to suicide, the suicide rate statistics was startling.

Ethan felt like he was suffering an existential crisis of sorts and the pressure the company was mounting wasn't helping matters. He decided on a whim to discuss with his new found online friend. He'd been skeptical about this Ed dude but the guy had proven to be a welcome breath of fresh air. He mostly shared memes and the few times they got into conversations his views were always plucked from scriptures. Ethan was seriously starting to think he was under a curse with church people. But what made Ethan take a liking to Ed was his story, which might have been made up. But why would he make that kind of story up? Out of the blues, one day after sending him a video meme, Edward started talking about how he was disowned for getting a tat as a teenager. The story intrigued Ethan and reminded him so much of his own story. It was the paradox with trauma bonding, how there was almost always a correlation. Ethan asked him why he's still around church after his experience and to that Edward sent a laughing emoji and said that he had been bitter against God and the church for the longest... but that's a story for another day. It was a story Ethan itched to hear, but he didn't say so. He suspected Ed was holding out on purpose, trying to draw him in. He had yet to fully know what Ed was up to, what he was truly after but maybe this conversation would reveal something.

There was a high chance Ed would say something

rankling. For one, he was a church person and then he was a Nigerian living in Nigeria. If he did, Ethan would have a good reason to cut him off. It would always be good riddance to bad energy.

-I'm about to start transitioning... what do you think?-

After he sent the message, his phone ringed with the reminder for him to use his HIV prophylaxis drug. He'd learned to take the counsel given at the sexual health seminar that held during the last pride month since he saw that the rate of HIV/AIDS spread in the community was shooting through the roof. The religious residue in him reared a head at some point and he wondered for a fleeting moment if the venereal diseases that plagued the community was a note of divine judgement. Apart from AIDS, there were the cancers, which bloomed aggressively and stomped life out of fellows. There was herpes too. But he quickly snapped out of it. These things happen to regular people too and the marked increase in the community was due to the proclivity to go wild that was inseparable from the community. The orgies, the drugs, the shared needles, the fact that people didn't disclose their status. They were all natural things and prophylaxis was one of the measures he took to ensure his safety.



Edward was packing up for the day when Ethan's text came in. He hurried out of his office and walked towards

Nathan's. He met him on the corridor.

"Look what Ethan sent."

Nathan looked at Edward's phone screen and shrugged.

"It's all he ever talks about."

"Yeah, you mentioned, but you said he has already started."

Nathan nodded.

"Look at this again."

Nathan read through the text this time and whistled.

"We need to tread carefully. I know Ethan, he's easily triggered."

The duo walked into Edward's office where they deliberated on what responses to send.

-Why?-

-Lol. Why not? It's my gracious extension of a middle finger to the world and its gender social construct-

Nathan and Edward looked at each other after reading Ethan's reply.

Nathan worried his lower lip for a moment before speaking. "Give me the phone."

Edward did, and watched Nathan's fingers fly over the screen as he typed a reply.

-Doesn't that defeat the point?-

-What point-

Ethan's quick responses encouraged his brother.

-Think about it, if you are damning social constructs, sticking to your form of masculinity would be a truer move.

Society says if you don't act a certain way, you're not a man. Doesn't that make transitioning an easy exit? A bow to the pressure of society?-

It was as though the light bulb Ethan had been groping around to switch on, had been turned on by that message. In a moment, all the comments he'd ever received on his masculinity played in his mind. He had thought that transitioning was the perfect statement of rebellion. Now, he was thinking again. Was it really he who thought he was meant to be a female or was he simply rehashing the words of others? Was his transitioning going to be for himself primarily? Did the company really care about him or did they just need him to be their trophy transwoman? Why did he want to transition? Did he really want it?

The light bulb led him to a dead end, because again, he was confronted with the questions that had become all too familiar: *Why do I exist? What am I really?*



"He has gone offline." Edward mumbled.

"Did I push too far?"

Edward's silence confirmed Nathan's fear.

"He's probably getting suspicious already... That's not the kind of thing I'd say."

Nathan sucked a hissing breath through his teeth. "Let's take some time to pray for his heart."

Edward shrugged. "It's all we can do for now."

They started praying. They prayed that the Holy Spirit will brood upon Ethan's heart, as he did at the beginning over the face of the deep; that the word of God will come to Ethan, calling forth light out darkness, this they prayed from second Corinthians four verse six. They prayed that the glorious gospel of Christ will shine upon Ethan's heart, that life will be communicated to the eyes of his heart. While they prayed, Nathan's phone beeped with a YouTube notification. When the prayer was over, he told Edward he wanted to stay back to quickly sort something.

“You want to watch Moní's new video with office wi-fi.”

Nathan burst into laughter. “Guilty as charged.”

“Oya let's watch it together.”

Mo's vlog: Sọrọ̀Sókè

“Today's vlog would be shorter than usual. I just want to share something that has been on my mind for some time, I'll deviate often and so it's going to be difficult to pick a title.

Let me share a story from my marriage and I'm doing this with my husband's permission. Please note that the fact that I'm putting out unflattering things from my personal life doesn't mean you are welcome to pry any further, barrage me with unsolicited advice or feel entitled to pass judgments. Cos, I've been getting some funny mails. We wonder why people have the propensity to only show the pleasant side of their lives, but we make those who dare to be vulnerable regret it with our snarling, judgmental attitude.” Moní paused, exhaled and chuckled. “That got really preachy, pardon me. To the story:

After we got married- let me back up a bit- before Barney boo met me, he had some guys from his office with whom he was cool. They knew his stance as a believer, even though they were at best nominal Christians and at worst..." Moní stopped herself. "no, I won't say that.

"Before you whip out the 'what association has darkness with light' card, let me say that he didn't have them as his inner circle Gees. He didn't seek counsel from them and he had other friends of like mind. But even with that, these people work with him. They grabbed lunch together, did meetings together. Surely some amount of closeness would develop.

"Now, there's an almost harassing boldness the children of darkness have in sin that's both challenging and ironic. I'm sure you know a lady who brags openly about how many homes she's wrecked and a guy that evangelises weed. They're usually so unashamed in the shameful. That's the ironic part. The challenge lies in the fact that we, who are children of light, who hold the word of life, the gospel that brings liberation, the very power of God unto salvation, are often shy or downright ashamed to herald the message we have. Look around you, see how vulgar music is being foisted on your mind in salons, malls, on the street, everywhere. Look at how your hall mates openly discuss sex in a way that leaves your sanctified mind wandering to forbidden paths. Yet, when it's time to preach and teach the gospel, we don't want to do too much. We want to be civil; we want to tone it down and make it comfortable for everyone.

"I have digressed, and it seems the vlog won't be so short. Picking up with the story, after we got married, I had issues with these boorish friends. They came over to our home to see football matches and whenever I served them something, they never accidentally muttered a 'thank you'. They were always so loud with their misogynistic talks and the sound of their cackles irritated me. I kept putting up with it in silence, hoping that somehow, my husband would get it. Of course, he didn't. He didn't read the signs in my frowns and attitude and the 'nothing' I grounded out every time he asked what the problem was. This further infuriated me. How could he not see?

"Now I know better. I've learned to communicate my feelings, desires, expectations and opinion clearly. Like many women, I walked into marriage with the notion that I could sulk my way into making a point to my husband. I've come to see that this tactic is simply immature and toxic. If there's something that needs to be said, I will open my mouth.

"Barney boo's friends frequented the house when the UEFA championship league was on, and they were strutting on my nerve. Then, the day came when they pushed my buttons hard enough and I let out my pent-up frustration. Guys, it was a mess. That day, they were seeing a match as usual and shouting down the roof at every shot on target. While this was on, I was in the room trying to piece my thoughts together to write a song but their noise kept cutting in on my flow. When they started their half-time banter, I stood up and walked to the living room. When they saw me, one of them said, 'Our wife, you no go show

love today?' Then the other one said, 'mummy Şèyí, enter kitchen for boys na.'

"I went off before I could think better of it. These were my exact words: 'I married Barney, not Barney and friends so I'm not our wife and I came here to tell you to stop making noise. You are not barbarians. Frankly, I'll be a lot happier if you take your nonsense elsewhere. I don't want my daughter growing around uncles who call females bitches and feel entitled to my food just because I married their coworker'." Moní laughed. "You will wonder how I'm able to remember what I said word-for-word. It's hard to forget what you regret. After saying that, everyone went quiet. Most notable was the shock in Barney's eyes. My guy didn't have a clue that I felt that way and I'd just gone ahead to embarrass him in front of his coworkers. It's what assumption and bottling up does to relationships, it pours bile and vitriol in places decent communication could have soothed.

"What I just shared now led to one of the biggest fights between my husband and I. It took the intervention of our counsellor to come to a point of mutual understanding and admittance of faults. You see, the thrust of all I've been saying since morning is this: speak up when you need to. It takes courage to speak up, but it's worth it. Be a voice for truth. Speak up for the gospel. Don't shut your mouth when your heart is burning in the face of injustice. Lies run rife when good men remain quiet because they don't want to be chaotic. But there is chaos and there is entropy that leads to positive change. This entropy could seem chaotic but it's for the greater good.



Child of God, you've not received a timid, fearful spirit but one of power, love and a sound mind. The righteous are as bold as a lion. Take your cue for audacity from the lion when it comes to declaring the truth. But of course, let your boldness be matched with wisdom. The gentility of a dove, the fierce boldness of a lion and the sly wisdom of a serpent. Speak the truth in love." Moní drew a deep breath and let it out through pursed lips. "I think I have my title now. Sọrọ̀sókè it is. So much for making a short video."

While the bloopers played, Edward asked Nathan when he would be travelling home. Nathan didn't hear him the first time and Edward had to repeat his question. Nathan said he'd go over the weekend. Moní's video had started something in Nathan. He knew what he had to do. On his way out of the company premises, he thumbed a text to Rénìkẹ́, asking if they could have a video call later that evening.

He was cooking noodles when her reply came in. She was down for the video call and almost immediately, his phone started ringing. He took the WhatsApp video call and Rénìkẹ́ started singing the cheesy rhyme she composed for him. She'd first sent it as a voice note randomly while they chatted and that day, Nathan was surprised by the melody of her voice, then amused by her childish gusto. When he listened to the VN, he imagined her wagging her head from side to side like a child as she sang, 'Nate, Nate, don't be late... It's almost eight... security go soon lock gate.'

Watching her now, she was wagging her head just like

he'd imagined. He smiled.

"You're a handful, Réniké. How did your day go?"

She made a sound that stopped in her throat and rolled her eyes.

"Rough day?"

"You have no idea. Started with snapping the heel of my shoe while alighting from the BRT bus I took to work, and trust me, the heel wasn't even high. I had to do drag and drop from the bus stop to my office."

"Drag and drop?"

"That thing you do when your footwear cuts now. Have you ever had a foot of slippers cut before?"

Nathan laughed. "I get it. *Pẹlẹ*."

"Go away jo, after laughing. How about you? What are you up to?"

"I'm trying to make dinner."

"Anybody hearing you will think you're making something special."

"I am making something special, thank you."

Réniké sneered. "Yeah, right? Isn't it noodles you're making?"

"Am I that predictable? Anyway, it's not just noodles, it's well-garnished."

Réniké laughed. "Oh, please. Na your type dey dice carrot inside noodles, snap am, upload with chef as caption."

Nathan chuckled. He wondered if this was a good time to bring up the elephant in the room. "Réniké, there's something

you did that sort of bothered me."

"Really? What did I *did*?"

Nathan shook his head and laughed. "During our last date, I think you were a bit unfair to that guy."

"Which guy? The waiter?"

She didn't remember? "No, the guy that came in with the lady... the one that you..."

"Oh," She hissed. "the faggot."

Nathan swallowed.

"What did I do?"

"What you just did. That condescension. And the assumption, how do you know he's gay?"

"Do you live under a rock? Have you really been so sheltered that you can't recognize a gay guy even when the signs are all over?"

Nathan sighed. "I'm just saying that homosexuality is a sexual orientation not a lifestyle that you can read off people's foreheads."

Réniké laughed. "It's madness and sometimes, you can read that off people's foreheads. Trust me, that guy most probably left that restaurant to hook up with his boyfriend."

"If you had a chance to say something to a prostitute, what would it be?"

Réniké paused a bit. "How is that related to this?."

"I'm just trying to sample your mind." Nathan turned off the burner and dished his noodles, even though his heart was pounding in his chest.

"I'll tell her about the love of God and share the gospel with her... She could just be another Rahab or woman caught in adultery..."

Nathan smiled approvingly. "Yaa doing well." He mumbled.

Rénìkẹ́ wiggled an eyebrow. "Bro Dave will be proud of me."

"Indeed. What if you had the chance to say something to the guy we met the other night?"

Rénìkẹ́ laughed. "I see what you're trying to do. You think I should be preaching to him? You think anything I say will change him? Nate, you don't get it. The madness is in the fibre of their being, it's not something you can preach off."

"I don't understand... You think the gospel is not enough to save a homosexual?"

"Oh, so you agree that he's a homosexual, yeah?"

"Let's assume he is."

"Look, I don't see the point of this whole back and forth. I know you're just playing the Devil's advocate. You can't seriously be supporting lgbt... bla bla bla."

"I'm not supporting..."

"Good. Then leave it be. Gays should not be allowed among us."

"They should be killed?"

Rénìkẹ́ let out her breath sharply. "Our law says they should be imprisoned."

"For what exactly?"

"The law is the law."

"But do you think it's a fair law?"

"Well, yeah. What they do is abominable."

"How so? If it's two consenting adults..."

"What nonsense are you saying?" Rénikē's voice was raised, scandalised. "You're talking about consent as if it changes the fact that it's wrong."

"Lying is wrong, cheating is wrong... yet no one gets to do time for those. Why is the story different with homosexuality?"

"You don't have an argument. People get jailed for stealing, for cheating others... actions have consequences."

"Yeah, they do. But how is homosexuality criminal? How does the sexuality of a person hurt the society if they're not predatory?"

"Of course, it hurts the society. It gives abnormal people room to roam the streets freely. Once they have that freedom, they start spreading the cancer of their abomination. Look at the countries where same sex marriage has been legalised, see how things have turned in those countries."

Nathan sighed. "Yet, you don't think homosexuals deserve to know the saving grace of Jesus?"

"They deserve to."

Nathan sighed, relieved. "Great, we are on the same page. Because the truth is, homosexuality is sin like any other and the answer to sin is the same: the redemptive work."

"I hear you."

"Yes. So, like we would reach out in love to any other sinner, we should to the homosexuals." Nathan wanted Réniké to see things his way by all means. He really liked her. He'd caught himself fantasising about raising a family with her. Having a daughter with her eyes and playful flare. He continued. "Homophobia is not how we will reach these..."

"Homophobia?" Réniké chuckled. "Are you an ally or something?"

"Ally?"

"You sound like you're marketing their pride... look, the Bible is clear on one thing: homosexuality is an abomination. People who practise it have been given over to a reprobate mind, because they did not retain God in their consciousness."

"Isn't all sin abomination to God? Didn't we all inherit a fallen nature, a reprobate mind? Is it not in Christ that we receive newness of life?"

"Why are you trying so hard to put us on the same pedestal as these guys?"

*Us, these guys...* She spoke as though they were talking about some extraterrestrial beings.

"All have sinned, Réniké. We all fell short of God's glory. It doesn't matter if you think someone fell shorter because they sin differently, before God sin is sin and the provision of Chri..."

"Ugh! I feel like we're going in circles. Why are you so passionate about this, anyway? Hold on, was this why you were acting weird the other day at the restaurant?"

Nathan swallowed. *It's coming out.*

Rénìkẹ́ went suddenly quiet. Then with a low voice she asked, "are you... gay?" She looked like she couldn't breathe and Nathan knew they were not on the same page at all.

"No, no. I'm not."

Rénìkẹ́ heaved a long sigh. "Thank you, Jesus."

"But my brother is."

She blanched. The silence grew awkward.

"Let's pick this up tomorrow. I'm really tired." Rénikẹ́ said finally.

Even as Nathan said okay and his good night, he knew the only thing that will be left to pick up the next day would be the pieces of what could have been. He sat on the double seater sofa in his living room, staring at his phone and the untouched plate of noodles before him. He forced himself to take a spoon of the noodles, chewing angrily, knowing that after tonight he might hate noodles for the rest of his life. Because it will remind him of this night. This night when he saw that nothing was working right in his life. This night when he lost a girl he had fallen in love with.

He thought about his dying father, about Ethan blocking him, about Rénikẹ́'s words. He thought about the chat between Edward and Ethan, the one he ruined. He took another spoon of the noodles. He chewed mechanically and tried to swallow; the food wouldn't go down. He spat it back into his plate. After all, his people say, *tí wájú ò bá ẹ́ lẹ̀, ẹ̀yìn ó ẹ́ padà sí*. Just like his life. He wasn't moving forward. He remembered his

dream, the part where he was tossed across the street. Perhaps it was time to start going back. His journey to Gbòngàn was a good way to start his backtracking. He grabbed his plate, walked to the kitchen and emptied it in the dustbin. He picked up his phone and pulled up his chats with Rénìkẹ́. He read through, savouring each affectionate checkup, each line of banter, every emoji, like a mourner going through the things of a dear deceased. He played her VN over and again. He increased the speed of the VN, to make it even more comical. He listened again.

*Nate, Nate, don't be late... It's almost eight... security go soon lock gate...*

It was nonsense but he couldn't stop listening to it. He chuckled dismally as he listened.



Rògbà squeezed his squishy stress ball with one hand and with the other, he drew mindless circles on the surface of his desk. Where could Eben have run to? They had exhausted every option in searching for him. They even tried long shots like the home of the snacks seller at his school. Every friend had been contacted, every relation. Eben's Mum was currently held hostage by Rògbà's boys. It had been a week since the boy's disappearance and Rògbà's team was no wiser in their search than they'd been the first day. It went beyond missing a favourite catamite, Rògbà had found a replacement, a lovely



doll of Lebanese descent born to a domestic help. The boy never spoke but Rògbà didn't mind. He did his biddings and that was enough. Rògbà feared that Eben was somewhere saying things he shouldn't be saying. By his rebellious disappearance, Eben had declared himself a scandal risk. Rògbà needed to find him not for the sake of his appetite, but to keep him silent forever. Rògbà couldn't risk any funny blow-up especially now that he was going for the gubernatorial seat of his state.

He focused his thoughts on Ebenezer and he only went in mental circles. Every possibility he could imagine, had been considered and had turned up dry. Someone was aiding Eben. Someone was hiding him. The question was who?

Rògbà tossed his stress ball aside and rang his intercom for DK. DK came in.

“Anything from David's end?”

DK shook his head. “Just prayers and general conversations.”

Rògbà nodded looking away. “I want you to flood the media with Eben's pictures. Get his mom to make a video announcing his kidnap. Pay television stations, broadcast it on radio, sponsor social media posts. Get fliers printed, let them hang on every wall on every street. And in everything put a phone number to be contacted if he's seen.”

“Whose number should I put sir?”

“Mine.”

DK turned to leave.

“And keep your eyes on David. Keep a man on his tail

and let me know if you see anything remotely suspicious.”

“Yes sir. We have also bugged his phone.”

“Good.” Rògbà reached into his breast pocket and pulled out an ATM card. He quickly scrawled the PIN on a square piece of paper and slid both across the veneered surface of his desk to DK. “Use as much as you need on the publicity. You can max it out, just make sure everyone knows there's a missing boy named Eben and he has to be found as soon as possible.”



Ladé was taking her breakfast of Èbà and afang when David stepped into the dining area.

“Before you say anything, this was what your baby asked for this morning. It's the baby, not me.”

David shook his head. “Indeed. I'm sure it was also the baby that made you eat sugar cane in the middle of the night when you were still living with Moní.”

Ladé pursed her lips. “Moní told you that?”

David laughed. “Don't worry, I'm not judging you.”

Ladé rolled her eyes. “Whatever.”

“I had a dream. I saw that we hosted a prayer meeting with Nathan and Edward in attendance.”

“Just the two of them?”

“Yeah, just both of us and both of them.”

“If you study that, would it be botany?”

David shook his head. "Is it pregnancy that's making you dry?"

Ladé sniggered. "I've always been like this."

"Of course, I know that."

"So, what were we praying about?"

David shrugged. "I don't know. We were *sha* praying."

"Sounds interesting. Maybe we should host a vigil one of these days."

"Copy that. I'll talk with Edward. Have a great day, try not to miss me too much."

David was on his way to the door when Ladé remembered that Uncle Farouk had sent her a direct message on Instagram the previous day. She asked him why he was sending a DM when he could've sent a WhatsApp message or just put a call through, but he said he thought it was safer.

"Dave, Uncle Farouk said you should call him with a public phone..."

David's eyes went wide, he signaled to the living room as he spoke. "Oh, Uncle Farouk. How is he doing?"

David, moved closer to Ladé and led her into the room.



"Rewind."

DK did as he instructed. Rògbà leaned back.

"Who is Uncle Farouk?" Rògbà asked slowly.

DK fixed his eyes on the device before them. "I will find

out immediately. But I think he's just family."

"You don't do the thinking, DK. Why is he asking David to call him with a public phone?"

DK was quiet.

"Continue playing."

DK tapped play but they heard nothing.



David sat on the bed. "I will call him with a coworker's phone, and I think it's about time we destroyed that microphone."



The next thing Rògbà and DK heard was a loud bang and static. On the laptop screen, 'no signal' appeared. Rògbà looked at DK. DK stood up immediately.

"I will hack his Facebook and look through the Farouks I might see there."

"Do that, and make it fast."



David walked into the toilet in his office with a phone he borrowed from a coworker and dialed Uncle Farouk.

"Hey, it's David."

"David, how are you?"

"I'm okay... a little on edge but I'll be fine. How is Eben?"

"He's settling in gradually. He has started talking. My wife has put him on a word and therapy regiment and I've been interrogating him."

David sighed. "Are you making progress?"

"Yeah, gradually. But I think we need to do something to stop Chief Rògbà. The news is filled with Eben's information and he's not safe. Not even here. Sooner or later, he'll be found out."

David narrated the encounter he had with Rògbà's men the day Eben was transferred to Kano, he told Farouk how they'd bugged his house.

"They might have bugged your phone as well."

David was starting to get anxious. "What do you suggest we do?"

"I've opened a case on him and I'm digging."

"And..."

"I've not found anything which makes me know he's good at covering his tracks."

"Look into his scholarship programs, look for the recipients."

"I'm on it already. But finding these people is proving difficult, there's no traceable record, no paperwork I can access. And I'm not sure we have time."

"I'm beginning to fear oh."

"Calm down. God will give us light. But I need you to do something for me."

"What's that?"

"I need you to be very discrete."

David nodded.

"I'm going to get Eben to make a video where he says it all and I'll keep that as leverage. Because now that his Mum has come forward to say that he has been kidnapped, we..."

"Might be considered criminals?"

"Calm down, David. We are praying. God will see us through."

David dropped the call and his phone beeped with an email notification. Someone was trying to log into his Facebook. He quickly denied the access and changed his password. He went to his settings and ensured that his two-factor authentication was active. He was sweating, his breathing was becoming shallow, his chest felt constricted and a tingle like needles ravaged his fingers. The last time he suffered panic attacks like this was when he had Sam's death hanging over him. He recalled the episodes where Sam's apparition strangled him.

"If God be for me..." David managed as he hyperventilated. "who can be against me?"

The tingling persisted.

"My spiritual eyes are open; I can see that those on our side are more than those against us."

His chest became tighter.

"The angels of the Lord encamp around me, they encamp around Ladé, they encamp around Eben."

A sweat rivulet rolled down his back.

"The Lord is my rock, my refuge, my hiding place, my strong tower."

David licked his lips and swallowed. His throat was so parched that swallowing was painful.

"The Lord is with me; I fear no evil. Even though I walk through the valley of the shadow of death, I fear no evil."

The light in the toilet blinked and went off. David gasped. He scrambled for the door and got into the office. It was dark too. His stomach churned.

"In darkness, the Lord is my light. I don't falter in the face of the darkness; I am the light of the world."

The light flickered back on and David's anxiety withered.



After being denied access to David's Facebook account, DK had to go through the more tedious route of going through David's friend list in search of a Farouk. He saw Ǫlátiléwá Farouk and immediately opened his page but it was abandoned. The most recent post dated back to 2015. But the exercise wasn't altogether futile, now he had a surname. He looked up Ǫlátiléwá Farouk on Google. His LinkedIn page came up. A criminal lawyer. DK continued scrolling and he saw

Farouk's Instagram page. He clicked on it. He surfed his page and saw a picture that had the location as Kano, Nigeria. This might be another useless lead, but it was something worth pursuing. He decided to hold on before informing Chief. It would give him more credibility if he found the boy on his own. He didn't want this to turn out like the Àyìnlá cocoa farm sabotage operation. After Chief got him to do all the digging and research, he committed the fun part of the job to Adamant and his men, claiming they were more experienced. DK hated those boys in Wings. They were too self-congratulatory for his liking. He'd show that he could get things done without them.





## CHAPTER FIVE

### HILLS OF GBỌNGÀN

Nathan walked into his room and dumped his duffel bag on the bed. He said a word of prayer and went into the family parlour upstairs. He met his mother asleep on the couch, with the TV droning away across from her. Nathan shook his head. They didn't even lock the door.

"Mummy!"

She jumped. "*Ejẹ̀Jésù!*"

Nathan burst into laughter.

"*Ş'ofépa mí ní?* Why did you shout?"

"You didn't lock the door."

She hissed and stood up. She enveloped him in a bear hug.

"Where is Daddy?"

“He's in the room.”

Nathan's Dad was happy to see him, but Nathan's heart broke when he saw his Father. He had become lean, his skin sagging with wasted muscle. The hair on his head was thin and wispy. His lips quavered when he asked who came into the room.

“It's me, Daddy.”

“Come, come. Come sit with me.” His Dad brightened and sat up, tapping the side of the bed gently.

Nathan sat beside his Dad and felt awkward when the older man ran his hands over his face and body. Up close, he could perceive a smell about his father that he hadn't noticed before. A pervading, dank smell. The smell of age, of hollowness. Nathan swallowed. He could also see the scars on his face, scars from the accident that claimed his vision. Flecks of black scattered around his orbits, interspersed with deeper gash scars. All the places where windshield shards had lodged the night the car accident happened.

“How are you feeling, sir?”

Mr. Mákànjúqlá chuckled. “I feel great.”

Nathan nodded and sighed.

“Why don't you read to me? I've missed that.”

Nathan brought out his phone. “Where do you want me to read?”

“Hmmm.... Read me one of my favourites.”

Nathan smiled, feeling the sweet pang of nostalgia's sting. He brought up Isaiah forty-three on his phone. He read

the first verse.

“But now, thus says the Lord...”

Elder Mákànjúọlá frowned. “Is that KJV?”

Nathan smiled and changed the version to KJV. “But now thus saith the Lord that created thee, O Jacob, and he that formed thee, O Israel, fear not: for I have redeemed thee, I have called thee by name; thou art mine.”

Elder Mákànjúọlá rubbed the top of his head, smiling. “Read it again.”

Nathan did. He read it five times before his Dad held out a hand to him. Nathan looked at the outstretched palm with confusion.

“Hold my hand, Èyítáyọ̀.”

Nathan was reluctant. What with all the body contacts? He was one averse to physical touch, especially from males and his Dad's touchy-feely energy would only make him twice as depressed.

“Èyítáyọ̀ Iyìọ́lá Olúwagbémilé kẹ̀ Nathan.”

Nathan did a mental eye roll, Rénìkẹ́ called it rolling the eyes of one's understanding.

“Èyítáyọ̀, I can feel your sadness.”

“I don't know what to say.”

“I've not called you here to mourn. I want you to be happy. The Lord has given me another day to live, he has given us the privilege of reuniting. We should be grateful.”

Nathan grunted.

“Let's take a walk.”

"I don't think that's a good idea, Daddy."

"That's why you'll wheel me. I want to feel the clean air of the hill."

Nathan goggled. "I can't wheel you up a hill."

"I will walk up the hill."

"No, no." Nathan shook his head.

Nathan's Mum plopped in then. "Èyítáyò, before you carry on with your *cho cho cho* come and lend me a hand in the kitchen."

Nathan touched his chest. "Is it me that's doing *cho cho cho*? How many minutes have I spent in this house to warrant this see finish, *nítorí ọlórún?*"

"My friend, get up and go and join your mother in the kitchen *jàre*."

Nathan smiled as he stood up. He was grateful for this escape from his Dad's weird talk. But the mention of the hills brought an uncomfortable memory. All through their growing years, their Mum didn't let them hike up the hills because it wasn't safe. There was the infamous Areo, the naked mad man who wandered the hills and hurled rocks at anyone he saw, there were the snakes too. So, it was a fantasy Nathan hoped to fulfill someday. He looked forward to the day he too would be able to relate to the stories his friends shared of their mountaineering experience. But all of that changed after Ethan's sentence. After the week Ethan spent alone on the hills, no one spoke about the hills. Nathan stopped thinking of the hill as an adventure to be ticked off his bucket list but as a living

reminder of that awful term when his brother was discovered.

"Chop the onions faster, Táyò." His Mum's pinched voice called him out of his thoughts. She took the bulb from him and chopped the onions herself muttering a Yoruba adage Nathan had heard one too many times from her. "*ba ẹ̀'ń kọ́sẹ́, là'ń kọ́ yára.*"

As we learn to work, we learn to do it with speed.

"I'd rather cut slowly than *kọ́' yára* and end up chopping my fingers, mummy."

She gave him a disappointed look and shook her head.

After some time, she asked after Ethan, speaking in an offhand manner as she stirred the soup, ladled a portion on her palm and tasted it.

"*Ẹ'ón gbùró Sínà?*" She asked.

As though Nathan didn't know she had been seeking the right moment and words to ask after him since they entered the kitchen. He knew his mom was trying to be careful. He knew what it was like to walk on egg shells. He'd make things easier for her.

"Not lately, but I believe he's fine."

She turned to him now. "You told me you talk with him. Why haven't you heard from him recently? Is there a problem?"

"No Mummy, there's no..."

"Please don't lie to me. What are you hiding?"

Nathan sighed. "He blocked me."

His mum looked through the window, the lines of strain on her face deepening. Another bout of awkward silence.

Nathan was starting to regret his homecoming.

"All the treasures of my life are hanging by threads," Yínká said. "And one after the other, these threads are snapping before my eyes."

Nathan didn't know what to say.

Yínká forced a smile. "Taste it," she held out the ladle to Nathan. "Is it well salted? Do you think I should add more maggi?"

"It's perfect."

"I know."

Both of them smiled, smiles that didn't touch their eyes, smiles that were willed out of breaking hearts.



Farouk decided he would have to travel down to Ondo to see what he might find from Rògbà's past. It was very likely he had a catamite in his time in Ondo when he ran his beverage company there before extending to Lagos, eight years ago. Initially, Farouk wanted to send an undercover agent to do the digging but he decided against it. With a case as volatile as this, he needed to be as canny as possible.

He arrived Ondo and the first person he interrogated was a sallow-skinned man called Elegbede. Elegbede was a bike rider and Farouk engaged him in a conversation as he rode him to a motel from the car park. Farouk didn't interrogate like he was interrogating, he just made small talk and tossed questions

around about the aspirants for the forthcoming elections. This Adérògbà man, he doesn't even stay in Ondo. How is he going to make a good governor?

"You no know anything oh. Na for this town that man grow, na for here hin start business. You know how many people that man employ? Na that man give Ègbón TY hin first work as driver."

Farouk paid attention to every word scattered by onrushing wind, looking for clues. Ègbón TY.

"Who be Ègbón TY?"

*"Àwọn Alayé nìyẹn. Ah, Bàbá àgbà. Ègbón TY don move jàre. Èni èlèni, he don go Ìbàdàn. Na siamon he be for NURTW ní Ìbàdàn."*

*Siamon? Siamon? Oh, Chiarman. Ìbàdàn... too far.*

Farouk kept quiet, willing Elegbede to say more.

"Èyàn l'Adérògbà o . Na him I go vote. Who you go vote?"

Farouk grunted in disappointment. His conversation with the rider had yielded nothing. Farouk would have loved to meet with anyone who served as Rògbà's domestic staff. Domestic staff usually know a lot, particularly drivers. But this Ègbón T was all the way in Ìbàdàn and he was an NURTW chairman. Reaching him would be quite hard and getting anything from him would be even harder. Farouk had to find another lead. He couldn't ask Elegbede another question about Rògbà without the risk of arousing suspicion. He had to look elsewhere.

He got to the motel. It was dingy and poorly-managed.

The lights were dim and the tiles were broken but it was a perfect cover for one who didn't want to draw any attention.

The next place Farouk took his 'watch dog sniffs' to was the motel bar. He took a corner seat and observed the activities. He watched the people milling in and out from above the magazine he pretended to read. He watched the scantily clad ladies who waited on tables. He took particular interest in a thickset man with an equally thick moustache who came in and struck off a friendly but lewd banter with the madam of the bar—that woman's wig was hideous, it made her head look like an angry porcupine. The moustache man looked like one who had been around for a while. He seemed like one who was acquainted with the streets. But he was also loud and easily distracted judging from how his eyes followed every backside that strolled past. From his little chatter with the madam, Farouk was able to pick his name just like he picked Elegbede's name from the brief brawl that broke out among the bike riders when he approached them. They were arguing on who was supposed to take the next passenger and while that was on, someone called Elegbede by name. Farouk pegged the name to memory. And he was repeating the thickset man's name in his head, an effort to peg it down in the sand of his mind.

*Siyambolá. Siyambolá. Siyambolá.*

Farouk kept his eyes trained on him. He watched as he took a seat among the other men watching a football match showing on the TV, watched as he groped the girl who served him his green bottles, watched as he laughed and lapped beer



froth off his handlebar moustache.

Farouk kept thinking. How could he get to talk with this man? How could he get the avenue to be alone with him? What questions could he ask without raising his eyebrows or drawing unnecessary attention?

The first thing Farouk figured was that he needed to keep the man's beer running. If he was drunk enough, he would talk. If he was drunk enough, Farouk's questions would evade his reasoning or skepticism.

Farouk signaled for a waiter. The lady waltzed to his table with a smile almost as gaudy as her makeup.

“Q̄gá, kí lẹ fẹ?”

“Malt.”

She looked disappointed. Farouk told her to tell Siyanbọlá that he was going to pay for all his drinks. Of course, he didn't call Siyanbọlá by name, he also didn't point. He described him. The man with the *irun'mú* and the oversized brown *bùbá*.

After serving Farouk's malt, the waiter went to Siyanbọlá to deliver the message. Farouk saw how Siyanbọlá's eyes widened. He read the expression. Wonder. Greed. Gratitude. No suspicion.

Siyanbọlá followed the waiter's jutting lips and his wide eyes came to rest on Farouk. Farouk let out a small smile and lifted his can of malt a little. Siyanbọlá lifted a fist in gratitude after which he ordered a crate.

Good.

While Siyanbọlá drank himself to stupor, Farouk passed the time chatting with his wife on iMessage and watching the football match. He paid attention to every patron that came in and he noticed that most of them stopped to greet Siyanbọlá and from the snatches of their conversations he could hear, he gathered some facts. Siyanbọlá was a vulcanizer. Good. An artisan this popular should be familiar with gossip. He had a child called Fẹmi or Kẹmi.

The match ended and people started leaving. Farouk saw that Siyanbọlá was sufficiently inebriated. Now, how was he going to get his attention?

Farouk waved the waiter over and asked for Siyanbọlá's bill. She named a price Farouk suspected was inflated but he simply asked for her bank details and he sent her the money. Having paid, Farouk stood up, careful to scrape his chair back as he did. Siyanbọlá's bleary eyes darted to him. He angled his head to the door, a move that said, let me have a word with you. Siyanbọlá nodded and tried to stand up but it was obvious that all that beer had found its way into his head, he plunked into his chair clumsily.

Good.

Farouk walked over to Siyanbọlá and held out a hand. He steadied him as they made their way out. Farouk led Siyanbọlá to the side of the building where some boys were smoking. He sat Siyanbọlá on a slab.

"Who are you?" Siyanbọlá asked in Yoruba.

Farouk smiled. "Someone who wants to be your friend."

Siyanbọlá laughed in slurred spurts. "Thank y-you. The. Drinks"

*"Kò tọpẹ."*

Farouk chose to start with mild flattery. "I hear you are a Bàbá Ìsàlẹ̀ around here."

Another bout of drunken laughter.

Farouk asked him how business was going.

Siyanbọlá prattled on about how tight things had become in the country and Farouk pretended to follow, humming and hissing with a shake of his head at the right points while he busied his mind with how to come in with Adérògbà.

"My brother," Farouk started. "The government is not even trying... this is why we must vote in a good governor. What do you think?"

Siyanbọlá started singing a campaign song for Adérògbà's political party.

*"You would vote for him?"*

*"Yes oh. Ah! Adérògbà na my pesin. Wọn mọ́ mí ní family è'gan. A jọ wà ní."*

"Wow! Did you work for him when he was still in Ondo?"

*"Leave that one. Adérògbà na my pesin."*

"Hmmm... I heard that he sponsored a lot of people's education."

"Ah! Filantropi toh bad. All those boys wey no get future again na Bàbá Adérògbà dey help their life and destiny."

Farouk's ears perked. "You sabi anybody wey Adérògbà

sponsor."

"Dem plenty *bi*.... *Wón pò bi wèrè, ọlọ́un*." He burped.

"Bastard plenty."

"You sabi anyone?"

"I no sabi oh."

Farouk almost hissed.

"Ah, but e get one guy like this wey die. Omo, e just too sad. RIP and long life and prosperity to him." Siyanbọ́lá crossed himself. "Na Akure the boy dey. The boy just too sabi book. Dem dey show am for telly that year. And na Chief Rọ̀gbà dey sponsor am."

Farouk's eyes widened.

"Wetin kill am?"

"No man know oh, but hin Mama talk say na enemies from him father side."

"You know his mother?"

"I no know her oh... How I wan know her? you no hear say na Akure the boy live? No be Ondo I dey?" He burped again. "No vex me oh."

"No vex. How you come know wetin hin Mama talk?"

"No dey ask me stupid questions, *ọ̀gbéni*!" Siyanbọ́lá was now raising his voice. "You know who I be? You wan dey doubt the credibility and accordability of the facts and figures of my story and song? You know for how long I don dey live for here? If not because of how this country be I suppose be professor oh. You know how many awards and encomiums I dey collect that year for secondary school? You know wetin dem

dey call me that year? Dey call me by my botanical name oh. Siyanbọ́lá melanogasterd.” He let out a long belch. “Èmi Siyanbọ́lá melanogasterd *lo fẹ́ ma* doubt. No dey doubting oh. Even doubting atomic theory say what? He say that no amount of volume of weight that is in space and time can accumulate...”

Farouk knew it was time to escape. If he stayed any longer, he'd be hoisted by his own plan. The man he got drunk to get talking will get him into trouble with his drunk talking. He stood up and slipped out of sight, leaving Siyanbọ́lá to the rest of his 'atomic theory'.

Farouk lay on the bed that creaked every time he turned, and he had been turning a lot. He was mulling over his conversation with Siyanbọ́lá, trying to sift out valuable facts from a heap of beer babbles. He spoke of a boy in Akure... a smart boy who died.

*Why would I take his word for it? What if he was just rambling?*

*He said the boy was smart, that Rọ̀gbà sponsored him... he said the boy made TV appearances. The dots, Farouk, the dots. Even if they're dropping from the mouth of a vulcanizer who likes his tipple, connect them. Rọ̀gbà took interest in Eben because of his outstanding academic performance.*

Farouk immediately knew what his next line of action would be. The next day he'd head down to Akure. He tried not to get his hopes up. This might well be a red herring.



Edward exhaled, rubbing the corner of his lips with a finger. He scanned his living room with his eyes, looking for anything amiss. He had double checked everything, yet he was certain he was missing something. Why was he feeling so anxious? It's just the regular teens. He walked to the three-seater sofa, he propped the pillows again and smoothed out non-existent wrinkles.

Edward glanced at the wall clock. In the next fifteen minutes, the teenagers would start pouring in. Edward had been working with Mrs. Nwafor for years giving mentorship and discipleship to teenagers in the church, but for the first time last month, the Lord gave Edward an instruction to start hosting fortnight hangouts for teens. As he prayed more on it, the instruction burgeoned with clarity. He knew the meetings would hold two Saturdays a month, each meeting would last two hours and in the space of that time, they'd pray and study the word of God. The Bible study would take an unconventional form. They'd look into scriptures based on matters the teens found pressing and the questions they had.

Edward exhaled again. If he had learned anything from his time with teens, it was that they could be quite unpredictable. What if they hated the meeting? Would they leave his house and say among themselves that 'Uncle Edward's meeting sucks'?

"This isn't about you, Edward." He said to himself. "This is about what the Lord has told you to do. It's about God and the kids he wants to reach..." The sound of a knock

interrupted his little pep talk.

Kúnlé walked in in his usual shorts. "Uncle Edward, good afternoon sir."

"Kúnlé, always the early bird. How are you..." Edward's attention shifted to the boy that emerged from behind Kúnlé. He was about an inch taller, had zits on his face and from the way he held both hands behind him and kept his eyes on his sneakers, Edward could tell he was bashful. Edward felt instantly drawn to him.

"I'm excited; I came with my friend. I literally dragged him down here. He doesn't socialise much."

Edward smiled and stretched his hand to Kúnlé's friend for a handshake.

"Nice to meet you..."

"...Adéyemí."

"I'm sure a crown would truly suit you." Edward quipped.

It took Déyemí a second but when he caught on, he smiled. A cheek bone dimple appeared with his smile.

"See, I told you. He's a cool uncle." Kúnlé whispered, nudging his friend. "I know uncles are largely uncool but here's one that's different."

The duo giggled as they followed Edward to the living room.

The meeting was beautiful. In all, six teenagers were in attendance, only Déyemí was the new face. The other five were some of the kids from Edward's local church. All of them

participated and Edward was glad they appeared to have enjoyed the time of fellowship.

When the meeting ended, Edward wanted to engage Déyemí in a conversation but Kúnlé and Déyemí left while Edward was encouraging Ijeoma, one of the teens who was having some academic struggles.

Later that day, Edward paced the passage like he typically did when he prayed and twice, his mind went back to Déyemí. His thought of his cheek bone dimple, his sneakers, his forehead zit.

“Father, is there something about this boy?”

*I want you to father him for me, the Lord said. I want you to father them for me.*

Edward pondered on that. Why the distinction? Why did he feel like he'd known Déyemí for long when he barely even knew him? He had always been skeptical of the love at first sight concept but the phrase seemed to be the best fit to describe how he felt about Déyemí.

He continued praying for the boy. He prayed for the others as well.

“God, if you're making me do Daddy duties, don't you think a wife would be a nice accompaniment?”

To that the Lord said nothing, but Edward could imagine him smiling and shaking his head like he himself did whenever Odinaka or Ajélàńkẹ́ Davis made a jocular remark in teen's church.

He was about to wrap up his prayers when he



remembered Ethan. He started praying for him.



Ethan gobbled up his wine, replaying the events of the previous day in his mind. It was all so ludicrous. Ansah Kwame was getting married. Kwame came to his apartment with bottles of wine, a manilla e and a wide grin to announce that his girlfriend- who Ethan knew nothing about until the moment- said yes. It took Ethan a hot minute to internalise the information. Kwame was bi, Ethan would never have thought that he'd want to get married. As though Ethan's mind wasn't addled enough, Kwame added that he wanted Ethan to be his maid of honor.

Kwame laughed at the frown that appeared on Ethan's face. He grabbed a seat at the coffee table and said, "In the spirit of limitless possibilities, Afia and I have decided to be unconventional. So, she's going to have a best man and I, you. Don't worry, the wedding is three months away. By then, you should have made progress with your transitioning."

Ethan chuckled and settled on a seat. "I have a ton of questions. Let me start with this, you really want your wife to have a best man that's not you?"

Kwame laughed.

"Didn't you just propose today?"

"Well, yeah."

"And you're already discussing maid of honor and whatnot?"

"We had this conversation before now." He shook Ethan by the shoulders. "Don't be a spoilsport. It's going to be exciting. Picture yourself in a *wicked* gown, going down the church aisle behind me. It's going to be spectacular, a literal vision."

Ethan tried to share Kwame's fantasy. He smiled, watching Kwame toss a pill under his tongue. It would indeed be something.

"But hold on, Kwame. Beyond the adventure and surface thrill of this, are you sure this is what you want?"

Kwame shrugged. "Unlike you, I don't overthink."

Ethan knew he was alluding to his transitioning. "Maybe that's the problem," He bristled. "Maybe you don't think at all."

Kwame laughed and tossed another pill under his tongue.

"What would you do when the thrill wears off?"

"I guess I'd have to find a way to renew the thrill. It's that simple."

"How are you going to stay faithful to your wife? You know marriage is a big deal, right?"

"Oh please," Kwame waved him off. "that's just your childhood indoctrination speaking. Life is all about being happy, living in the moment. *Chale*, you need to purge yourself of all these sentimental crap that keep people away from finding true happiness. I'm bi, and that already shows that I'm not monogamous by nature..."

"Then why do you want to get married?"

"For one, it's going to make my folks happy."

Ethan scoffed. "Look who needs the purging from sentimental crap. Have you thought about the feelings of this lady you want to get married to? Does she know..."

"Piss off." Kwame rose in an angry fit. "You're not my Dad."

Ethan sighed. "Look, I'm sorry if I pushed your buttons but I'm only trying to look out for you."

"Maybe you should look out for yourself and get your act together. When are you going in for your surgery? Wilson is starting to talk. He says you're a vacillating child."

"We both know Wilson is only interested in what my transitioning would do for the company's name. He doesn't give two jacks about my happiness. I don't just want to be another trophy."

Kwame shook his head. "Do you even know what you want?"

"Yes, yes, I do. I want to be me. I don't have to transition to be accepted."

"Are you out of your mind?" Kwame repeated the question with a spice of cussing. "Nobody put you up to this in the first place, you asked for it."

Ethan shrugged. "And I'm not asking for it again."

Kwame blinked. "Are you going to say that to Wilson?"

Ethan nodded.

Kwame cursed loudly, slapping the back of a seat and knocking it over. "We already got grants, there are

expectations.” He exhaled, put his arms akimbo and said, “I know this is a big step for you, I’ve been able to get in touch with a conversion therapist, I could send you over...”

Ethan clenched his jaws. “I see where your true interests lie.”

“Don't get emotional. I'm on your side.”

Ethan walked over to the door and opened it. He held it steady as Kwame walked out, raining insults on him. Ethan closed the door and he felt like he could finally see. He thought of Kwame as a brother, saw the community as family, a just system.

But now he could see something else, a chunk of people held together by a brittle agenda. People who were friendly as long as you didn't go against their pet opinion. If you dare go against them, they'd go from family to foe in a heartbeat.

Ethan thought of all the people the community attacked. How the community stopped at nothing until they saw 'bullies' burn to the ground. At first Ethan loved it. He felt it was the right thing. He was fueled by his own anger, his own quest for vengeance. Now he wasn't so sure.

He thought of people who did nothing against the community but dared to hold a contradictory opinion, Pastors who refused to officiate gay weddings. Business owners who were ruined for not wanting to be mixed up with gay affairs. The community fought them. The community was always perceived to be the victim, but were they really?

The protests the community staged, some of which

interrupted church services; protests where religious people were harassed and barraged with questions. The content the community sponsored which were deliberate to make a burlesque of everything religious people believed. The cartoons and comic strips Ethan himself created since he joined Strator's Agency. If anyone dared blaspheme the LGTBQ community like they blasphemed the church, would the person live to write another piece?

Ethan took one of Kwame's pills with wine, unlike Kwame, he hated the quick effect of sublingual administration. This was why he fled Nigeria. This was why he sought asylum. Because he wanted to be away from a system that was unjust to him, because he wanted to stand on the side of fairness. But it would seem he only landed on the other side of a different kind of injustice. Before he was the victim, now he could play the victim while he foisted his thoughts on others.

*Is this right? What is right? Who defines right?*

Kwame said he was bi and so polygamous by nature. Was that right? Even people that were gay hardly ever committed to one partner. Not even those who were married. Ethan himself couldn't say off the top of his head the names of all the men he'd slept with. He didn't know all their names-heck! He didn't know all their faces.

*Is this decent? Is this proper? Is it humane to use people as disposable objects of gratification?*

Thrill. find it. pursue it. live for it. *serve* it. This was the gospel of the culture. They called it different names, being

sexually liberated, not holding back, being free.

*Free? Is this freedom?*

A new unease crawled into Ethan's belly and if he would describe the feeling with a word, the best fit would be *shame*.

But he didn't let the feeling sit with him for long. He was quick to find his shield of anger. He quickly worked up his memory, bringing his trauma to fore. He was hurt. He was hurt.

Chibi, *omọ Ibo aláṣọ*, was the closest thing to a mentor Ethan ever had. In his warehouse they talked, they did things. Even though now, Ethan hated Chibi- sometimes he thought to himself that Chibi abused him. He was only twelve at the start, after all. But then, Chibi never used force. Ethan was the one who walked every other evening after school lesson to Chibi's shop. He enjoyed it, he looked forward to being with Chibi. Yes, he was twelve, but he knew what he was doing... Did he? Was it abuse?- then, he could swear that he loved Chibi.

But Chibi hung him out to dry. That was the chief reason Ethan hated him. After rousing confidence and defiance in him, Chibi vanished at the time Ethan needed him the most.

It was an evening like any other, Ethan left school lesson before it ended, sneaking through the back door and scaling the fence like he had done countless times before. His body thrummed with anticipation like it did on such evenings but he was too preoccupied with his fantasies to have observed that a curious boy was following him. When he got to Chibi's dank room in the warehouse, the two of them were too consumed

with each other to hear the squeak of the metal window or notice the draft of sunrays that filtered in with dust particles. Neither of them saw the pair of eyes that watched them. Neither of them heard the hurry of feet as the boy ran off.

What Ethan remembered first was the shriek. Not the bang of the door opening, not Chibi's shock, but the shriek. The shriek of his mother. His uncle, Uncle Débáre was with her. He was the one who spoke, all his mother could do was scream.

She took her headgear off her head in one languid move as she continued shouting, “*Ọmọ yìí tí ọ́pa mí ọ. Sínà tí ọ́pa mí.*”

The next thing Ethan remembered was that he was at the T junction near the market, on his knees, taking lashes from Uncle Débáre. His Mom was on the floor, rolling and screaming about her doom because Sínà had killed her. A crowd gathered; whispers spread. People Ah-ed and Oh-ed.

*I knew it. I knew there was something strange about this boy. He will be shaking waist and doing like a girl. I knew he was possessed.*

*Since when did you start this abomination?*

*Where did you learn it?*

Ethan could say nothing. He was tongue-tied, terrified. More lashes came, not just from Uncle Débáre but from any bystander who could reach him. Slaps, kicks, spits.

*Satanic child.*

*Accursed child.*

*Evil pikin.*

It continued for what felt like forever before his Father arrived with four mechanic boys. His father had heard of the

unthinkable evil he had been caught practising. Ethan could not look at his father, even though he knew the man could not see him.

“Handle him.” His father said to the mechanic boys.

The boys whipped out fan belts. They made Ethan lie down on the dirt road, and they lashed his bare back with their fan belts. A woman was quick to supply grounded pepper to put on the wounds inflicted by the mechanics' belts. The village that was hardly there to raise him, was present to execute him.

Ethan absorbed the pain with grunts and gnashes of teeth. He didn't shed a tear. He didn't utter a scream.

But when one of the mechanics asked in Yoruba where the other filthy boy was, that despicable Igbo boy and someone from the crowd said his shop was locked and there's no trace of him in town, Ethan let out a yelp. No one ever saw Chibi after that day.

Ethan drained his glass at once and felt his back, touching the hypertrophic scars that rippled across. He was hurt.

The next memory was few days later when his parents took him to the priest of a church for deliverance. An all-nighter was pulled with Ethan lying on rocks and receiving hot drops of candle wax on his back- still raw from the strokes and pepper. Men and women circled him chanting prayers for his forgiveness, for his redemption, for the exorcism of the demons that were living in him.

When morning came and the Priest ended the prayers,



Ethan thought it was finally over. But the Priest went on to announce that for Ethan to be fully delivered he had to be sent to the mountain alone for seven days. He had to go seek the Lord with tears and fasting, he had to show God how truly sorry he was, perhaps God might be merciful enough to overlook his outrageous sin.

The same mountain his Mom never allowed them venture close to because it was unsafe, he was exiled to for a week. Ethan spent the week thinking about how his life was totally ruined. The whole town must have heard about his mess by now. Everyone in school would avoid him. He'd always be an outcast.

He was lying in a cave one evening, he couldn't tell which day of the week it was, but he knew it rained the previous day and it was the rain that drove him into the cave. He heard laughter from a distance. At first, he thought he was imagining it. He tried sitting up and he hit his head on a rock. He winced. The laughter grew closer. A clash of stones. Finally, Areo peeped into Ethan's little hideout. Instinctively, Ethan backed up.

Areo grinned. He told Ethan to come out. Ethan didn't budge. Areo went in. He said 'I heard you like it like this,' in Yoruba, tugging at Ethan's shorts. Ethan closed his eyes, too weak to fight. He tried to focus his thoughts on how Areo got the news. Who could have told him? How did word reach this outcast? Ethan imagined a local coming up the mountain to share the tea with Areo and he knew it was not probable. Areo

kept talking, slicing into Ethan's thoughts, making it difficult for him to pretend he was elsewhere. He forced his mind to centre again on his thoughts. Perhaps Areo overheard. Maybe those people who came up the mountain to pray brought it up in one of their gossip/intercession moments... Ethan wished Areo would just shut up. His smell was pervasive enough, his touch sickening. Why wouldn't he just shut up?

Ethan thought he'd puke, but when Areo was done, he heard laughter. For a moment, he thought it was Areo laughing and he only realised that it was him spurting the eerie cackles after Areo had left the cave. Ethan laughed long and hard. As his laughter receded to coughs, he got his first assignment. He liked to think he gave himself the assignment as a form of retribution for all that had been done to him. Sometimes he wondered if it was something speaking to him, if he was in fact possessed like they all claimed. But for whatever reason, Ethan decided that when the whole fiasco was over, he'd get fifty church boys. He'd sleep with fifty church boys before he left Gbongàn. He hit that goal before the next year.

Areo came back two more times and each time when he was done, Ethan would find a puddle of rain water to wash himself. But he never felt clean. He could never feel clean again and he didn't seem to mind, the thought of sharing this filth with fifty others consoled him.

Ethan grabbed the wine bottle by the stem and guzzled from it. He plopped three of Kwame's pills on his palm and poured them under his tongue. With a wince, he braced himself

for that staggering jolt he didn't like but now needed to manage his pain.

*How can Nathan ever claim that a God who sent me to the mountain to be raped loves me? How can a God I've devoted all my adult life to fighting want me?*

His phone beeped. A message from Ed.

-Wanna talk? I think it's a good time to share the rest of my story-

*A welcome distraction*, Ethan thought.

-Let's hear it-



By the time they reached the hilltop, Nathan was breathless and he feared for his father.

*What if Daddy collapses? Why did he insist on coming here? Why did I succumb for God's sake?* He looked at him. The older man took a deep breath and ran his fingers on a stone.

Nathan heard birdsong and he looked in the direction of the sound in time to see a pair of zebra finches take flight. He and Ethan, in the time they studied birds and tried to figure the meaning of their songs, had discovered that these orange-beaked birds always sang the same song. Ethan called them the old women choir, alluding to the group of women at their church who sang the same set of songs at every thanksgiving service. The canaries on the other hand sang different songs and it was their twittering Ethan and Nathan loved to decode.

Nathan recalled one of such conversations.

They were seated on the *decking* of their former house, watching the birds on a high tension NEPA- when NEPA was still NEPA, before they changed their name to whatever- wire.

"Yellow bird A is singing about food." Nathan usually started the speculation.

"Yellow bird B is sad. Her Dad just died."

"Leave the dead alone. Let's go to find food."

"I miss Daddy. I miss Daddy."

"I am hungry. I am hungry."

Nathan allowed himself a small smile. They never talked about birdsongs after Ethan came back from this mountain. They talked about little after that time.

Nathan remembered how the events of the period impacted his own life. The questioning he got from almost every student in school.

*Did you know before?*

*How could you not know?*

*Did he try it on you? Don't lie... I won't tell anybody.*

*How does it feel to have a strange brother?*

*How does he behave at home?*

*Does he tell what it's like to you know...?*

Nathan didn't answer any of those questions. He had his own unanswered questions but he never asked Ethan. The questions stuck in his throat, pooled in his belly. They lacked the form needed to convey them in words. He lacked the ability to fully understand them, to rightly articulate them.

“Èyítáyò, let us pray.”

“Daddy! Was that why you made us come all the way here? We could pray at home and God would hear us now.”

“I know. But this place is...” Elder Mákànjúqlá sighed. “I want Sínà to come home. I want him to see me before I die. I want to talk to him. I want God to reach my son, wherever he is.”

“Alright, let's pray.”

They held hands. Elder Mákànjúqlá started singing. Nathan felt a stir of faith in him that was quite unusual. Ethan will return home. He will come back to this hill and he will be a changed man. His father wouldn't die. Because Jesus bore stripes for him, Elder Mákànjúqlá's cancer will vanish.

*Speak.*

*This doesn't even make any sense.*

*Speak to the rock. The rock is Christ.*

*Nathan do you really believe this? Aren't you already doubting?*

*Even if your head is doubting, let the faith in your spirit propel you. Faith will work in your heart, if you don't dwell on the doubt in your head.*

*How is Ethan going to come to this place? How? What will bring him to Nigeria? And cancer disappearing? Are you okay?*

*And since we have the same spirit of faith, according to what is written, “I believe and therefore I spoke,” we also believe and therefore speak,*

Nathan cleared his throat. “Daddy, this sickness is not unto death. Because of the stripes Jesus took for you, you are

healed right now. God will bring Ethan back to us. God's purpose for Ethan's life will stand. He will come to know the saving grace of God."

"Amen."

Now that Nathan had declared by faith, his conviction felt stronger.

"Father, we believe you. There is nothing too hard for you. You are the God of all flesh. Daddy is healed. Ethan will be rescued. Because you said in your word that whoever says to this mountain 'be removed and be cast into the sea,' and does not doubt in his heart, but believes those things he says will be done will have whatever he says. Thank you, God, because you have done it."

"Thank you, Jesus." Eder Mákànjúqlá said, waving his hands.

"In Jesus's name we have prayed,"

"Amen."

Nathan sighed. He knew his work in Gbòngàn was done. As they walked down the hill, he held his Dad steady with a hand.

"I've always known you were a prophet." His Dad said.  
*Prophet kó, profit ni.*

"You don't believe me?"

His Dad's perceptiveness was something that always surprised Nathan.

"You can ask God. He told me that he ordained you a prophet to the nations. Why do you think we named you

Nathan?"

Nathan made a Bronx cheer. "Because it rhymes with Ethan. Mummy told us this."

Elder Mákànjúplá laughed. "That's the second reason."

"I've heard oh. Easy there, Daddy." Nathan held his Dad tighter as he almost tripped on a disintegrating stone.

"You still don't believe me." The older man shook his head. "You think because you don't dress a certain way and you don't say '*báyí ni Olúwa wí*', you're not a prophet?"

Why was his Dad belabouring the issue? Nathan paused to think. Someone had said something along this line before. He tried to jog his memory. David.

He smiled. His smile dimmed when he remembered that he gave David an accurate word in the midst of banter. Was he truly a prophet?

"You are a prophet. You can ask God."



## CHAPTER SIX

### IRÉSOMÍJÍ

Farouk thought of Akure as a free teenager, one approaching the maturity of civilisation with anticipation and proactiveness. A mine of possibilities. A city coming to realise its own beauty and potentials. But he wasn't here for sight-seeing, he was here in search of clues.

How long ago did the boy die? Considering the time Rògbà relocated to Lagos, it was likely a long time ago. How would he ask questions? Who would he ask?

He settled for a different route this time. A bored trader. Traders like artisans were apt to be custodians of history and the dregs of forbidden tales.

He observed the traders at the bus park and concluded most of them were too preoccupied with vying for passengers'



attention to want to delve into the past. He needed someone who would appreciate his company. He walked by the road, pulling his baseball hat low over his face.

Which roadside trader would be the best? The woman selling soft drinks and snacks? Na, she was too busy chiding her errant child. She won't make good sport. The woman selling recharge cards? The glower stamped on her face made Farouk kill the thought. She was the kind of Nigerian you would approach at the bank with, 'Sorry, please, don't be offended. Can I borrow your pen?' Then she'd hiss before jabbing a pen chipped at the tip in your face.

Finally, Farouk saw a peg that seemed square enough for his square hole. A corn seller. She had a child strapped to her back with a threadbare wrapper. The child's oblong head hung carelessly on the crease of the wrapper and the woman used a hand to adjust him to a better sleeping position. With the other, she fanned the embers roasting her corn. She had no customer and she looked very bored.

Farouk went to her. He said he wanted to buy corn. She asked him to make a pick. He picked a cob that was raw. She told him it'd take a while for the corn to roast, he shrugged.

"Madam, I fit sit with you?"

She cleaned a side of the bench with her hand and smiled at Farouk. Those teeth could do with braces.

"How market madam?"

The woman heaved a long sigh. "My brother, anybody wey talk say people no wicked, no know anything. People

wicked. No be so my life be before oh. Na my husband people destroy my life like this. Dem kill am, come collect everything wen we get. Ah, people wicked.” She shook her head. “But my God pass dem. My God go vindicate me. The God of Prophet Ummunakweze go fight for me.”

“So, you no be Akure indigene?”

“Good question, my brother. Na for Bayelsa dem born me and na there I grow. Na for there I meet Fọlárànmí.” She let out a wistful smile. “Na corper hin be for our area that year. we come start love...” She giggled, showing those scattered teeth.

“When una move come this side?”

“Three years ago oh,” She started crying. “Fọlárànmí people wicked. Dem no even gree make I enjoy my husband. Dem no even allow make he raise hin pikin small.”

“Madam, sorry. It is well, eh?”

Farouk could already tell that he wouldn't be getting any meaningful information from this woman. She rattled on and on about her problems and eventually, Farouk preached the gospel to her. She was quick to declare that she knew God already, she never missed online morning prayers led by Prophet Ummunakweze.

She raised a finger heavenward, lifting her eyes. “And I know in due time, my God shall surely fight my battles.”

Farouk nodded, he gave her a thousand naira for his roasted corn and told her to keep the change.

He'd have to find another trader. Hopefully, he'd get the clue he so desperately needed, not tales of woe. Time was fast

running out and so was his patience.



Eventually, the person who led Farouk to the home of the deceased boy, was a beggar. The Fulani man in a discolored kaftan followed Farouk closely, begging for alms. Farouk gave him a two hundred naira note and asked him in Hausa if he was familiar with the territory. The man went on to say there was hardly anything that happened in Akure that he didn't know. Farouk said he was going to ask tough questions to know if the man was as knowledgeable as he claimed. If he was able to impress him, he'd give him five hundred naira.

Farouk garnered enough information from that little mutually beneficial ruse. And with the information came some insight. The boy's name was Irésòmíjí. He died at twelve, eight years ago. He lived under the care of Odíjorótó his Grandmother who raised him after the demise of his parents. The boy died the same year Rògbà extended his business to Lagos. More dots to connect. Perhaps Rògbà fled Akure. Perhaps this Irésòmíjí was the key Farouk had been seeking. And there was another semblance to Eben. He was a vulnerable son of a single parent.



Enitan had been on Rògbà's payroll for eight years for a job that was no job. Rògbà moved her from Ikare to Akure to be

Odíjorótó's neighbor. He hired her to keep watch and make sure Odíjorótó was safe after the demise of her only grandchild. He was afraid Odíjorótó would despair of life and fall into self-harm. He was afraid some miscreant would take advantage of Odíjorótó's vulnerability and illiteracy to swindle her. He instructed Enitan to keep her eyes on the older woman, to report any suspicious activity. Before he left Akure, he made sure to plant Enitan by the woman for support and security. Enitan had never known a man so kind.

That day, Enitan was seated on the thick balustrade in front of her house, pinching off the husks of melon seeds and humming along to a song by Ojo Ade playing from her radio. The moment she saw the man approaching Odíjorótó's flat with his face cap and loping gait, she knew something was off. She quickly whipped out her phone to take a picture but she couldn't get his face and quick movement made the picture blurry.



Farouk took on the persona of a news reporter trying to do a story on Rògbà for the forthcoming elections. He wanted to know all Rògbà had done for the woman and her deceased son.

The woman enthusiastically poured praises on Rògbà as she narrated her story in Yoruba. Irésòmíjì would never have been able to win the science fair contest without Rògbà's help. She showed him the plaque where it was displayed on the wall of her little sitting room. Her smile was proud, but pinched with

grief. Farouk asked if he could take a picture of the plaque, Odíjorótó did not mind.

How did Rògbà meet Irésòmíjí?

Rògbà took interest in Sòmíjí after the speech and prize-giving day at his secondary school.

Did he come first and win all the prizes?

No, he actually came second. But Rògbà said he saw something in him. He could tell that Sòmíjí had a bright future.

Who came first?

One Tòmídé.

Farouk made notes. He asked her to talk about her son. She said she couldn't go on without offering Farouk something. Farouk told her not to bother but she insisted. He told her water would be fine. She said she'd go across the road to buy 'cold pure water'. Farouk said the water in her house would serve just fine. But the woman stood her ground. A guest from Chief Rògbà deserved a warm reception.

Farouk asked if he could look in Sòmíjí's room while she was away and she obliged. She directed him to the room.

Farouk stood there for a moment, searching his spirit. He prayed under his breath asking the Lord to guide him.

The room was almost totally emptied out. Farouk looked at the iron bed, the wafer-thin mattress. The nails on the wall and Farouk imagined the boy's uniform hanging on those nails. A line of cobweb landed on his head, calling him to action. He brushed it off and moved closer to the bed. Upon a prompting, he squatted and peeked under the bed. A labyrinth

of cobwebs and dust made it hard to see the books lying on the floor. Farouk reached over and picked them. They were mostly school notebooks and textbooks. He knew he hadn't found what he was looking for. He heard the woman's voice calling for him.

*Holy Spirit.*

*Lift the mattress.*

He did and he saw a little red journal.

He picked it. He carefully returned the other books back under the bed, keeping only one school note and the journal.

When he stepped out of the room, he saw Odíjorótó holding a bottle of water and a can of malt, grinning from ear to ear but she wasn't alone. There was a lady staring him down with sharp eyes.

"She said you're a news reporter. Which media outlet do you work with?"

"A YouTube channel."

"And you're asking questions on Chief?"

"Yes, I want to run a story on him."

"What is your name?"

"Ọlátiléwá Farouk and I was just about to leave."

Her eyes were trained on the books Farouk was holding. Farouk held on tighter.

"Can I take a picture of you, Mr. Farouk?" Enitan asked even though she had already taken pictures through the window and sent them to Rọgbà.

"That won't be necessary. Please excuse me."

Farouk walked out of the house as quickly as he could manage, ignoring Odíjorótó's pleas and questions. He walked down the street, taking turns and looking over his shoulder.

He entered a supermarket and walked between the aisles while he read Irésòmíjì's journal. He was getting drawn into the entries when he noticed a guy staring at him. He made for the door. The man followed.

Farouk hastened his steps, hearing the wild thump of his heart in his ears. Once he got outside the supermarket, he broke into a run. Two men were hot on his tail.

He ran into a street and bumped into a food hawker. Hot soup splashed all over him as the woman was knocked to the ground. He didn't wait to apologise or wipe his burning eyes. He took another turn, but his assailants were not missing a beat. He burst out to a street lined with shops on one side and a sprawling plaza on the other. He ran behind the plaza, looked around and took a path between houses. He was starting to breathe easy when he spotted the green joggers of one of his assailants. He gritted his teeth and picked up his pace.



DK saw how rigid Rògbà's back was, how his chest did not heave with his breathing, and even though nothing on his face showed it, DK knew Chief was mad.

"I committed this whole Farouk affair into your hands, DK. You said you were working on it and now that bastard is in

Akure, trailing footprints. You allowed this."

"Chief, I'm sorry."

"Try again."

DK swallowed. "Actually, I found him online so I mobilised my man in Kano to try to dig around him."

For the first time since the conversation started, Rògbà looked at DK. Rògbà's face was impassive but that vein on his temple had come to fore. DK immediately regretted his words.

"So, you give orders now." Rògbà stood up slowly. "I travelled to the UK to see my family for few days and you decided to take laws into your hands."

"No, sir. It's not like that, sir."

"Ogie,"

Ogie appeared in the doorway. "Yes, Chief."

"Get me my darts."

"Yes, Chief." Ogie said before he left.

DK's heart fainted. "Chief,"

"Dike Opara, you said it's not like that. Tell me what it's like."

DK swallowed. "Chief, I will take whatever punishment you mete out, but I want you to know that my loyalty is undivided. I did a stupid thing, I agree. I was only trying to impress you."

Rògbà chuckled. He took a dart from Ogie.

"If it's not your famous Daddy issues making an appearance."

DK clenched his jaws, partly because he was bracing



himself for the dart in Rògbà's hand and partly because he was smarting from the sting of the dart from Rògbà's tongue.

*Fiam.*

A nanosecond after Rògbà threw the dart, it arrived at its destination: DK's left eye.

"I know you are still loyal, DK. But you know I have to do this."

"I know, Chief." DK grounded through his teeth.

*Fiam.*

A second dart arrived at a spot close to the first. DK let out a groan.

"Ogie, get me my darts."

Ogie walked over to DK, pulled out the darts from his hooded eye, causing a spurt of blood to hit his face, and handed them over to Rògbà. Rògbà casually picked two pieces of serviette from his desk and wiped the blood off the dart.

"Take him to a clinic. An eye patch would suit you, DK. It would give you that villainous look." Rògbà chuckled. "Now, that would impress Daddy."

Rògbà picked his phone and redialed the number he'd called some minutes before.

"Found him yet?"

He paused listening.

"Bring him alive."



Şhaléwá was in the kitchen with Hanatu. Şhaléwá was

dicing carrots while Hanatu chopped cabbage; the duo discussed as they prepared a salad. Şhaléwá stopped talking abruptly. She held her chest.

“Father, send your angels to deliver my husband.”



Farouk stumbled and fell. He stood up immediately and continued running. He got to a junction and saw a power bike with its rider.

“Hop on,” the rider said through his helmet.

Farouk climbed the bike. He looked over his shoulder and saw the two men. One pointed a gun at them. Before Farouk could say a word, the rider did a sharp swerve that almost threw Farouk off but saved him from getting hit by the bullet. The rider took another turn. Farouk looked over his shoulder. He couldn't see the assailants. He sighed. And only then did he realise something. The notebooks. He wasn't with them anymore. His memory quickened. While one of his assailants pointed a gun, the other was holding the notes. They must have dropped when he fell.

“Thank you, Father.” Farouk muttered.



The rider dropped him by the roadside and pointed to a bus. “That's an Abuja-bound bus. Go.”

Farouk hurried to the bus.

*Hold on, how did he know...*

Farouk turned around to see the bike rider but there was no power bike, no rider. He blinked.

Go.

He got to the bus.

"Abeg, where this bus dey go?"

"Abuja. Enter quickly na you be the last passenger."

Farouk entered the bus.

"Oga, close your mouth now you want make fly enter?"

The person seated next to him said.

Farouk chuckled.

"Do you know there's soup on your shirt?"

Farouk looked at the crust of egusi on his purple shirt.

He shrugged. "Such is life."

*God, thank you. Thank you for the advantage of the supernatural.*

For the rest of the journey, all Farouk could think of was the content of Sòmíjì's journal.



"What do you mean by you lost him?" Rògbà's voice was even and low, the hint of menace was in the calm. He paused to listen, picking his stress ball from the table. *Squish. Squish.*

"You recovered what?" His eyes widened a bit. He stood up slowly, walked to the door and shut it. "He had Irésòmíjì's

journal?"

"Yes, chief."

Rògbà swallowed, pushing down his jangling nerves. *I'm a cat*, he thought. *No matter how I'm thrown, I'll always land on all fours.*

"I need you to get that journal to me immediately." *Squish. Squi-squish. Squi-squish.*

*How did I miss this? How did I miss something so dangerous?*

"Wrap it in a parcel and send it through a driver. Are you sure he didn't make a copy of the book?" *Squish. Squi-squi-squi-squish. Squi-squish.*

"No, Chief."

"Spring men all over the state. Talk with the buffer, what's his name again? Yeah, Azeez. Work with him; we have competent hands in Owo, tell Azeez I want all hands on deck. That man must still be somewhere within the state. Find him and get him to me alive. Is that clear?"

"Yes, Chief."

"I want to get that book within an hour." *Squish. Squish. Squish.*



15/07/11

I won this book for coming second in my class they also gave me water bottle for coming first in introtech but thats not why am excitd. I'm excited bcos today I met an angel! When the event was coming to an end, Teacher Jibola told me somebody

wanted to see me outside. I went and I saw a man in white agbada stand beside a fine car the type they drive in mummy television. He said his name is Uncle Rogba and he was impressed with my outstanding performance. He said he's going to sponsor my education up to university!!! God! I couldn't believe my ears. I asked him to repeat himself. He did. I asked him why he chose me, why not Tomide Arogundade who came first in every other subject. He said Tomide was a privileged child, he had both parents. He said he had done his findings and he knew I only have grandma. I felt so touched. He said my future is bright. I believe him. I will become somebody great one day. One day I will wear a white agbada like Uncle Rogba and drive nice car. I will also help a less-privileged child. Corper Anita told us in literature class to keep journals that it's a good habit for lexis and structure. I want to start doing that now.

19/07/11

I've missed some days but from now on I will try to write every day. I'm enjoying my holiday. I went to play ball on school field today, when I got home I was surprised to see Uncle Rogba's car in front of our house. I got inside and I saw him laughing with Grandma. He brought so many foodstuffs we cannot finish eating in a year. hahaha. That is exaggeration of course. What figure of speech is that? Hyperbole! Corper Anita must be proud of me. hahahaha. I remember that day in class when Corper Anita asked Mayowa a question on figure of speech and Gbolagade whispered 'figure eight' at the back.

Gbolagade foolish boy like this. I have to go now. Grandma is calling me. maybe I should give this book a name.

22/07/11

I know I promised to write every day but... the truth is its not easy jare. Coper Anita will understand. So, I have a name for this book. I will call it Anita bcos coper Anita inspired this.

Anita guess what happened today. Uncle Rogba took me on a fild trip to his cocoa farm. God! It was so large. Uncle Rogba is a big man. He has so many workers on his farm. He took me round, when I became tired of walking, he carried me on his shoulders. I told him to put me down bcos I felt somehow embarrassed, I'm not a child now. But he tickled me and said I should stop forming for him. I laughed and I let him put me on his shoulders. He said I was a giant. Hahaha. I felt like a giant. I like Uncle Rogba.

Farouk brought out his phone. He was grateful he obeyed the nudge he felt in the supermarket to scan the pages of the journal. He did it thinking that it was his proclivity to read eBooks urging him, but now he could see that it was the Holy Spirit. He captured every page with the scanner feature on his iPhone 'notes'.

He continued reading Sòmíjí's journal. Rògbà continued with the gifts and grooming throughout the JSS 1 long vacation. Sòmíjí entered JSS 2 with supplies from 'the angel'. New uniforms, new sandals, a new school bag, all the textbooks. The gifts and kindness continued through the first term of JSS 2 and

the first hint of assault came on the 24th of November.

24/11/11

Anita, I slept in class a lot today. I couldn't wait for school to be over. After school, Uncle Rogba's driver came to pick me and he took me to Uncle Rogba's house here in Akure. Uncle Rogba and I sat to watch TV. He told me to come sit on his laps. I did not feel embarrassed to sit on my daddy's legs. He slotted in a disc and the TV started showing something strange. Men that were not wearing any clothes and doing strange things. Uncle Rogba laughed and asked me what I thought. I told him it was strange. He agreed and turned it off. We went to the kitchen to make lunch. Uncle Rogba is a very good cook. I never knew a man could cook so well. He told me he has a surprise for me, I don't know what it might be. But don't worry Anita I'll tell you as soon as I know. I'm not making any promise of writing every day again.

27/11/11

In Uncle Rogba's house today, he gave me the best news I've ever heard. He told me that he would be taking me to Lagos during the weekend to register me for a science fair competition that holds next year! He said he believes in me that I can win it. God! I'm shivering with excitement. I already have some projects I can do. I can do an energy renewal project, a wind powered bulb... I will go to the library tomorrow to read more, I will check physics textbooks and see what I can do to make me the best. I'm going to be great. hahahaha. I don't know why those strange naked men won't leave Uncle Rogba's TV. Why do they do those

things? Is it really as interesting as they make it look? Why does uncle Rogba laugh? Is it funny? Is it like a game? I don't care sha. Im going to be a star like Einstein. Anita, I'll be great!

Farouk lifted his eyes from the phone. Rògbà had groomed Sòmíjì well enough to make him comfortable, now he was priming him, getting seeds in his mind. Farouk sighed. He continued reading.

01/01/12

Happy new year Anita! This year is full of so many possibilities and am hopeful. The first round of the science fair will hold in March. I'm getting myself prepared for that. The day before yesterday, Uncle Rogba told me to give him a massage and he started asking questions about the people on the TV, if I ever wondered about them. he said it was okay to wonder. I told him I wonder sometimes. He asked if I wanted to try, I said no. I was quite afraid. He told me not to worry, he'd never hurt me. I believe him. Uncle Rogba is my daddy. I trust him.

After the thirteenth of January, there was a long break. The next entry was on the tenth of February.

10/02/12

Corper Anita will be passing out next week and I told my mates that we should contribute money so we can do a little sendforth for her. they agreed. I don't understand myself this days.

14/02/12

People in school were all excited about valentine. I



think its nonsense. All their noise was just annoying me today.  
Foolish people.

17/02/12

I hate seeing mirrors. I hate looking at my body when I  
bath. Uncle Rogba is a good person.

Farouk had questions.

*Sòmíjì, what happened? Why the abruptness, the curttness?*  
*What happened?*

But he feared he knew already. Rògbà had begun to reap  
the dividends of his sowings.

22/02/12

When I see him I feel faint, I start sweating. Why does it  
feel so painful? Why cant I enjoy it like the people on TV? Why  
does it replay in my dreams?

25/02/12

Teacher Jibola reported me to the principal and now I've  
been suspended for a week. Useless people. They say I'm  
always fighting. Why wont I fight. All the people in my class are  
so foolish, so annoying. Always making noise. Nonsense.

02/03/12

The first stage of the fair is next week. My proposal is  
ready, I've prepared my prototype. He said its good, even  
though he didnt really look at it. doesn't he believe in me any  
more? Have I offended him? maybe I need to try to enjoy him

better, maybe I should learn to make the sounds they make on TV. maybe that way I will please him.

05/03/12

Im happy. He took me to his cocoa farm again. He told me many sweet things. he made me promise that I wont tell any one. he said if I did people will misunderstand him. they would hate him. why would anyone hate him? he's an angel. He's not perfect but I love him.

Farouk's heart broke with every entry he read. Sòmíjì passed the first stage of the science fair, but his documentation of it didn't sound happy. The next stage was in Abuja by June. He kept referring to Rògbà as 'him' not Uncle Rògbà, definitely not daddy. In between preparations for the second stage and being a bully at school, he started leaking. He bought me diapers; he wrote. He didnt even ask if I want them.

Sòmíjì passed the second stage of the competition.

21/06/12

His driver took me to his place and he showed me the mail on his laptop. Ive been shortlisted among the top three participants and we will be going for an exhibition in Transcorp Hilton in December. God! This is greatness. Leaking greatness. hahahaha. People at school say Im losing weight. I can hardly keep anything down these days. I'm always throwing up.

Unable to stomach any more, Farouk stopped reading.

But even when he wasn't reading, he couldn't get the words out of his head and the question of how Sòmíjì died kept plaguing him. He opened the journal again.

6/11/12

Yesterday Grandma said she wants to introduce Jenrola to him, maybe he would be able to help my cousin get an admission. I refused. I had to lie to Grandma that he doesn't want to help anybody again. I told her he could kick me out of the scholarship plan if we start introducing other people. He might think we are not grateful. But the truth is I don't want him doing things to Jenrola. I won't be able to forgive myself.

9/11/12

I'm afraid. Today there was blood. I screamed but he didn't stop. It was a lot more painful. When he finished he gave me first aid and he said it'll be fine. What if the bleeding starts again at night? What if I bleed to death?

17/11/12

It happened again. He sent me to a doctor for stitches. They said I'll be fine. Lying bastards. The doctor took him to his office and they talked privately for a long time. I'm tired. I will write later

04/12/12

Today is the D day. Anita I'm writing from Abuja. This hall is so cold. I hope I win.

04/12/12

I won! I spoke on TV. I won!

06/12/12

I cant continue like this. There is something wrong with my body. Who would I tell? Who would listen? How woud I tell anyone that I have been urinating something white for months?

Farouk scrolled to read the next entry but there was nothing. Farouk looked through the window. They had arrived at Abuja. It was time to light the fuse.



## CHAPTER SEVEN

### BLOWBACKS

Rògbà squeezed his stress ball till his left hand started cramping. He switched to the right. He flipped the journal; the next page was blank. He flipped again, blank. He tossed the book aside. Seeing himself through Irésòmíjí's eyes irked him. The boy was an ingrate. How could he write about him with that edge of disdain? After everything. More troubling was the thought that someone out there had laid a hand on this book. What did that Farouk read? What does he know? And Eben... where was he?

Rògbà's phone started ringing. It was an unknown number and Rògbà picked the call hesitantly.

"Am I speaking with the parent of Eben?"

Rògbà sat up. "Yes, you are. Who are you?"

"My name is Ahmed and after seeing Eben in the news, it occurred to me that I had seen his face somewhere. Eben is here in Kano. I've seen him around The Haven Shelter."

*Kano. DK was indeed on to something.*

"Give me every detail you have." Rògbà had already opened his Mac Book and he was already looking up The Haven Shelter on Google. He clicked on their website.

The man on the phone said he knew little else, he just wanted to help. He went on to beg for money. Rògbà smiled. The typical Nigerian, never missing a chance to get his palm greased.

"Text me your account number. You deserve a thank you."

Rògbà ended the call. Almost immediately, the man's account number came in as a text. Rògbà hurriedly sent him fifty thousand naira via his mobile banking app, feeling the usual formality of using an off shore account for business, unnecessary.

*The Haven Shelter.*

He scrolled through the landing page of the website. A non-profit catering to the needs of internally displaced children. THS was awarded the UN survivor grant the previous year and the NGO was led by Şhaléwá Qlátiléwá. Rògbà's lips parted.

*Farouk Qlátiléwá... Şhaléwá Qlátiléwá. Who are these people? Why are they out for my blood? They don't know who they're dealing with.*

Rògbà called Ogie.

“Give the phone to DK... Both of you are flying to Kano tonight. Those men you mobilised in Kano, get them to find a place called The Haven Shelter. We are launching an attack by midnight. Eben must get to me before tomorrow... I don't care if you've been discharged or not. Get. To. Work.”



It took hours to finish up the process of filing in his case against Rògbà at the Supreme court, hours of getting scanned documents printed, videos burned to discs and affidavits signed. Farouk knew that a man like Rògbà would have contacts at the Supreme court and it wouldn't take long before he got wind of the law suit. Then, efforts would be made to sweep things under the carpet and silence the accuser. This was why Farouk triggered the second phase of the plan while he went about the process of the suit. He had to keep Rògbà busy. It would be better if things ran at the same time, it would fluster Rògbà to see himself caught in a deluge of unforeseen turns. From what Farouk had gathered from Irésòmíjí's journal, this man was a calculative controller and getting him flustered would serve Farouk's purpose.

As he walked the corridors of the edifice, corresponding with Ahmed via texts, he felt alive. Right from his childhood, Farouk had been obsessed with solving crimes. He read crime novels, binged on a lot of crime TV. He was the kind of teenager

who sat alone thinking of all the possible ways he could raid CBN and get away with it. He trained himself to think like a criminal, for he believed it was the best way to get a criminal.

He went to study law with this same drive but it didn't take long for him to see that in Nigeria, things don't exactly work like crime TV. In crime TV, there are bad cops and good cops. In his reality, it was best to assume there was no good cop. Partners sometimes threw each other under the bus in the books he read growing up. Thus, he learned early to keep his cards close to his chest but then, there was no way to play totally safe. Risks were an integral part of the life he'd chosen, and the truth is a good part of the thrill of it was in the risk. So, he had to risk trusting. He had very few people he trusted and Ahmed was one of them. He was a Muslim man of principle and a straight spine. Qualities that shine from afar but are almost suicidal in the reality of corruption. Ahmed had been denied promotion for years. Attempts had been made on his life and time and again, he'd been made to take the fall for superiors all because he wouldn't 'strike out and doctor where necessary'.

This operation was of high risk. The lives of all the children at THS were endangered. Farouk knew that everything could topple on his head in a moment, but then again, he knew that there was the chance that things would go according to plan. He had a contingency for every contingency but the risk remained.

So far, Rọgbà had been playing by his script. Farouk's phone beeped. Ahmed had just sent him a pdf bank statement



showing Rògbà's bank transfer to him. Farouk quickly saved it to the cloud alongside the video Ahmed made while he spoke with Rògbà over the phone.

Farouk knew that in spite of all his efforts, the chance of getting Rògbà to appear in court was slim, which was why the third phase of the plan would be triggered soon enough. The power of media and conspiracy.

Eben's video, the video of Ahmed's phone call, a narration of Irésòmíjì's story with pictures of his journal on slideshow would be published on an anonymous YouTube channel. As soon as Ahmed published the video, Farouk would reach out to the Chief Security Officer to Amúsàn Kennedy, the incumbent governor of Ondo state and current candidate of People Alliance Congress for reelection, with the video and a request for support. Even though the system was flooded with crooks, Farouk knew that with conspiracy and a common goal he could stir the flood of crooks to favour his purpose. In this case, PAC was the rival party of Rògbà's political party and ever since Rògbà won the primaries for the governorship election, all indices pointed in his favour. The grass root politicians in Ondo rooted for him, the people loved him. His campaign movements seemed to hit the right spots and gain good traction from the media. PAC would gladly hop on a chance to ruin Rògbà. Farouk's request was simple. He needed soldiers.

Before Farouk took the flight to Kano that evening, he instructed Ahmed to publish the video on YouTube but keep it private. Farouk shared the link with the CSO before he called

him. As expected, the CSO was quick to throw his weight behind Farouk, after doing little to verify his claims.

Farouk flew to Kano that evening. Now it was time to wait. Time to wait for Rògbà to bite the bait.

Around ten pm, Ahmed called to inform Farouk that he'd received information that two guys came in from Lagos. This might be it. Farouk instructed Ahmed to tighten up the security around THS and keep Eben near the surface.

"Make the extraction easy for them, so that we don't put the other kids in more danger. Speak with the guy Monitoring the CCTV surveillance just to double check everything."



DK approached this mission with a vendetta of his own and even though Chief had trained them to keep their judgement from beclouding sentiments, he'd vowed to himself that someone must pay for his now blind eye. Chief had Eben to settle scores with, he would even out with Farouk. He had sent a furtive message to one of the men on ground in Kano to help him get a hand grenade and the boy had come through.

As their vehicle approached THS's street, one of the men looked with a pair of binoculars. He chuckled. "The boy is out there, sitting with some other kids. This is nothing but luck, *gaskia*."

DK and Ogie exchanged a glance. They had been trained to look upon luck with suspicion.

"What are they doing?" Ogie asked.

"They are seated around a fire; it looks like they're reading. I think we should go get him now."

Ogie inhaled and looked through the car window. "Turn off the headlights and let's watch them for some minutes."

"We don't have ti..."

"Just do what you're told." DK snapped. He leaned close to Ogie who was with him at the backseat. "Do you suspect foul play?"

"Not very likely, but we can't be too careful."

DK nodded. "We shouldn't wait too long too." *I'm itching to avenge my eye.*

Seconds ticked by as Ogie watched the children around the fire with the binoculars, he scanned the area and saw nothing amiss.

"Let's move."

When Eben and the other children saw the van zoom to a stop in front of them, they drew back and approached the door. But they weren't fast enough. Everything seemed to happen in a moment. Before Eben could process his alarm, a hand was clamped over his mouth and a hood came over his face. He was carried into the van in spite of his kicking and clawing. While the children scrambled and a ruckus grew, DK detonated his grenade and threw it.

"What are you doing? Get in!" Ogie hollered.

DK entered the van just as it started its movement. DK

looked over his shoulder and smiled when the grenade went off. The glow of flames, the hysteria of ruin and loss spreading in the vibrant wind of harmattan filled DK with a sense of triumph.

“Why the hell did you do that?”

DK didn't bother to answer Ogie. He pulled a cigar from the inner pocket of his jacket and held it between his teeth. He turned to Ogie. “Pass me lighter.”

Ogie did grudgingly. “You don't ever learn, do you? Did Chief ask you to do that?”

DK lit his cigar and took a drag. “Are you any different from a robot?”

Ogie narrowed his eyes at DK. “Are you getting ambitious? I hope you remember what Adamant did to Ọ̀gùn Èjẹ̀ when he tried to overthrow him? Imagine what Chief would do if he smells this rebellion.”

How could DK ever forget? Hadn't Rọ̀gbà taken them to the Ìlú péjú Wings base to see Ọ̀gùn Èjẹ̀' s macerated bones in a show glass? How could he forget the glitter of warning in Chief's eyes as he asked them if they thought it was beautiful. But DK knew that Ogie wouldn't tell on him, so he could easily pin the explosion on the Kano boys. He had to even out for his eye, that was all that mattered. Now that he'd taken his pound of flesh, he'd make sure Chief doesn't get wind of the liberties he took.

“Shit!” The guy driving cussed. “I think we're being followed.”

DK's ears perked. He whipped his head around. A vehicle was gaining on them.

"Step on the gas, will you?" Ogie ordered, cocking his gun. He powered down his window and peeped through, aiming his gun at the tyre of the car on their tail. Just as made to pull the trigger, he saw a blast of red flash before the blow of pain shot through his body. His gun clattered to the ground and his hand bled.

"DK, cover!"

"Bloody hell!" The driving guy said as he pressed the brake, causing everyone in the car to jackknife.

DK and Ogie saw that another car was coming at them head on. A car was closing in from the front, another from the back.

"Turn into the bush! We have to cut and run now." DK ordered.

But the car coming from their front had cut them off with a double cross parking and soldiers bearing arms had stepped down from the car. DK looked over his shoulder, the men in the car behind had also stepped down.

"The boy! He's our leverage."

Ogie held Eben by the neck and held a gun to his head.

"If you have half an ounce of sense," A soldier boomed.  
"You will drop your weapons immediately."



Back at the shelter, Şhaléwá watched paramedics stretcher casualties into ambulance after ambulance. Her face showed no emotion but inside the whole of her world was crumbling. She loved these children like they came from her womb. She knew and prayed for every one of them by name. She spent hours poring over their progress reports and the performance appraisals submitted by care takers. She carried them always in her heart. She had never thought she'd have to carry them through a distress like this.

The sobs started in her chest, when Zainab informed her that five children died on the spot and ten suffered severe burns. She asked Zainab for the names of the dead children, Zainab told her.

“Where are their bodies?” Şhaléwá managed.

Zainab led her to where the bodies lay, charred beyond recognition. Şhaléwá crashed to her knees and wailed without restraint. Her throat burned with carbon (ii) oxide and soot, but it came nowhere close to the conflagration of grief that consumed her from within.

She embraced the blackened, sizzling bodies not minding the pain it caused her hands. Farouk stood behind his wife, staring down in shame. He'd rushed down as soon as he heard. Whatever thrill he felt from the success of his conquest thoroughly paled in the face of this. He'd gone too far. He never should have risked the lives of the children. He couldn't bear to think of how much pain he'd caused his wife.

*I won, but at what cost?*

He pulled his wife away from the bodies and hugged her. She pushed him away but he held on, speaking softly to her, inhaling the smell of burnt flesh and ash that clung to her.

"Forgive me, Şhaléwá. Please forgive me. I accept every blame you put on me."

Şhaléwá pulled away. "Farouk, I know you want to go to the barracks to interrogate the boys you caught. Go."

Farouk winced. "That's not fair, Şhaléwá."

"Oh, it's not? Is it fair that Yahuba, Mbyak, Ayange, Ishaya and Bello got to pay the ultimate price for your little gamble?"

Farouk gritted his teeth.

"Just go!"

Farouk walked to his car, leaned his elbows on the roof of his car and let his head drop. A sinking feeling started in him. He didn't have a child. After fifteen years of marriage and countless medical tests, he was still without a child. This was a central bother to his existence, a bother he rarely allowed himself dwell on. Did he use his job as an escape? Did he bury himself in solving crimes to avoid facing the shame that plagued him often? Was it wrong to want respite? Was it wrong to escape? After all, he wasn't doing anything wrong. Şhaléwá had the NGO, he needed something. Şhaléwá took the children at the NGO as hers and he was fully in support. She too had been in support of his career. Until this moment.

Şhaléwá saw herself as the mother of those children. Perhaps that was the problem. Maybe the problem was in the

fact that he couldn't think of them as his children. Maybe if he thought of them as his children, he wouldn't have put them in danger like he did.

*I'm a horrible person. A horrible person posing to be a hero.*

"It's not your fault."

Farouk turned to see Hanatu beside him.

"It's not your fault and she knows it." Hanatu repeated. "Everything she said there, she said in the heat of the moment, it was her emotions speaking."

"But emotions reveal the truth about people's thoughts more than processed speech."

"Your wife loves you and she cannot blame you for this."

"You can't be so sure."

Hanatu smiled. "I can. While you're away on the field doing the work of CID-Naija, Şhaléwá stands for you in the place of prayer. She's quick to pick signals and order divine help for you. Even if she's not directly involved in solving cases with you, she does it with you. She loves you."

Farouk closed his eyes. "She watched my back but I exposed her to danger. What kind of man am I? How could I have exposed my own while guarding another?"

"Take it easy on yourself, Farouk. You're not God. You can't control everything. Learn from this, apologise to your wife and moving forward try to have her back like she has yours. In all you do, don't give room to the enemy through condemnation. I know Şhaléwá. She's a woman of the spirit.



Even though she's emotional right now, she's not limited to the senses. She knows that the enemy has done this, and deep down she knows that you're not the enemy."

Farouk sighed. "I will wait here for her."

"Good call."



Ethan heard the doorbell ring. He smiled and walked to the door, wearing only a pair of socks and briefs. Tájù didn't even close the door behind him before they started making out. After a fervid round, both of them lay on the floor of the living room, enjoying the feel of the cold tiles on their bare backs.

"Well, how was your flight?" Ethan asked and the two of them burst into laughter.

"I'm starving." Tájù said, standing up. He walked to the fridge.

"You were apparently hungrier for other things."

Tájù smiled and pulled the fridge open. "I hope you have some leftovers."

"Yeah, I should." Ethan joined him at the fridge and from there, they went to the kitchen to microwave the leftover. Tájù talked about life in Bristol and then he stopped abruptly.

"What is it?"

"Do you know I've been spending my weekends here consistently for close to two months?"

Ethan sat with him at the coffee table, holding a fork. "I

didn't know you were counting." He tucked into Tájù's meal.

Tájù made a face. "Why do you always do this?"

Ethan shrugged. "They say there's love in sharing."

"I find myself looking forward to this."

"Sharing your food with me?"

Tájù slapped off Ethan's hand. "Seeing you, *òdè*."

Ethan chuckled.

"I've been thinking about us lately. Don't you think we're getting a little too old for all these jumping around? Don't you think we should settle? I mean, I've had them from all over and none gets me like you. I'm content with you. I think we should get exclusive. You know the theory about your first, right? I think it rings true for us."

Ethan laughed and searched Tájù's eyes playfully. "Jim Iyke, is that you?"

Tájù hissed. "I know you had a crush the size of Olúmọ rock on that Jim Iyke guy when we were in Primary school. You were always talking about the films he acted with that your gossip buddy, Leah, that was her name, right?"

"Lydia."

"Whatever. It was so ridiculous. I wondered if you didn't watch anything else on TV apart from Jim Iyke. I started hating the guy *sef*."

Ethan laughed. "Tájù! You were jealous."

"Never."

"Of course, you were!"

"Let's leave that one. What do you think of my

proposition?"

Ethan shrugged. "I beg to differ."

Tájù frowned. "You don't feel the same way about me?"

"I don't believe I'm old."

Tájù shook his head.

"I've been doing some thinking of my own and I believe it's time to do things with a little more purposefulness. So, I subscribe to the idea of getting exclusive."

Tájù stood up and did a dance.

"Don't just stare, join me."

Ethan hissed and went to the living room. He sat on the couch and turned on the TV.

"Come on."

"You know I'm not a dancer."

Tájù came to join him on the couch. "I have another idea." He held up a blunt. "A blowback, have you ever tried it?"

Ethan nodded. "And I hated it."

"No, trust me, you'll love this one. It's poetic. It's you breathing in my exhalation and vice versa. Like CPR through the filter of pot."

"Jim Iyke would never say nonsense like that." Ethan said but he took the other end of the blunt between his lips.

After the blowback, Tájù absently stubbed the blunt out on Ethan's couch.

Ethan gasped. "You ostrich! Do you want to burn down my house?"

They laughed hard.

Ethan cleared his throat. "Tájù, now it's time for me to make my own proposition. You know I said I've decided to do things more purposefully. Tájù, have you looked back on your life and wondered how you might have coped if you stayed back in Nigeria?"

"I get homesick from time to time, if that's what you're asking."

"No, think of all the other boys like us struggling with their identity, closeting their sexuality and living in perpetual fear. We are free because we escaped, what can we do to help people like us back at home?"

Tájù shrugged. "You do advocacy stories every now and again in your comics, don't you?"

"But how much can that change?"

Tájù sighed. "Why don't you just say what's on your mind?"

Ethan stood up and walked to the window. He pulled back the drapes and held onto them. "I want to go back to Nigeria."

Tájù stared at him for some seconds before he burst into laughter. "You've had too much to smoke."

"I'm serious."

"You're high. High as a kite."

"I'm ser--"

"Are you trying to get yourself killed? You can influence culture from here, you don't have to risk your life."

"Come on, T. I've become restless here. I've thought

about this and I'm sure this is what I need to do. This is the purpose I have to pursue. I must help other Nigerian boys find the path of liberation."

"There's social media, you can create a network. You don't have to move."

Ethan shook his head. "It's cowardly to nest in the comfort of another man's land and give advice to my people back at home. Come with me, T."

"Come with you?" Tájù came to stand beside Ethan. "You can't..."

"Please."

"I can't just uproot my life and move back to Nigeria because of you. There has to be another way."

Ethan faced the window. "This is the only way for me. I have to follow the purpose I've carved for myself. I'm tired of living in a bubble."

Tájù tipped his chin. "If you had to pick between me and going back..."

"Don't put me in that position, T."

"I need to know. If you had to choose, what would it be?"

Ethan took a thoughtful pause. "I'll choose going back to Nigeria."

"Wow," Tájù opened his mouth to say more but Ethan held him and spoke.

"Because I know you. You're a standup guy and you won't let anything come between us. If the distance between

Bristol and Atlanta is not stopping us, this would not."

"You are very confident of the potency of the *ẹfọ* you cooked for me."

Ethan chuckled. "Please think about it, T. I know that deep down your heart yearns for home... and for me."

"This is madness."

"I know... But I have to go." Ethan said and embraced him.

"And I can't think of letting you go."

"So come with me."

"It's not that easy, Ethan. I can't just up and leave."

Ethan smiled. The resolve in Tájù's voice was gone. He would finally have the peace he desired. He'd go back home, give the kind of mentorship he needed as a growing teenager, to other teenagers and he'd go with Tájù. He would have his cake after eating it.

He mumbled sweet words to Tájù's ear as they made their way to the room.

\*\*\*\*

Farouk drove his wife home by 1:30am and all through the journey, neither of them said a word. When they got home, Şhaléwá told Farouk to go to the barracks. This time, her voice lacked the tinge of bitterness. It was just stolid, and weak.

"Just go. I need some time alone."

And so, Farouk left for the barracks.

Farouk walked with Iorkyaa, the second lieutenant in charge of the detachment commissioned for the operation of the

night. Iorkyaa brought Farouk up to speed.

“We've put the four of them in different rooms and we've been trying to interrogate them all night but we've not made any progress.”

Farouk nodded. “They wouldn't break immediately.”

“We should use force?”

Farouk shook his head. “I won't recommend torture. People like that are used to pressure hitting them from outside, let's switch it up. We will break them from inside.”

Iorkyaa frowned. “From inside?”

“Set up projector screens in each of their rooms and get the video commentary on Rògbà playing on repeat. Put Irésòmíjí's pictures all around them and make sure they don't get a wink of sleep. They wouldn't break immediately but with five days of high caffeine and a constant drone of a dead boy's story, one of them would begin to crack at least.”

Iorkyaa nodded. “After five days, can we begin to pressure them from outside?”

Farouk sniffed a chuckle and shrugged. “If that would be necessary.”

“What's the situation at the shelter?”

“Well, it's all ruins. Thankfully, we didn't record too many causalities, although five died on the spot. Those injured have been taken to the general hospital.”

“You should go home to get some rest. We can handle things from here.”

Farouk nodded, yawning. He walked to his car, eased

back his seat and slept off. He awakened to the ringing of his phone.

"Hello, Şhaléwá."

"You can come home when you're done oh. Don't sleep in the barracks."

"I was actually sleeping when you called."

"Come back home."

When he got home, Şhaléwá was sitting in the living room. She tapped the space on the chair beside her. He came to sit.

"Şhaléwá, I'm sorry."

She nodded. "I'm sorry too. I shouldn't have spoken like I did." She sighed. "Farouk, I think I need a break."

Farouk's heart started pounding. He knelt beside her. Şhaléwá furrowed her brows.

"What are you doing?"

"Please don't leave me. I will be more available; I'll be more considerate."

"Nooo... I don't mean a break from you."

"Ah, *Jésù seun o*."

Şhaléwá pursed her lips. "I don't think I'll be able to face those children again after what happened today. I've failed them."

Farouk held her hand. "Look at me. Look at me, Şhaléwá. If there's anyone who failed the children, it was me and I'm going to address them. I'm going to apologise to them. I'm going to step up to my responsibility over them. You won't



become that mother bearing the blame for her husband's failures, not on my watch."

Şhaléwá shook her head. "I can't get the image of their burnt bodies out of my mind, Farouk, and the shelter, our labour of years has been razed to the ground. Where do I start?"

"*Ilé Ọba t'ó jóná...*" Farouk started a Yoruba proverb. The king's palace that got burnt...

Şhaléwá pressed her lips together as tears burnt their way down her cheeks. Farouk thumbed them off.

"Complete it, Şhaléwá."

"*...Ẹwà ló bù sí.*" ...Only gave room to a more beautiful one.

Farouk nodded. "We shall rebuild."



That night before Farouk went to bed, he went on YouTube to check the video they had released. It had garnered one hundred and fifty-six thousand views already. The bedlam in the comment section had spilled into other social media platforms. He knew Twitter would be on fire- when was it ever not on fire?- with Rọgbà's matter. Farouk smiled to himself. He sent a text to Ahmed. By 7am the following day, Ahmed was to release the second video. This one would contain the footage of Ahmed's phone call to Rọgbà and the incriminating bank statement, the CCTV footage of The Haven Shelter up till the bomb and a documentary of the victims of Rọgbà's attack.

The final video would be of Rògbà's pawns whenever they break.



He knew he couldn't stay another day in the country. When he received news of the attack on his cocoa farm, he knew he was not safe in the country. Some youths had set his farm on fire as a counterattack to the arson on the Qlátiléwá's foundation. Rògbà sat in his private jet and for the first time since he was seven, he couldn't quell the tremor of his hands. What he feared the most was happening. All he fussed and jittered to hide was out in the open. The cat had fallen head first.

Jemisiyun was not taking his calls. He tried his son's line.

*Phil, pick up, please.*

"Hello, Dad."

Rògbà inhaled deeply. His son took his call. Even if the whole world was against him, he had to keep his family on his side.

"Phil, how are you..."

"Dad, what is this they're saying about you on the internet?"

"Listen to m..."

"Did you do it?"

"I'm coming over, I promise, I'll explain everything to you." Rògbà tried to keep his voice neutral. He heard

background talk. Jemi's voice.

"Rògbà," Jemisiyun's voice came over the line. He heard a door slam. "don't contact us again. Don't come anywhere near us."

"Jemisiyun, you can't take my children away from me."

"I very well can. That boy, Irésòmíjì, died because of you. Why do you think I will trust you with my son?"

Rògbà moved the phone from his ear and stared at the screen. Jemisiyun had never used that tone on him before.

"You promised me. You told me it will never happen again. So, this is why you dumped us in the UK, so you could molest boys all over Nigeria."

"Shut up! You knew what you were getting. Don't act like you didn't know. You were a nobody in Àkùngbá and you know I didn't marry you for love."

"I know. You married me for convenience; you married me to stop people from talking. You only touched me to have children for appearance's sake. I know all these and I can live with them. I could live with the thought of your affairs. But this... this I cannot overlook. That boy died at twelve! Twelve! I won't let you near any of my children."

"You are a hypocrite! You saw me. You caught me with Inyang before we got married."

Jemisiyun went quiet.

"I'm coming home."

"Try it and watch me turn you over to the police. I'll send the divorce papers through my lawyer."

The line disconnected. Rògbà stared at his trembling hands. He was seven again, sitting on his bed, trembling as he waited for his cousin to step out of the bathroom and out of his room. He could still picture Àfònjá's Liverpool towel, could still perceive the earth-rich scent of his black soap. The pebbles of dread and disbelief that crawled in his own stomach then were back sloshing around in his gut almost audibly. He lay still, pretending not to hear the slaps of Àfònjá's wet slippers on the floor as he walked out of his room. He curled tighter, forcing down the avalanche of shame that roiled in him.

*It didn't happen. It didn't happen.*

He curled tighter, grabbing the sheets in his trembling hands. He opened his eyes and he caught a stain on the sheet. He yanked it off and tossed it in a corner of the room, calling for one of the domestic staff to take it out. He asked that a new sheet be put on his bed. He watched as they replaced the sheet, screaming thoughts.

*Nothing happened!*

He screamed the same thoughts every time Àfònjá visited until he left for the university. Àfònjá left but the seed remained in Rògbà, as did the shame, the lies, the hiding.

Now, forty-four years after, everything had come to explode in his face. Rògbà swallowed, trying to still his hands. He picked his stress ball and squeezed frantically. He tried to focus his thoughts on something benign but they kept running wild, calling up all the memories he'd repressed, all the forbidden feelings.

He turned on his phone, knowing full well that it was a counterproductive decision. He couldn't seem to stay away from the comments. He barely slept through the night. He stayed on his phone, reading the comments, the quote tweets. He'd read them until his chest was tight and he couldn't breathe, then he'd turn off his phone but few minutes later, he'd be back, following the vitriol in his mentions.

He scrolled through tweets under the hashtags of his name. He read, sucking air through his teeth. He stumbled on a tweet that took the wind out of his sails, it read,

'You know the amazing thing about God,  
if #**Rogba** would just accept Jesus today  
his sins would be forgiven and he'd become  
a brand new man'

Rògbà looked through the replies.

'Brand new man kill you there.'

'Religious people are just stupid walai'

This reply got another reply:

'Not you insulting religious people and writing

'walahi' in the same line...

what's the colour of your confusion?'

'I'm just here for the violence'

'make it make sense abeg. Your god will forgive a murderer,

but will send innocent people to hell.'

'Accurate. God is merciful and even though he hates sin, he doesn't want any sinner to perish.

For anyone feeling condemned, God loves you.'

'Wrong time to preach abeg. I'm a believer too  
but there's time for everything. #Rogba must suffer  
for his wicked deeds. CT learn to read the room!'

*You've lost it all. Your children, your farm, your political  
ambition. Everybody hates you. What do you have as a reason for  
living? Where do you want to run? How long can you run before the  
law catches up with you? You've been served a law suit; all the odds are  
against you. How would you like your life in prison?*

Rògbà's phone fell as the shaking of his hands became  
more intense.

*Fall on your sword.*

*You know the amazing thing about God...*

*Fall on your sword, it's the only option you have left.*

*if #Rogba would just accept Jesus today...*

*God is a figment of people's imagination, he's a character  
formed to assuage men's itch for escape. Fools chalk things up to a  
supreme being because they don't want to take charge of their lives.  
You've believed this since you could think for yourself.*

*God is merciful...*

*Fall on your sword. Fall on your sword, Rògbà.*

Rògbà stood up and walked to the hostess' quarters. He  
asked the hostess to excuse him but she was already scampering  
away before he asked. He raised a hand to stop her.

"Before you go, give me a slice of cake and a glass of red  
wine."

*See the way she trembles in your presence. See how the cake*

*platter rattles in her hands. She sees you like the rest of the world now see you, a monster. See the perspiration on her brows, see how she's hurrying to leave. She can't stand you. No one can. And if you're being honest, you know that even you can't stand you. This is why you must free yourself. Fall on your sword.*

*"Thank you."*

Rògbà looked at the bottle of red wine beside the half-filled glass, the glistening fork by the slice of cake.

*Fall on your sword.*

Rògbà picked the fork and the glass of wine. He tapped the glass of wine with the fork gently.

"Time for a toast." He whispered and then started chuckling. He lifted the glass. "to the cat in catastrophe."

He burst into a raucous laugh. He guffawed as he hit the fork against the glass again, with more force this time. He hit the glass again. It shattered. He laughed harder. It was all so funny. His entire life was a massive brilliant joke. He poured the wine on his abdomen, finding mirth in the way his blue kaftan soaked up the red wine. He picked the bottle of red wine and emptied it on his abdomen, gasping for air and shedding tears as he laughed.

He dropped the bottle and picked up the fork. He had the fork in one hand and the broken glass in the other. At the same time, he plunged both into his abdomen. The waves of pain that travelled to his head tickled him some more.

*Deeper.*

He pushed the fork in, twisting it. He pulled out the

glass and watched blood gush.

"It's all red wine. It's red wine." He said amidst bouts of laughter.

He pushed the glass back into his gut.

He continued laughing, but as life ebbed out of him, the mirth ceased. He came face to face with the reality of eternity. In that glacial moment, before blackness closed in finally, he knew that regardless of what he made himself believe, there was God and life after death and for him, an impending fierce judgement.



# PART II

## EPIGRAPH

“And He Himself gave some to be apostles,  
Some prophets, some evangelists,  
and some pastors and teachers,  
for the equipping of the saints  
for the work of ministry, for the  
edifying of the body of Christ,”

**Ephesians 4:11-12 (NKJV)**



## CHAPTER EIGHT

### ONCE UPON A VIGIL

Nathan steepled his fingers under his chin, listening to the *griin, griiin, griiin* bleeding into his ears from his ear buds. His mum picked the call.

*"Táyọ̀, báwo ni?"*

Nathan decided to cut to the chase. "How is Daddy?"

His mum sighed. "I can't lie to you; your father is in a bad state. I was even going to call you; the chemo is taking a heavy toll on him." Her voice broke. "Seeing him so helpless hooked up to all those machines... and the bills! At this rate, all our life's savings would be swallowed up by hospital bills."

"Can you put me on video call so I can see him?"

"Okay, I'll go to his ward and call you on WhatsApp."

Nathan stared off at the wall. After the exhilarating

experience on the mountain, the declarations and confidence that rose in Nathan's heart, he didn't see this steep valley coming. The day he left Gbongán, just as he arrived Lagos, he received a distress call from his mum that his Dad passed out. Since that day, he'd been hospitalised at Ilé-Ifẹ̀.

*Did I really hear God? So much for being a prophet. It would seem I've successfully jinxed things with my big mouth.*

His phone started ringing. When he picked the video call and saw his father's efforts at sitting up. The way he bit his lower lip and furrowed his brows made Nathan look away for a moment. He could see what his mum meant.

*"Táyọ̀, bóoni?"*

*"Daddy, how are you feeling?"*

*"Err... don't worry about me, shèbí you said God will heal me or you don't believe it anymore?"*

Nathan felt awful. Why did he awaken hope in the poor man?

*"Hello? You don't believe it?"*

*"I do... There's nothing God cannot do." He was glad his dad couldn't see his face. "Please give the phone back to mummy."*

He asked his mum if he could speak with the doctor. She told him the doctor was off attending to some other patients in the next ward, but when he comes around, she'd call him. Nathan ended the call and turned to his computer screen, trying to focus all his attention on balancing accounts. Figures that weren't adding up was a lot easier to deal with than prophecy

and reality not adding up.

"Nathan,"

He lifted his head to see Edward at the entrance of his office.

"Let's grab lunch."

Nathan shook his head. "Appetite no dey plus, I need to tidy up these reports and mail them over to the auditor before the close of work."

Edward shrugged. "I'll bring takeout for you, then."

"Daddy Eddy," Nathan lifted his hands. "I'm loyal to your administration, Baba."

Edward shook his head. "I hope you've not forgotten the plan for this evening?"

"What pla... oh, the meeting at Bro David's place."

"You don't forget. Shey you will tag along with me after work? We'll go there, hangout for a bit, rest and then by midnight we'll start the prayer meeting."

"No qualms."

"Safe." Edward walked off.

The smile on Nathan's face disappeared. He wished he could find a good excuse to escape this prayer meeting. He was in no mood for hangouts or prayer parties. He turned back to his computer screen, returning to the comforting distraction of his job.



"So is Eben coming back to Lagos any time soon?"

Edward asked, nibbling on pringles where he sat on the floor of David's living room.

"I doubt it. The last time I spoke with Aunty Şhaléwá, she said he has become totally closed off to everyone. He's seeing a shrink there in Kano and I don't think he's ready to meet his mum just yet." Ladé replied.

David inhaled deeply. "The poor boy. At least, the whole situation gave Aunty Shaléwá's foundation good PR. The go-fund me people created to support the rebuilding project has generated enough funds to build two other facilities."

Ladé nodded. "She said they're going to build five other branches in different northern states, each named after the children that died in the explosion. The foundation is also getting a lot of international recognition now. Honestly, it's well deserved."

"Prophet Nathan, you've been quiet all evening. What is the Lord saying?"

Nathan forced a smile.

"What's up with you and Rénikè now?"

*Oh, God. Really?*

"I don't know if you're comfortable talking about it... but Rénikè has been talking and you know, rumours..."

Ladé nudged David with her elbow and flashed him a quelling look. "Don't mind my husband. He's been rooting for you two since the start. How is business moving at Ed's motors?"

"What rumours exactly?" Nathan asked.

David and Ladé exchanged a look.

"I probably shouldn't have said anything."

"What has Rénikè been saying?"

"Something about choosing your brother over her... just some ridiculous talk really."

Edward looked at Nathan. His brother?

Nathan swallowed. "Can I... er... use your bathroom?"

"Why, sure."

As soon as Nathan closed the bathroom door, Ladé turned to her husband. "For goodness's sake, David!"

"I probably should have just kept quiet."

"Yeah, you should."

Edward sighed. "She was telling people about his sexuality?"

"You knew?"

Edward hissed and ground his teeth.

Nathan's fingers flew over his keypad furiously.

-I tell you something in confidence and you go ahead to yap about it behind my back. What do you mean by I picked my brother over you? Who the hell do you think you are? Was I supposed to choose you over him? What's so special about you that will make me choose you over my blood? I mean, even your mother didn't choose you-

He sent the text before he could think better of it. The minute he saw blue ticks on the message, Rénikè's call came in.

"How could you, Nate?"

"Don't call me that."

"How dare you bring my mother up to score cheap points?"

"What were you trying to score when you were maligning me with my brother to everyone in your church?"

"This is different!"

"How is it different?"

Réniké scoffed. "You know what? I think it's best if we avoid each other moving forward."

"No... that would be better. You know what would have been the best?" He took the phone from his ear and held it close to his mouth, sending every word like a dagger through the speaker. "It would have been best if we never met."

"Don't ever call me again."

Nathan chuckled. "Hell would have to freeze over before I consider it."

The call ended.

Nathan chewed on his knuckles, listening to his shaky breath and thumping heart. He kicked the wall and blew out his cheeks from the pain.

*What have you done, Nathan?*

He redialled Réniké.

"Didn't take long for hell to freeze." Her sarcasm rankled.

"Look, Réniké, I know emotions are high right now. We should probably settle to discuss this when the steam has blown over and we are much more rational."

"I am perfectly rational and I can see you for what you



are. You care more about your faggot brother than me. At this point, I don't know if you're defending him because he's your brother or for other reasons."

Nathan bristled. What was she suggesting? The biggest effect Ethan's ugly discovery back in Gbongán had on Nathan was the need to prove that he was not like his brother. He lived with the compulsion to prove his straitlaced masculinity. He never allowed himself to indulge in anything remotely feminine, never welcomed any show of affection to other males. He felt the need to repress and bottle every feeling. He never wanted anyone to look at he and his brother and have a reason to think they moved the same way even though they looked very much alike.

He ended the call. This was a mistake. Every part of it was a mistake. Meeting her, collecting her number, trusting her, attacking her like she attacked him, fighting dirty to get even. It was all a mistake; a shard tearing in his soul. A shard that once sat whole as part of the window of trust. He shut his eyes and the scene from his dream played behind his eyes. Was this was what the crash landing portended? Nathan wanted to cry, but he didn't allow it.

Edward rapped on the door.

"Nathan,"

Nathan pulled the door open and walked out, chin up. If Edward didn't know better, he'd think that Nathan was perfectly fine. He made to pat Nathan's shoulder and Nathan shrugged him off.

When he rejoined Ladé and David in the living room, he saw a lady wearing scrubs walk in. Ladé introduced her as Ìyanu, her younger sister. She seemed very tired and went straight into her room. Nathan barely even caught her name or the face and he didn't care.

Nathan couldn't concentrate during the prayers. His mind kept drifting back to Réniké; he replayed every conversation they'd ever had in his mind, he pictured her rolling her eyes at him, giggling, pouting like she did whenever he teased her. How did he manage to land himself in a bitter break up when they got off to such a great start?

"Nathan, it's your turn to lead us. You'll be leading us in prayer for the next hour."

Nathan sighed. "Let's just worship the name of the Lord."

He muttered tongues while thoughts of Réniké kept his mind busy. With time, the voices of Edward, Ladé and David lifted in adoration drew Nathan to the present. He lifted a worship song and they joined him. As they sang, tears gathered in Nathan's eyes and he convinced himself that the tears came because of the weight of God's glory being released in the atmosphere of worship.

"In Jesus's name we have worshipped."

"Amen."

"I don't have a prayer point for us, but I want us to just pray in the spirit. Let's just pray with the utterances the Holy Ghost will be giving us in tongues and understanding." He felt

silly. He didn't have a prayer point to give, how was he supposed to manage the remaining minutes of the hour? Wouldn't he come off as unspiritual if he just kept asking them to pray in tongues?

*Focus.*

Nathan decided to follow the admonition in his heart. The best thing to do was to make the most of this time of prayer and fellowship. He rose to his feet and increased the intensity of his prayer. Tuning one's attention in prayer would often times start from outside-in. If he put more energy into the prayer, it would be easier to focus his heart.

As he prayed intentionally, he could hear Ladé say words between strings of tongues. She kept repeating, "where the word of a king is, there is power."

Nathan didn't stop praying as he pondered on the scriptural quote. He whipped out his phone to search out the scripture. He found the verse in Ecclesiastes eight verse four.

*Where the word of a king is, there is power; and who may say to him, "what are you doing?"*

*The power of God is embedded in his word. As he speaks, the power to perform is released.* Nathan kept meditating on the verse as he prayed. He remembered something he read from a Myles Munroe book, something along the lines of the believer being a king and priest according to scriptures and that God is known as the King of kings because his children are kings.

*If God has indeed made me a king, and he has, then where my word is- according to his will- there is power.*

*Nathan, do you believe the Lord?*

"My Dad will live. Daddy will live to declare the goodness of the Lord in the land of the living." Without feeling the confidence or assurance his words held, he said them. He repeated the words in his prayer, fixing his heart on what the word of God had already said about divine healing.

"Jesus bore your sickness and infirmity in his body. Jesus paid the price for your healing, for your peace. Two people cannot bear the sickness of one man. Jesus bore it, Daddy cannot bear it again. Cancer you are gone in the name of Jesus. The hand of the Devil is stayed over my family in the name of Jesus."

The more Nathan prayed, the firmer his faith grew. The Lord ministered words to his heart, reassuring words about his father's healing and he typed them on his phone for safekeeping. At the end of the night, Nathan's heart was full of hope.

But when the vigil ended and he took his phone out of do not disturb mode, he saw that his mum had been trying to reach him. His heart lurched. Had something happened to his Dad again? Of course, something had happened, why else would his mom be trying to reach him at three am?

He called her.

"Táyò, where have you been since, eh?" Was the strain in her voice just late night husk or something else?

"*E má bínú. Şé kò le?* (I'm sorry. Hope there's no problem?)"

"Your father has to be transferred to Lagos this morning. The doctor said his organs are failing and he needs special care. Once I charter a taxi, I will call you so you can tell the driver where to go. You know I don't know anywhere in Lagos."

"Alright ma."

Nathan could almost hear the hiss of deflation coming from his chest. His Father's organs were failing.

*The grasses wither, the Lord had said, the flowers fade. But the word of God abides forever.*

*Daddy's organs are failing. He needs special care.*

Nathan swallowed. "God, I still believe you. When Daddy comes, I will lay my hands on him and pray for him. I know You will honour Your word."

"You should grab some sleep before day break, bro."

Nathan didn't turn to Edward.

"Are you okay?"

"What suggests that I'm not okay?" His voice came out harsher than he intended. Did he even intend to say that? Was any of these intended?

In the sigh Edward released, Nathan could tell he was retreating. "I'll go at your pace. Whenever you're ready, I'll be here."



From David and Ladé's home, Edward drove back to his apartment to clean it in preparation for the teen's meeting to hold later that morning. Still yet to recover from the vigil, he

dozed off on the couch. He didn't hear Ijeoma and her brother, Odinaka, come in. So when his eyes fluttered open and he saw figures looming, he jumped.

Odinaka laughed and curved his already bandy legs, lifting his hands high above his head and grunting through his teeth.

Edward chuckled and rubbed his eyes. "Odinaka, you're not serious. IJ, how are you?"

"I'm okay."

"Have you started exams?"

"No, but we'll start on Monday and I'm so flipping scared."

"You don't need to be, you've been reading, haven't you?"

"I sit and stare at words and equations that might well be Latin and then I have a headache. Does that count as reading?"

"I know you're wasting your time in science class. Uncle Edward, you should see IJ's paintings."

Ijeoma's eyes went wide. "OD!"

Edward looked at Ijeoma, wiggling his brows playfully. "So, you've been hiding your talent, huh? Let me see your works."

"Gotcha," Odinaka supplied enthusiastically. He came to sit on the arm rest of Edward's couch. "This is her burner instagram account where she posts her art."

Ijeoma quickly snatched Odinaka's phone. Just then,

some other teenagers walked in, giving Ijeoma an escape.

"Uncle Edward, how are we celebrating your birthday next week?" Ini Momodu asked.

"When is his birthday?"

"Next Saturday."

"Ah, makes sense. We'll gather here for a parteeeeeey." Odinaka was up on his feet, dancing to music only he could hear.

Edward raised his hand. "This is not what we are here for."

"When we finish today's study, we'll then plan the party." Ini Momodu said, taking her seat beside Ijeoma who instinctively shifted even though there was room enough for Ini.

Edward shook his head. *These kids.*

"Kúnlé, lead us in worship."

Kúnlé wiped his palms on his shorts and hummed a tune before he said, "There's a song in your heart, just sing it to the Lord. If no song comes up, sing in tongues."

A cacophony of joyful noise erupted in the room after some time as they all worshipped with abandon. As Edward sang, he couldn't help but think of Kúnlé's Mum, Grace. From the time he met her through Mrs. Nwafor, he loved her fervour and the same fire was now rising in her son. Every time Kúnlé sang, the glory was always tangible. Edward knew it was one thing to be a great singer, it was another thing to be able to minister life through songs. Kúnlé was both.

The sound of rhythmic claps drew Edward's attention to Déyemí who was seated right next to him. It occurred to Edward then that Déyemí sat beside him the last time they gathered, but he brushed it off as inconsequential.

"Let's turn our Bibles to first John three verse two and three. Someone should read for us."

"Beloved, now we are children of God;" Ini Momodu read, "and it has not yet been revealed what we shall be but we know that when He is revealed, we shall be like Him, for we shall see Him as He is. And everyone who has this hope in Him purifies himself, just as he is pure."

"Thank you, Ini. Today, we'll be considering the subject of Sonship."

"Opps... this is where the ladies leave the room." Odinaka chipped in, scratching his cheek like he did whenever he was being deliberately silly. Some of them chuckled, Ini threw her pen at him.

"But we all know this sonship is not gender-specific, right?" Edward asked.

"Yes sir."

"We know that in Christ there is neither Jew nor Greek, slave or free, male or female, right?"

"Yes sir."

"Great. Now, let's focus on what we have for today. The privilege of being sons of God is such a premium thing that it made John exclaim in the first verse of that chapter. He said, behold what manner of love the Father has bestowed on us, that



we should be called children of God! Look in your Bible, can you see the exclamation mark?"

The teens nodded and lifted their eyes to Edward.

"Why is it such a big deal? Someone might wonder. Let's recite John 3:16 together."

In unison they quoted the scripture off the top of their heads. "For God so loved the world that he gave his only begotten son..."

"Hold it there. I have a question. Is Jesus the only son of God?"

A thoughtful silence followed.

"Well, yeah. He is. Isn't that what the Bible says?" Ijeoma finally mumbled.

Edward smiled and nodded. "In comparing scripture with scripture, you must always bear this in mind: the Bible is a cohesive unit and it has no contradictions. So, when it seems there's a conflict between what various parts of scripture are saying, the problem is with your understanding. You must therefore seek to get insight and light by the Spirit of God. Now, let's look at John twelve verse twenty-four. No, back up a little, let's start from the previous verse. Ijeoma, read to us."

Ijeoma read the scripture.

"From what you just read, IJ, what was the context in which Jesus was speaking?"

Ijeoma glanced at her Bible again. "He was talking about his death? I guess?"

"Right. He was announcing to them that the hour of his

glorification had come and in the same breath, he goes on to give the metaphor of a grain of wheat... is someone catching the drift?"

"Let me try," Kúnlé sat up. "Jesus was the seed and until he died, he was alone but after his death, burial and resurrection, he could produce many more after his kind."

Déyẹmí started clapping.

Odinaka joined in the clapping. "Give that boy a bottle of chilled beer, scratch that, a chilled bottle of communion wine."

Edward shook his head and chuckled. "Finally on this matter, let's look at Hebrews 2:10. Déyẹmí, read that for us."

After Déyẹmí read the scripture, Edward said, "So, at the time Jesus spoke to Nicodemus as is recorded in John three sixteen, he was indeed the only begotten son of God. But by the redemptive work he did, he brought many sons to glory. Until Jesus was glorified, he was the only begotten of the Father but by his glorification, we, who were aliens from God's covenant have been engrafted into his lineage. Now, we are sons of God!"

Ini raised her hands. "Hallelujah!"

Ijeoma took notes.

"Can you see why sonship is a big deal? It's the reality of Christ made available to the man in Christ. Littered all through the new testament, we see the various truths associated with this great privilege of sonship. And the first I want us to consider is that sonship draws us to communion. Odinaka, read Galatians four verse six."

“And because you are sons, God has sent forth the Spirit of His Son into your hearts, crying out, “Abba Father!””

“Because we are sons of God, we have received the indwelling of the Holy Spirit and this spurs us to cry 'father!' You have received the Spirit of God and this Spirit is one that consistently yearns for communion with the father. This is why we are to pray without ceasing, to keep communication lines with the father open at all times. This is why we prioritise prayer and not just leave it to convenience. This is why we pray long and pray well. This is why we worship the father and give thanks at all times. Because our inner man yearns for communion with the father.

“Now, going back to the first passage of scripture we read, the one I read, we can see further insights into sonship. It says, 'beloved, now we are children of God; and it has not yet been revealed what we shall be, but we know that when he is revealed, we shall be like him, for we shall see him as he is. The second thing sonship does to us is that it makes us yearn for the coming of Jesus. We look forward to the return of our Lord and saviour with joy and expectation. It's an aberration for a son to think of the Lord's return with fear and trepidation. Instead, because we are sons, we look forward to the revelation of our God. It's this understanding that made the saints of old cry, 'Maranatha!'

“Verse three says, 'And everyone who has this hope in Him purifies himself, just as He is pure.' You see, sonship spurs us to be holy as our father is holy. The hope of seeing our Lord

drives us to do only what he loves and advance his course. Living with the consciousness of sonship will make you live a life of purity."

Edward went on to expound from scriptures on the rights and responsibilities of a son of God. The teens took notes and somewhere towards the end of the meeting, Kazayet sauntered in with a pair of identical twins.

"We have early birds here. Kazayet, what took you so long?"

Kazayet scratched his head. "I'm sorry Uncle Edward, I woke up late."

"When did you sleep?"

"Three."

"What kept you up?"

"COD."

"That had better be the name of a chemistry textbook."

Odinaka sniggered.

"I know that COD is call of duty *jo*. I'm not that old. Don't come late next time, Kazayet and introduce our new friends to us."

"I can't tell them apart, but one is Ozioma and the other is Ozichi. They are my neighbour's daughters."

"You are welcome in the name of the Lord!" Kúnlé started singing and the others joined him, clapping and bobbing their heads. Odinaka beatboxed and it was totally off beat, but that could not deter him.

"For the sake of our new friends, we should do a recap of

what we've studied so far. Everyone is going to talk. So, let's start with you, Déyemí."



Ijeoma refused to give Odinaka his phone because she didn't want him to show Edward her burner Instagram account.

"Uncle Edward, the handle is mijscape underscore. Check it out later."

Ijeoma scowled at him before she turned to Edward. "Please, will you help me talk to my parents? I don't know how to tell them I can't be a doctor."

Edward felt a tap on his shoulder. He turned to see Déyemí twiddling with his thumbs and saying, "My mum is here and she'd like to say hello."



"Please excuse us and let's do our job."

Nathan stepped back, swallowing. What was the problem? What did he do wrong? Was his faith inadequate? Why did he lay his hand on his Dad and pray for him with all his heart, yet nothing happened? He looked from his father's swollen legs to his head that chemo had totally ridded of hair. He looked at all the bags of fluid hanging up and draining into his body. The doctor said the cancer had already travelled to his lymph nodes, bones and liver.

*But the word says that these signs shall follow those that*

*believe. God, what is going on?*

*"Mummy, I'm going to the waiting room."*

*She looked at him and nodded. "I will sit with him."*

Nathan sat in the waiting room and plugged his ears; he scrolled through his playlist looking for what to play. He wanted to play a sad song but he decided against it, instead, he chose to create a new playlist which he titled 'faith tonic'. The first song he played that afternoon was William McDowell's Still Moving and in spite of the questions in his heart, he chose to focus on the testiMonies captured in the track.

*God is a healer. Rapha still heals. He's still moving... My Dad is still dying... He's still proving- cancer is wild. An aggressive and ruthless blind fire- just how grea... My Pastor's wife died three years ago from breast cancer. She died after a double mastectomy and a gruelling chemo journey combined with homonotherapy. My Pastor taught me almost all I know about faith yet his wife died. Pastor Banji Adérintó must have prayed, he must have exerted his faith. Pastor Banji has more faith than me.*

Before long, Nathan couldn't concentrate on the song. Was he really exercising faith or living in denial? He thought of his Dad's legs, of how frail he had become. His mum said the chemo was affecting him badly. He could hardly keep anything down and he was anaemic. Nathan couldn't imagine the extent of the pain his father was in.

*God. God.*

Nathan waited. He wanted to hear the Lord speak to him. He wanted some reassurance, a sign, a change. He sat still

with his hands clenched between his knees, inhaling the antiseptic smell of hospital he hated. He got nothing. He flashed back to his childhood, to the days when his proneness to ear infections made him frequent the clinic in their town. When did the infections stop? He tried to trace it back but he couldn't get his finger on the specific period. Was he in primary five or primary four?

He jogged his memory again. Albeit hazy, the memory came. Someone, probably during school fellowship or Sunday school, had read a portion of scripture where Jesus performed a healing. He said a prayer that could not have exceeded two lines. He couldn't remember the prayer but he'd never had an ear infection since then.

*Are you seriously comparing your childish ear discomfort to cancer? Your Dad's liver is failing, his kidneys are failing. They're going to put him on haemodialysis. Do you know how much that's going to cost you? This is not pus in your ear, the sooner you start preparing your heart, the better positioned you'll be to handle grief.*

The next song on faith tonic came up. Nathan listened to the lyrics that almost sounded like mockery to him.

*This is the confidence that when we call to you...*

He turned it off. He picked his phone and opened twitter. Banter about yesterday's football match would serve to take his mind off his Dad momentarily.



## CHAPTER NINE

### COUCHES

After church the following day, Pastor Banji called Nathan aside telling him he'd received a word for him. Nathan's heart soared. He shifted his weight, ready to receive the word of the Lord.

"Daddy said you are entering into a new season. He said you are stepping into ordination. What he has called you to be from your mother's womb, you begin to walk in them."

Nathan's shoulders slumped.

*God, really?*

"That's all?"

"Yeah..." Pastor Banji frowned. "You seem disappointed."

Nathan sighed. "I am disappointed. I need to talk to



you, Pastor AB.”

“Like right now?”

“If you don't mind sir.”

Pastor Banji shrugged. “Let's go to my office.”

Nathan told him everything about his father's health and the confusion it was causing him. In all his narration, he was careful to leave Ethan out. Pastor Banji let him pour out his heart without interrupting him and when he was done, he allowed companionable silence sit between them for some seconds before he asked Nathan to come with him for a christening ceremony where he was to officiate. It took him by surprise and he didn't know what to say.

“Don't just sit there, get up, son.” Pastor Banji said with a chuckle.

On the ride to the home of the new parents, Pastor Banji turned on the car stereo. The station they chanced on was playing gospel songs because it was Sunday and the song being played was the 'The Anthem' by Dunsin Oyekan. The very song Nathan had been listening to the previous day. Pastor AB sang along, dancing with his shoulders as he drove. He wasn't a great singer but what he lacked in vocals, he more than made up for with his fluid moves. Nathan wondered if Pastor AB had any plan to give him counsel on what he discussed with him. By the time they arrived the venue and Pastor AB had said nothing about Nathan's Dad, Nathan was sure he wasn't going to talk about it and that left him feeling flat.

But on the ride back, Pastor Banji brought up his wife's

demise and Nathan could tell that it was difficult for him.

“Pastor, you don't have to...”

Pastor AB waved him off. “When Mọlẹwà died, it felt as though the ground slid beneath me. I've always believed in miracles and healings. I have taught and administered God's power since my university days but there I was standing face-to-face with the reality of my wife's death. I prayed for the Lord to heal her, I fasted, I declared the word. I did all I knew yet she died. The day before she passed, Mọlẹwà held my hand and said, 'Banji, this pain is too much. Let me go.'”

Pastor Banji sighed as he manoeuvred a turn. “Why didn't God stop her from getting cancer? Why didn't God heal the cancer at the early stage? Why did she have to go under the blade? Mọlẹwà fought the mastectomy option. She stalled till it was fatal to stall any further. After the operation, she took down the mirror in our bathroom. She cried every time she showered. I would stand there with her and tell her how beautiful I thought she was, but all she saw was that her womanhood had been depleted. It was a difficult journey. She wore stuffed bras even when she was going to bed. It took two months post-op for my wife to smile again. As if that wasn't bad enough, three months later during a routine check, the doctor spotted a lung metastasis in spite of adjuvant therapy. While all of this was going on, I was still preaching, still overseeing God's flock. I was still getting called at midnight to pray for a sick child here, a depressed sister there and in every case, there was healing. But day after day I prayed for Mọlẹwà, I anointed her with oil till she

snapped one day, telling me she was sick of the smell of olive oil. Make no mistake, Ọmọlẹwà was a strong believer and one of the most spiritual women I've ever met, but prolonged physical pain has a way of wearing your resolve thin. The cancer grew in spite of prayers and chemotherapy. She was tired. She wanted to go."

Pastor Banji pulled up at the church parking lot. "After her demise, her mum called me aside one day and said, 'Şèbí people testify in your church every Sunday. Why didn't God heal Ọmọlẹwà?' I wished she spoke with accusation and not the sincere tone of confusion. Mọlẹwà's mum was the person who bought into the vision God gave me when it was no more than a seed. She supported us financially. Every time she was in Lagos, she fellowshiped with us. She's a great woman and I hated that I didn't have the answer to her question."

As Pastor Banji spoke, all Nathan could think of was that just last year, this Pastor did a three-part teaching series on faith and healing, wrapping it up with a miracle service where many sick were healed. How could he minister God's power to the sick after losing the one he loved to a sickness?

"But you see, one thing I've settled in my heart as an eternal persuasion is the reality and integrity of God's word. The grasses wither..."

"The flowers fade but the word of God abides forever."

Pastor Banji nodded. "Even in the face of contradictions and intense confusion, I never for once welcomed the thought that God's word wasn't true. Yes, I had questions and I asked

God those questions but I did not question the Lord. I did not question His love nature or immutable integrity. He is God and His word is realer than my experience. The Lord began to show me that in this fallen world, pain is an integral part of the human experience and it would be indeed unfair for the Lord to shield us from pain when the world He's sending us to is broken and full of it. When Jesus hung on the cross, passers-by taunted Him. They said, 'Physician, heal yourself.' If He could heal people, why couldn't He heal Himself? And as I pondered on that, I saw the Lord Jesus in the context of my pain. I imagined how He must have felt on that cross knowing full well that He could order a legion of angels to his aid. I learned that even though God can do all things, he won't do all things. He is all powerful but not erratic. He's a God of plan and precision and sometimes in the working of his wise counsel, there would be necessary pain. If Jesus had healed himself on the cross, there would be no healing for humanity. The healer suffered and didn't heal himself so He could bring healing to many more.

"If Mōlèwà had not died, I wouldn't be able to relate to your pain or the pain of many other people I meet during the course of ministry. Now, I can reason with those who believe divine healing has ceased and point them to the unchanging truth of God's word with more compassion. There was purpose to my pain. With the comfort I've received from the father came the grace to minister comfort to others. I know now that Mōlèwà didn't die because cancer was too hard for God to heal. He's the God of all flesh, there is nothing too hard for Him. God doesn't

need to exert himself more to raise a dead man back to life than He has to when healing a headache.”

*It doesn't cost God more power to heal Dad's cancer than it cost him to heal my ear infection.*

“With a mere touch of Jesus' cloth, an infirmity that had plagued that woman for twelve years instantly ceased. You must know that the Lord is able to heal. He is capable. Do you agree with me on that?”

Nathan nodded.

“Beautiful. Many believe God can, but where most falter is the question of his willingness. In Matthew eight verse one to three, the story of the leper who came to Jesus is narrated. That man knew Jesus could but he wasn't sure if He was willing and in response, Jesus told him He was willing and He healed him. There was no sick person that was brought to Jesus throughout his time on earth that He didn't heal. As a matter of standard principle, the Lord is willing to heal.”

Nathan frowned.

Pastor AB smiled. “I know that look. But Mōlɛwà died, but Timothy was sick, Paul spoke of a thorn in his flesh, Epaphroditus was sick. Yes, I know. But these cases are exceptions. We don't look to outliers for precedence. It's true that sometimes people don't get healed and that could happen for a wide range of reasons, however, this must not plant doubt or scepticism in your heart about God's ability and willingness to heal.”

“How then do I know if the Lord would heal my Dad or

if his case is going to be an outlier?"

"Simple. What has the Lord said to you?" Before Nathan could respond, he continued "and if you've not yet heard anything, you can go with what the word says. His will is declared in His word and His word makes it abundantly clear that He wants us to prosper and be in health even as our soul prospers."

Nathan sighed and looked out the window. "God said my Dad would be healed."

"Then believe it with the whole of your heart. We don't exercise our faith as a means to coax a reluctant God, no. We exercise faith to agree with the counsel of God. Don't waver, son."

Pastor Banji continued encouraging Nathan, stirring up his faith and gradually Nathan's focus shifted from how great and monstrous cancer was to how mighty and good God is.

"Don't forget the word God sent me to give you. I will advise that you give more attention to consecration this period. Take time out to fast and pray, seek the Lord's face and while you're at it, study the book of Jeremiah and Lamentations."

Nathan nodded. "Thank you very much Pastor AB."

"You are always welcome. Have a great day. I love you, son."

"Hmmm."



By the time Nathan got home that afternoon, all he wanted was to hit the sac, but he had given up his room to his mum and he'd been crashing on the couch whenever his mum passed the night at the house. Thankfully, she spent most nights at the hospital with her husband and Nathan had hoped that she'd not be at home but alas she was in the house praying down the roof.

*“Bí ẹníkẹ̀ni bá wà, ta bí nípasẹ̀ obìnrin àbí nípasẹ̀ iṣẹ́ abẹ́, t’ón ta ofà sí mí, sí idílẹ́ mí, in the mighty name of Jesus, iná ẹ̀mí mínmọ́ kọlù ọ́l’ àkókò yí. Olúwa gb’ógun tí àwọn t’ón gb’ógun tí mí. Ru ara re s’ókè iwọ onídàájọ́ ayé, san ẹ̀san fún àwọn tó fẹ́ pa mí l’Ọkọ. Má jẹ́ é k’ àwọn ọ̀tá mí yọ mí. Sàánú fún mí. Jèsù sàánú fún mí. (If there is any one born of a woman sending arrows to me and my home, in the mighty name of Jesus, the fire of the Holy Spirit combats such right now. Lord, wage war against those who wage war against me. Stir yourself up, you judge of the earth and repay those who want to kill my husband according to their works. Don't let my enemies triumph over me. Have mercy on me. Jesus, have mercy on me.)”*

She started singing a song about the fire of God consuming her enemies, calling upon the God of war to fight her battles. Nathan gritted his teeth.

*“Olúwa, ò (Oh, Lord)!” Nathan covered his ears with a pillow but his mum's voice soared higher. “Ẹ̀mí mínmọ́, ẹ̀mí àwọn wòólì! Ọlórún olódùmarè, àditú, Ọba tó lo kánrin kése. Ọ̀wó kẹ̀nbẹ́ re’bì jà, awúwo má ẹ́ é gbé. Ẹ̀yin l’Ọba tó wó odi Jericho, nípa agbára yín lẹ́ pín òkun pupa náyà. Ẹ́ sọ fàráò àti kẹkẹ́ ogun rẹ́ sínu ibú omi,*

*Eyin loba tó jà fún àwọn ọmọ Ísráẹlì. Bàbá, jà fún mi! Olúwa, jà fún mi! Èmí míímọ́, jà fún mi! Jà fún mi! Jà fún mi! Jà fún mi! Jà fún mi! (Holy Spirit, the spirit of the prophets! Eulogies of God... You are the God who brought down the walls of Jericho, by your power you split the red sea. You threw Pharoah and his chariots into the sea, you are the King who fought for the children of Israel. Father, fight for me! Lord, fight for me! Holy Spirit, fight for me! Fight for me! Fight for me! Fight for me)“*

Nathan knew for sure that she was wagging her head violently to a side per '*jà fún mi*'. '*Jà fún mi*' right, '*jà fún mi*' left, '*jà fún mi*' right. Nathan sighed. He knew he could not convince his mother to stop praying like this. He had tried once before to make her understand that the fire of the Holy Ghost is not for roasting enemies, neither is God interested in the destruction of men but that they come to repentance. However, the saying about old dogs and new tricks played out right before his eyes. Today, Nathan wasn't even interested in teaching his mum to pray according to scriptures, he just wanted to sleep.

She started singing a Yorùbá hymn.

♪ *Oníṣẹ̀gùn nílá wa niyín*, (the great physician now is here)

*Jésù, abáni dárò* (the sympathizing Jesus)

*Ọrọ rẹ mú ni lára dá* (he speaks the weary heart to cheer)

*À gbọ ohùn ti Jésù* (Oh, hear the voice of Jesus)

*Ìró dídùn l'orin séràf* (sweetest note in seraph's song)

*Orúkọ dídùn ní ahọ́n* (sweetest name on mortal tongue)

*Orin tó dùn jùlọ ni* (sweetest carol ever sung)



*Jésù, Jésù, Jésù (Jesus, Jesus, Jesus) ♪♪*

Nathan couldn't help but smile. The hymn took him back to his growing years in Gbòngán. The Sunday services in their small, dimly lit church. His mind brought scenes before him. His little self standing among other parishioners, holding up the hardback hymnals and singing with the whole of their hearts. She stopped singing abruptly, halting Nathan's reverie. She resumed her prayers calling upon the fire of God to lick up every cancer in her husband's body as it did the water upon the altar in the days of Elijah. Of course, she prayed in Yorùbá. Even though she was a civil servant teaching English in a public secondary school and she rarely ever spoke Yorùbá in her daily conversations, she prayed only in Yorùbá. Nathan once asked her why she didn't pray in English. With a chuckle she said, “*Ogun ayé ò gb'èbó* (the battles of this life do not understand English).”

*“A sàà ti kọ́ wípé, àìyà yíò pá àwọn àlejò, nwọn yóò sì fì ibèrù jáde ní ibi kọlọ́fín wọn. Àlejò ní cancer yíí lára ọkọ mi, àjòjì sì ní pẹlú. Nítorí nà, jáde kúrò nínu àgọ ara Gbádébò ní orúkọ Jésù! Jáde! Jáde! Jáde! (It is written that the strangers shall fade away, and they shall be afraid out of their close places. This cancer is a stranger in my husband's body, therefore, get out of Gbádébò's body in the name of Jesus! Get out! Get out! Get out!)”*

Nathan listened as his Mum switched gears in prayer. She started praying for forgiveness. Begging the Lord over and again to forgive her sins if it's the cause of her husband's sickness. Nathan could tell she was crying. She prayed

earnestly that God would bring Şínà back home, so he could see his father before he died. Didn't she just pray for his healing? Why then was she speaking of his death like something inevitable?

*Isn't it?*

Somewhere between the staccato of '*dárí-jì mí, dárí-jì mí...*', Nathan slept off. When he awakened, his mum had already made dinner. At the table, she said she saw a vision while praying.

Nathan scoffed. "During your '*dáríjì mí*' prayer?" Immediately he said it, he sensed a sharp rebuke in his spirit. Who put the prayer marking scheme in his hand? Where was the biblical honour for parents in that sarcastic remark? Was she praying to him? Why then did he think it was his place to judge the content of her prayer or what results it could command? That he knew better was no ground to become puffed up with knowledge, it was no reason to sting his mum with sarcasm. He instantly repented.

She shook her head and said, "God will forgive you."

"I'm sorry, ma. What did you see?"

"It was like a picture. I saw Şínà in Muritala Muhammed airport, he was standing with another man and they were with their baggage. I don't know if it's a revelation of what is to come or if it's real time."

"It could be your imagination."

She shook her head. "I didn't cook that up. I know what I saw."

Nathan sighed. Was it feasible? What would bring Ethan back to Nigeria after all these years? He looked at his mum and saw a forlorn look in his Mum's eyes.

"What is the problem?"

"I was the one who pushed him away." She shut her eyes. "When he was on the hill, Areo forced himself on him."

Nathan blinked. "Who told you this?"

"Şínà. He threw it at me as an accusation and I felt attacked..."

"What did you say?"

"I told him, 'they you see that it's only mad people that desire men like them.'"

In the silence that followed, Nathan could almost touch his mum's pain and regret. Beyond the lines that deepened on her face and the tears that gathered in her eyes, he felt the force of her guilt in him. In a way that was inexplicable, for a moment, her essence was united with his and the pain she bore for years became a shared experience. The whole thing left Nathan confused.

"I remember it every day. What kind of mother am I? I exposed my son and when he returned wounded, I struck him down. I beg God all the time to forgive me, maybe one day he will have mercy on me. Maybe then I will feel forgiven."

"Mummy, God's forgiveness is not a feeling we wait for; it's a finished work a child of God receives by faith. The moment you confess a sin, you receive forgiveness and that settles it. When God forgives, he keeps no record of wrong. God has

forgiven you; you need to forgive yourself."

"Ah, I don't understand this one that you're saying oh. Are you saying that even if someone commits murder he only needs to confess once?"

"Exactly."

His Mum burst into laughter. "*Şe tiɛ̀r'èyin ɔmɔdé isinyii, ɔ̀ɔ̀ yín ẹ̀yin nìkan ló yé* (you children of nowadays are just plain ridiculous). You don't know that there are different weights of sins and realms of access into mercy? During last year's *Ìsọ̀jì Agbára*, the guest minister that came to our church explained this mystery to us. There are some depths of iniquity that one repentance cannot cover. Why do you think David kept repeating his confession?"

"Mummy, first of all, confession of sin is not something we do to purchase forgiveness. It's not your plea and tears and gimmicks that cajoles God into releasing forgiveness for sins. Forgiveness was made available because of what Jesus did on the cross. What Jesus did was enough. Nothing else is required. Confession is only done to lay hold of what is already available. Forgiveness of sins is not something the child of God strives to attain to, it's not a temporary plan like data either. You don't need to renew forgiveness subscription every day. God's forgiveness is a gift of grace and it is without repentance."

She hissed and shook her head. "This is what happens when you leave the concentrated teaching of God's word to follow all these empty theories you youths carry around. Do you know more than the man of God they brought all the way

from Òṣogbo for Isojí Agbára?"

Nathan kept quiet and continued eating his meal. He knew arguing with his mum was pointless, instead, he'd pray for her and repeatedly show her what God's word says about forgiveness of sins.

Later that night, he chatted with Pastor Banji, sharing the way he was moved from within when his mum was talking. Pastor Banji explained to him from 1 John three sixteen and seventeen that what he experienced was 'the opening up of his bowels of compassion.' He went on to teach him on compassion; how it was an outworking of the love nature imparted to the believer by the Holy Spirit; how it was a necessity for the flow of life and healing. He taught Nathan to never shut up his bowels of compassion, instead, he should use it as a burden for prayer and a nudge to minister.

Acting upon the counsel he received, Nathan decided to take a daily fast for the rest of the week. He spent the lunch hour seated on the floor of his office, praying and meditating on the word. When he sat on the floor, anyone looking through the frosted glass would assume he wasn't on seat and that allowed him the needed privacy for communion. But Nathan faced one challenge. Like his mother, he had never been able to pray quietly for long. He'd start out muttering tongues under his breath, conscious of where he was but after some minutes he'd take off. Nobody complained but Nathan found it quite embarrassing every time a co-worker called him 'aláàdùrà' or *prayer meshin*. It made him feel like a Pharisee making a long

prayer at the corner of a street.

By Wednesday, he found a new spot. The convenience. The toilet facility at Ed Motors was ample enough and the cleaners did a great job, Nathan had room in front of the stalls to pace and blast tongues without drawing attention.

After his prayer on Friday, he saw that David had left him an Instagram DM. He never understood why David preferred texting with Instagram when he had his WhatsApp contact. After exchanging pleasantries and 'wyd', David asked Nathan to join in on a plan to go over to Edward's on his birthday to celebrate with him. David added that Moní and her family will also be around. With a smile, Nathan thumbed a response.

-Even if I don't want to turn up for Edward, who would pass up on a chance to meet THE MONÍ?-

From the office, Nathan went to see his Dad at the hospital. That had been his routine since Monday and with every passing day, his Dad seemed to fade away. He sat with him and watched him.

"R.. read to me." He rasped.



Edward awakened on his birthday feeling lopsided and sour. He was clocking thirty-seven still single and lonely. Over the past few years, he had come to develop an aversion for birthdays. Every birthday was a reminder of the fact he hated to

admit: he was getting older. His last birthday had been a respite, he'd been so preoccupied trying to close the Lagos state BRT bus contract that he didn't have time to take birthday calls, but today his birthday had fallen on a weekend and he barely had anywhere to turn.

He recalled the day he ran into a secondary school mate at the mall, when he went grocery shopping. He heard his name and turned around to see Tosan. With full beards and a budding paunch, it was difficult to recognise him and if not for his ears that were still two sizes larger than his face, Edward wouldn't have placed the face.

As they made small talk, Tosan called for his daughter who was already taking liberties with items on the rack.

"Itohan, come here."

The girl came reluctantly. She was no less than three years old and this shocked Edward. *Where Tosan see daughter?* The last time he saw Tosan, he was a scrawny JSS 2 student. *Who give am pikin?* He wondered as he glanced at Tosan's hand propped on his cart. His wedding band seemed to say, *his wife, durh!*

"Itohan, greet big daddy. He was my school father when we were in secondary school."

The little girl curtsied. "Good evening, sir."

*Big daddy.* Edward gritted his teeth. He took Tosan under his wings when he was in SS2 and Tosan was in JSS1. Tosan ran to him every time a mate or a senior who was Edward's junior bullied him. Tosan ran errands for him. But

there he was with his madam's-cooking-belly and a daughter addressing Edward as big daddy. He found a way to excuse himself before Tosan could ask about his family. He was already making jokes about husbands becoming the regular grocery shoppers and how his wife always left him a message on what he should get on his way back. He clearly assumed Edward was married and Edward didn't want to have reason to clarify that.

As he drove home that evening, a voice in his head jeered at him. *O r'ómọ'nú ẹ.* The boy who called him school daddy, now had a daughter who called him big daddy but he was in fact nobody's daddy.

Edward wanted to get out of bed but he was so listless that he spent minutes building up his nerve to get up. Was this laziness, Saturday vibe or languor? Is this what they call birthday depression? *Depression is not my portion in Jesus's name.*

He forced himself out of bed and started singing a song of praise mechanically.

*I'm alive. That's a reason to be grateful. I'm saved, another reason to be grateful. I have peace with God. I have a home to live in. I have food to eat. I'm in soundness of health. I refuse to be ungrateful.*

He was still singing when the doorbell went off. He went to get the door and to his surprise he saw Odinaka and Déyẹmí, holding a wrapped parcel and screaming, 'happy birthday!' Before he could gather his thoughts, he heard the honking of a car horn. Déyẹmí's Mum powered down the window of her car and waved to him, "Happy birthday, Edward."



He waved her over. “Şolá, come inside.” He looked at the boys. “Let’s go inside.”

Edward ripped off the brown paper covering the gift, unsure of what to expect. When the framed painting was revealed, Edward let out a gasp. It was a portrait painting of him playing one blue and purple hues and signed all over by the teenagers he taught at church and those who came for the hangouts. Ozichi and Ozioma signed a heart and wrote 'happy birthday'. 'Teacher. Kaz.' 'Coolest Uncle. Kúnlé' 'Role model. OD' At the bottom of the work, he saw a signature without words, the signature of the artist. 'MIJ' Maduka Ijeoma.

“You guys... This is so nice. I don't even know what to say.”

Edward looked at the work of art again and this time, he saw some of the inscriptions he missed the first time. 'Love you uncle Edward. Ini M.' 'Driven man. Davis' Edward smiled at the pun. His eyes came to rest on the last inscription. 'Dad. Yẹmí'

He looked at Déyẹmí. The boy smiled. Edward hugged him. He went to hug Odinaka too.

“Ijeoma painted this?”

“I told you. She whips her brushes like magic wands.”

“Wow! Give me your Dad's number, I have to speak for Ijeoma.”

Şolá watched in silence, feeling her cheeks hurt from too much grinning. Déyẹmí was unravelling around Edward in a way that made her remember him sitting astride on Femi's shoulders, holding his head and squalling. It was enthralling

and a tad scary. She didn't want her son to get hurt. What if Edward moved away? What happens if Edward had a reason to withdraw? Wouldn't this emotional immediacy Déyemí was developing towards Edward come back to break him?

"I don't mean to be a spoil sport..."

"Ugh, mummy, you only say that when you're about to be a spoil sport."

"Well, I have to be at work today."

"You work on Saturdays?" Edward asked.

Şolá nodded. "I work especially on Saturdays. You see, I work as a marketing strategist in a Salon, so Saturdays are very busy for me." She smacked her lips. "Boys, let's go."

Edward straggled behind Odinaka and Déyemí, trying to engage Şolá in a conversation.

"Thank you for bringing them, Şolá."

Şolá waved him off. "It's no big deal. You seem to have charmed my son, he won't stop talking about you, it's uncle Edward this, uncle Edward that."

"And any mother would be sceptical. I know you want to know what kind of person I am if I'm to have such an influence on your son."

Şolá smiled at him. "You're right about that."

"This is the point where you give me your business card and tell me to be in touch."

Şolá scoffed. "Business card, really? Do people still use that thing? I mean we've got LinkedIn and Instagram bios now, who cares about business cards?"

"I do, if you had caught me outside my house, I'd have given you mine."

She made a sound in her throat. "Good bye, Edward and happy birthday once again."

"Your phone number at least."

"I'll get yours from Yemí, I'm running late already."

Edward sat on the veranda, thinking of Şolá. What he felt for her was not an attraction as much as it was a curiosity. He wanted to know her. To know her history, her future plans. He wanted to know what her experience had been raising three children alone. Kúnlé said their father died about four years ago. How did she manage the financial weight of feeding four mouths, housing them, clothing them, paying their school fees? How did she manage being a single parent with her day job? Did she get overwhelmed sometimes? What were her fears?

*There's just something intriguing about those eyes, those washed out eyes; like the sky after a long downpour. Her body... Wait a minute, Edward, what are you doing?*

He quickly shook his mind off Şolá and headed into the house to fix himself breakfast. But as he broke egg shells and beat the eggs, he wondered what time Şolá had to wake every day. She'd have to make breakfast and pack lunch for her children, get them ready for school and herself ready for work in time to beat Lagos traffic. What time did she sleep at night? Did she help out her children with homework? Did she have a domestic staff? How in the world could she juggle all these and still manage to look so chic? The wrinkles on her face were not

deep furrows, instead they looked to him like graceful carvings, ornamental etches that were just the finishing on a magnificent work of art.

"Jesus! Edward!" He quickly turned off the burner. He flipped his omelette and saw that he'd burnt one side of it.

*What's wrong with you?*

Edward thought he heard something like the strum of a guitar. He held still, paying attention. He heard the tune of a guitar. He assumed it was something outside that didn't concern him. He plated his half-burnt omelette, then he heard Moní's voice singing a birthday song. He could never mistake that voice. But even though he knew, when he opened the door and saw her standing there with her family and some of his friends, he was shocked.

Edward, Nathan, David, Ladé, Moní and Barnabas played games, listened to Moní's new track and danced. They ate small chops and drank wine. They took turns to talk about Edward and how he had impacted them. Hearing them talk, Edward teared up a bit. Şèyí and Şèyẹ were in Edward's room playing and turning the whole place upside down. Şèyẹ stepped out wearing Edward's shirt and sneakers. The shirt swallowed him whole and he almost tripped walking in his uncle's shoes. He strutted into the living room, doing a rap freestyle verse that was pure nonsense. The adults had a good laugh watching him. Moní filmed every moment on her phone, ever so conscious of documenting it all. When they danced to her song, she made them do a TikTok dance routine, it was a

total disaster but Moní saved it anyway.

Nathan hadn't laughed so hard in a long time. Listening to the people around him recount tales from years before in the raucous manner they did, overlapping one another's dialogue, bolting out of their seats to stop Moní from sharing yet another embarrassing story, guffawing like they had no care in the world, he lived in the moment. He allowed the wave of cheer drown out his burdens.

"Ladé and I have to go back to the family house to film my next vlog." Moní announced. "But don't worry, the fun still continues. I'm leaving Barney and the kids to continue the party."

"We all know you're only using this to get rid of Şèyè." Edward remarked with a sneer.

Moní sniggered. "Not the exact words I'd use, but you get the idea. Ladé, let's meuuvée."

Ladé got up, rubbing her bump. "Talk to me nice, I'm about to feature in Moní's video."

On a whim, Nathan said, "Don't you guys need a cameraman?"

"Are you thinking of submitting a CV, bro?"

Nathan chuckled. "I don't charge heavy, just 2,500 per hour."

Moní scoffed. "I'll pay double."

"Dollars."

Moní burst into laughter. "Actually, I remember now that I love filming myself."

"Yeah?"

"Yeah. Yeah. There's just something about setting up and running back to sit that's thrilling. You know, the whole independent woman thing."

Barnabas shook his head. "Nobody dey speak English pass woman wey dey try cut cost."

They all laughed.

"Really great joke, Sweetheart. I just wonder for how long you'd have to sleep on the couch."

"My love, don't do me like this."

Moní flashed him a smile. "Having a smart mouth comes with a price."

Nathan chuckled. "You know, I've also been crashing on the couch since my mum came visiting." He extended a hand to Barnabas. "Welcome to the club bro."

Barnabas slapped his hand away. "What's that thing they say about misery liking 'we gather dey'? As if you're not the cause of all these."

David sipped on his wine. "I would've said something about women being terrorists but my lovely wife is in the room."

Moní looked at Ladé. "Do it, Queen."

Ladé knitted her brows with dramatic concentration as she nodded, she faced David. "Here is my verdict, two days on the couch."

Edward burst into laughter. "General market for the men except the celebrant. Love it."



## CHAPTER TEN

### **GIRLS OF THE SAME FEATHER**

Nathan surveyed the living room. He savoured the picture frames flanking the TV like an aisle. There was one taken at Barnabas and Moní's wedding where Ladé was maid of honor and the best man seemed distracted. There was another with the couple and their parents; only Moní's Dad wasn't smiling in that frame. Nathan loved the beach scenery in David's wedding pictures; when he saw towering palm trees in the background, the first thing he did was to look at their legs to see if they floated like his parents did in their wedding picture. He could see the imprint of Ladé's heels in the beach sand and that made him know the picture was actually taken at a beach. But he couldn't be too sure, with the impressive improvement of photo editing, feet planted in beach sand might have been

planted elsewhere at the time the photo was taken.

His eyes came to rest on an older picture, in this one, Ìyanu was a teenager with a low cut. She stood behind the settee while the rest of the family sat. Perhaps, that was why she stood out to him. Maybe it was the way her lowcut gave her a look completely different than what he saw the other night at Ladé's, than the lady standing beside Ladé in her wedding picture. He moved closer to the picture that seemed most recent, one taken at Ìyanu's induction. Seeing the stethoscope hang on her neck and the palpable joy in her smile, he could only imagine how much effort went into bagging that degree. A respect for the profession settled on his heart but he also remembered his Dad. He didn't want that now. He turned away from the pictures.

"Where are we shooting?" He asked Moní who was already walking down the hallway.

"Let's use Ìyanu's room." Ladé supplied.

"Give me a moment, I need to see where the lighting would be perfect." Moní opened Ìyanu's room and scanned it briefly. She opened the curtains, tapped on a light switch and nodded. "With this and my ring light, we should be good."

They started setting up, mounting the camera, moving a framed art work into the camera's field of view, readjusting the light till Moní was satisfied with what she saw on the camera screen. While Nathan did the hefting and arranging, Moní and Ladé touched up their make-up and brushed their weaves. When they were finally camera ready, they took their seat and clipped on their body mikes.



Mo's vlog: Friendships and seasons

"I'm doing this episode with my homegirl, my day one. My dearest bestest..."

"Enough of the *kàrámpò*, Moní."

Moní faced the camera. "Don't mind her. She likes acting as if she doesn't like a good shower of love."

Ladé rolled her eyes. "Mummy Şèyí, you're embarrassing me. Can we get to the business of the day already?"

"Okay oh. For those who are familiar with this space, the name Ladé is not a strange one. Now you can put a face to the name. Here with me is..." She looked at Ladé. "Introduce yourself na."

"Oh," Ladé adjusted on her seat. "I am Ọmọladé Kọmọláfẹ and yeah, Moní is my girl. Trust me guys, we've been through plenty."

Moní nodded. "That's right. Ladé was there through my silly relationship that had red flags pegged on my nose. Red flags everyone but me could see..."

Ladé chuckled. "Let's not get into Mr. C gist please. No digression today."

"Right, right. No digression. Ladé was there when my Bulimia became life-threatening and she was instrumental in my recovery curve."

"Before you start thinking I'm the host here and Moní is the parasite, let me tell you that Moní housed me for about two years, not because I was homeless or anything but you know..."

She shrugged. "And those days were definitely the highlight of my spinsterhood. So, you see, it's a mutually beneficial ship."

Moní angled her head. "Where should we start?"

"The beginning now. Let's talk about how we met at family house."

Moní brightened. "Ah, yes... that's a good one. So, Ladé and I met during service year at the Nigerian Christian Corpers' Fellowship family house, Ebonyi state chapter. For some weird reason, we never met in camp. I never even noticed her in the NCCF tent where daily meetings held."

"But I noticed you. Who didn't? For one, you were quite conspicuous back then."

Moní poked Ladé and she sniggered.

"Not my BFF body shaming me."

"But on a serious note, the day you led worship, I was like, who is that girl? Who she be? Who be she? What is the talent? What in the sound of music am I witnessing?"

Moní adjusted her blouse and sat up. "What can I say? I didn't go after stardom, stardom chose me."

Ladé shook her head. "Remind me again, dear viewer, what comes before a fall?"

"Stepping on a banana peel." Moní retorted. The two of them look at each other for a second before they burst into laughter.

"Pardon my playfulness. It's extremely difficult to be serious around Moní. You must believe me, I'm not like this on a normal day."

Moní sneered. "She's the bad influence here. Anyway, both of us got selected to be incoming state executives and after the orientation camping exercise, we were moved to the state family house. It was there I took note of Ladé. She was such an ajebutter! With her spri-spri English and straight-outta-CU vibes. I remember the first day Ladé was on kitchen duty..." Moní started laughing.

"Moní, you've started digressing again."

"Leave me, I will digress this one. Guys, she was panicking and pacing all over the kitchen... She took out her phone..."

Ladé quickly clamped a hand over Moní's mouth. "Moní, you won't tell this story." She faced the camera. "See, it's not as bad as Moní is making it out to be. I knew how to cook, I had just never cooked for so many people and I sort of freaked out, so I..." She brought down her voice. "don't judge me guys..."

Moní broke free. "She called her mum!"

Behind the camera, Nathan' was a balloon inflated to tautness with repressed laughter.

After a good laugh, Ladé said, "Moní came to join me in the kitchen and she helped me out with the cooking, from there we struck it off. I'd later become the state financial secretary and Moní, very obviously, became the state music director."

"Even after service year we kept in touch and continued building our friendship..."

"Until my sister follow man go Port Harcourt." Ladé

said, feigning malice.

"And that man is her brother." Moní chuckled. "Poetic, isn't it?"

Ladé was not smiling. "This is one of those moments when everything comes to a head. I think Moní used me. I think she warmed up to me because of my brother."

Moní rolled her eyes. "Don't be ridiculous. I met your brother years after we'd been friends."

"But you had seen his pictures and you thought to yourself that 'hmmm, Bọbọ yìi hanz, let me use Ladé to get to him.'"

Moní chuckled. "This your theory is rubbish. Please let's continue what we were saying."

"I won't let you change the subject, madam. Did you ever admire my brother before?"

"What's the point of this?"

"Answer the question."

"I'm not answering anything." Moní insisted.

Ladé sneered. "Please you people should judge this matter in the comment section o. I have been defrauded. The woman I thought was my best friend was only trying to steal my brother and she succeeded. I'm emotionally traumatised guys, send comfort to me. the account number is..."

"Can you people see that this girl is the bad influence here?"

Ladé chuckled. "Well, well, as the saying goes, we meet to part and part to meet but the truth is parting, however

necessary it might be for growth, could be very painful. You see, after Moní got married and moved to Port Harcourt, our friendship could not remain the way it used to be.”

Moní came in then. “We used to live together, we attended the same local church, we had this weekly lunch dates with Ladé's family. We were thick as thieves. But the whole change that came after the wedding was something entirely new and quite challenging for me. The branch of the company I was working with in PH was not like the Lagos branch, which I had become used to. I had to join a new church, meet new people. Add all those to the fact that I was a new bride just trying to acclimatise with the demands of marriage. It was a whole lot to juggle.”

“On the other hand, I had more free time on my hands and I could literally feel the absence of Moní thrum around me everywhere I turned. I was always reaching out to Moní. I'll send her memes that I found funny and call her every chance I got. My calls would sometimes meet her in the middle of other responsibilities and sometimes my messages got late replies. I'm sure you know the deflation that comes with wanting to drop gist as-e-dey-hot only to find that your friend is unavailable. With time, I started nursing a grudge against Moní. I felt outgrown, forgotten. Left behind, literally. Back then, we had our little groupie. Myself, Moní and Jádesọlá, then the boys which were basically the men we eventually married and Moní's older brother, Edward. Soon after Moní left for Port Harcourt, Jádesọlá and Terrence got married and left the

country. So, yeah, I was hurting.”

“One day, after service, I sat in my room and began to reminisce. Nostalgia filled me as I thought of Ladé and I might have shed one or two drops, you know. I picked my phone and I posted a selfie I took with Ladé on my wedding day and shared it to my WhatsApp status with a mushy caption. Ladé's reply was, 'omo, I thought you've forgotten me o'. I called her immediately to let her know how silly it was to think I could ever forget her. We talked that day for three hours on end without feeling the time passage.”

Ladé smiled. “Yorùbás say, twenty children can never play for twenty years. Inasmuch as we enjoy our tribes and we want to move through life together, arm-in-arm, the truth remains that our journeys in life would require partings. Now the question is, how do we manage friendships when things like this happen?”

Moní wet her lips. “I think the first thing is consideration and maturity...”

“Those are two things, Mummy Şèyí.”

Moní hissed. “Na you sabi. Like I was saying, I think it's important that we bear in mind that in cases of long-distance friendships, a lot could be going on with your friend where they are. This consideration would rid us of that sense of entitlement that says, 'why is she not calling me? Why is he not reaching out?'. I mean, we're all adults and relationships are not competitions, why keep track of who's calling first? If you miss someone, call them. It's that simple.”

Ladé sucked air through her teeth and considered that for a moment.

“You want to say something?”

“Yeah, I'm just thinking that sometimes too, it's necessary to watch it if you're always the one reaching out and there's zero effort from the other counterpart. I know we are busy but no one is really so busy if they care. To avoid coming off as pushy I think one needs a healthy measure of checking the energy this 'friend' is returning. Sometimes what you think is a cold shoulder is simply that, and that's your cue to withdraw or at least tone it down.”

Moní nodded. “I agree. Omo, you wise sha.”

Ladé did a bow and Moní rolled her eyes.

“That's a proud bow.”

Ladé shook her head. “I think the next thing would be intentionality.”

Moní smiled, looked at the camera and pointed at something imaginary. Ladé looked at her funny.

“What are you doing?”

“I'm going to put Travis Greene's picture there in post.”

Ladé blinked, trying to get... “Oh,” she laughed. “You're not serious at all. Make sure you cut this part out when you're editing.”

“You know I won't. Back to what we were discussing... You were making a point about being intentional.”

“Yeah, because of the demands and responsibilities we have to cater to, deliberate effort is required to keep friendships

going. You have to come to a point in your life where you give priority to relationships that matter to you and actually commit to them.”

“So good. I like the last part of what you just said because I feel part of the problem lies in distinguishing friendships from casual interactions. When we throw the word around loosely, we have many friends and if care is not taken not any friend. This is what I mean, you have a wide range of people you hang and chill with, people with whom you have surface conversations and you call them friends, but there's no deep relationship with anyone. Because the emotional energy you could have invested in building depth has been spread across all the 'friends' you have. I don't know if you get what I'm saying?”

Ladé nodded. “Definitely. And I feel it goes beyond just friendships, take for instance, I actually set reminders to call my parents. Intentionality is the fuel that feeds relationships.”

“Another thing is if you realise that there has been a hiatus in communication that should not be there, don't let guilt hold you back. I know some people feel that if they've not reached out for a long time, reaching out would be awkward. That might be true, but think about it, the longer you stall, the harder it is to surmount that initial awkwardness.”

Ladé smiled. “I can relate to this one. After uni, I struggled with settling into phone call culture. My alma mater had a law against using sim-enabled phones, so you can imagine living four years without day-to-day phone calls and



then returning back to a world where phone calls were the norm. It took a while to get back into the flow. My parents complained a lot, that was when my phone call reminders started. The bottom line again is, efforts.” She sighed and turned to Moní. “anything else?”

“Nope. I think this is where we draw the curtains.”

“I don't see no pencils.”

Moní rolled her eyes. “Dry.”

Ladé laughed. “Bye guys.”

Nathan clapped after ending the video recording and saving it. “I enjoyed this.”

“Thank you for helping out, Mr. Nathan.”

Nathan frowned a bit. “Nathan is just fine.”

As they rearranged Ìyanu's room, Ìyanu walked in on them. With a reckless squeal, she ran into Moní's arms. All of a sudden, Nathan became intensely aware that he was the only male in the midst of so many females, there were only three but it felt like he was in the midst of so many ladies. He excused himself and went back to the living room, while the ladies caught up and chattered in the room.

While he sat there in the living room, he continued assessing the picture frames until he started feeling pressed. The pressure came from inside like a faint tug, a gentle beckoning. He knew he needed to pray.

He bowed his head and started praying in tongues, carefully searching his spirit as he did. When he heard the ladies approaching, he stopped praying but the burden had not yet

been discharged.

"Sorry, doctor, can I use a bathroom?"

Ìyanu turned to him and did a double take. "I've seen this face somewhere before."

Ladé shook her head. "Down the hall the first door by your left."

"It was the other night at your house, right?" Ìyanu asked Ladé after Nathan left them. "who is he?"

"Do you like him?" Moní asked and Ladé gave her an elbow nudge.

Ìyanu scoffed. "I have a boyfriend, thank you."

Ladé blinked. "You do?"

"Of course. His name is Nsikak and he's a catch."

"When were you going to tell me?"

"Two seconds ago? Jeez, I'm starving. Please tell me y'all cooked something."

"Let's all go to the kitchen and cook together like back in the day." Moní said.

"Yeah, back in the day before you all abandoned me in this house."

"Don't be like that, Ìyanu. You barely even came home for holidays; you were too busy with med school to be abandoned."

Ìyanu laughed. "Fair point. Man! I've missed you so much aunty Moní. I hope you've been taking care of my brother?" The look she gave made her question rich with subtext.

In the toilet, Nathan prayed with increased fervour as the pain in his stomach intensified. He didn't understand what was going on, but he continued praying in tongues. He put his hands on his stomach where it hurt.

"Out of my belly flows rivers of living water," he found himself saying between strings of tongues, "out of my belly flows rivers of life. Rivers of healing. Rivers of fire."

He prayed till the pain ceased and he got a note of victory in his spirit. He thanked the Lord and exited the toilet. He checked his phone, the time was 6:27pm, he should start heading home.

"Whoa, you are sweating. It must have been an intense battle in there." Ìyanu said and Nathan felt a rush of embarrassment. She sniggered and apologised when her eyes clocked Ladé's.

"I should be on my way now." Nathan announced.

"We're almost done cooking, just chill a bit." Moní said.

"This is the point where you act like you don't want the food but we all know you do, cos you're a bachelor... you're a bachelor, right?"

Nathan forced a chuckle. Why did this girl put him on edge so much? "Yeah, yeah, I am."

"Give us a minute." Ladé said through her teeth, pulling Ìyanu into the kitchen.

"Ìyanu, did you drink something?" Moní asked. "I knew you to be the quiet type, what has changed?"

Ìyanu chuckled. "I've been on my feet for thirty-two

hours, you try that and you'll see there's little difference between drunkenness and sleep deprivation."

Moní pat her shoulder. "Maybe you should go inside to sleep so you'll stop embarrassing the poor dude."

Ìyanu chuckled again, swaying slightly. "No way. This is the most fun I've had in a while. Did you see the look on his face?" She burst into laughter. Her phone beeped. She pulled it out and looked at a text. She was putting the phone away when the screen lit up. She glanced at it; smile gone. She tapped the lock screen button. Two seconds later, her screen lit up with yet another text.

"Is there a problem?"

She shook her head. "I need to make a call."

She excused herself. Ladé and Moní only had to exchange a glance to telepathically share their thoughts.

Throughout dinner, Ìyanu didn't say a word. No sooner had she finished her meal than she retired to bed. Nathan appreciated Ladé and Moní before leaving.

While clearing up the dishes, Moní suggested a video call with Jádeshlá and Ladé agreed at once, saying she hadn't heard from Jádé for some time.

They put the call through to Jádeshlá. She picked the call, excusing herself from the buzz and noise of a party. She looked radiant. They talked, laughed, caught up.

"Moní, sing for me." Jádeshlá said.

Moní scoffed. "You can always listen to any of my songs if you want to hear me sing."

"That's not what she means, she wants us to worship together. Right, Jadesqlá?"

"Right."

Moní shrugged. "Alright then."

They started singing. Jadesqlá's singing lagged because of the video call, but it was beautiful nonetheless. Ladé worshipped, rocking from side to side and she remembered the day she met Terrence. The day he stood beside her in church singing off key. She smiled but her smile died the moment she sensed something off.

"Jadesqlá, what is the problem?"

Jadesqlá looked askance.

"Are you sad about anything?"

Jadesqlá said nothing. She looked around. "Let me get in the car."

Moní looked at Ladé. "What's going on?"

"I don't know what it is exactly, but I can sense Jadesqlá is sad."

That confused Moní because Jadesqlá looked just fine. There was no force or hint of a mask in her smile. She looked genuinely happy.

The moment Jadesqlá slammed the car door, she burst into tears. Ladé and Moní watched without saying anything.

"I don't even know how to begin to process it. I've not allowed myself think about it, or even admit it."

"What are you talking about?"

"Terrence. That bastard is cheating."

A second passed, then another. Ladé opened her mouth to say something in Terrence's defense when Moní held her arm. Terrence couldn't hurt a fly. Terrence couldn't cheat in an exam not to mention cheating on his wife!

"How do you know this?" Moní asked.

Ladé was incredulous. *How on earth is Moní buying this?*

"You know, the whole 'a woman can tell' thing, yeah..."

Ladé exhaled sharply. "Are you serious right now? There's no way..."

"I know you'll take his side, but at least let me finish!" Jadesqlá snapped. "I've been unable to say this for weeks. Unable to face myself with what I know, because it's unbelievable, inconceivable but I won't be gaslighted into thinking it's all in my head. Not by you, not by anyone." She wiped her tears with shaky hands. "you know what, I'm done here."

"I'm sorry, Jadesqlá. I was out of line."

"Please finish what you were saying."

"We'd be together and I'll know he's not with me. His manner was different... off. I started snooping. Then..." Jadesqlá's voice broke. "I found the chats. My husband has been exchanging nudes and sexting with a red head from San Diego. And guess who has an art exhibition in San Diego next week?"

Ladé and Moní sat in stunned silence.

Jadesqlá looked through the window. "I have to go now. He's coming."

Before they could say anything, the call dropped. They

sat there in silence for a long time, trying to internalise what they'd just heard.

"We must pray for our friend." Moní said eventually.

As they prayed, Ladé's heart started thumping. She thought of what David told her the day he was in the hospital. He knew he was going to cheat. He was confessing beforehand, securing her forgiveness. She went back to the time she was ten, at the former pastorium. The time her parents' marriage was on the rocks. She remembered Iyabo's face. She could picture her Mum dragging a box out of their room. The fear that enveloped her at the thought of her parents splitting returned with a vengeance.

Terrence was cheating. Immaculate, saintly Terrence. If Terrence could cheat on his wife, why won't David?

*What would be your reaction if I cheat on you?* He'd asked that day, and true to her naïve nature she said, *I don't know. I don't sit around preempting negative scenarios cos I understand that my heart is a field and the only seed I want thriving on this field is the seed of the word.*

*How dumb are you, Ladé?*

Tears rolled down her cheeks. She could imagine David picking a cheap prostitute from the spot in front of Peka Hotel. The very same place in Allen Avenue where Ladé frequented with other sisters from church to preach the gospel. She imagined him doing stuff to one with awfully bleached skin and a loud mouth. She could see him doing the things he did with her, to this faceless, bleached slut. Ladé's heart broke over and

again.

“Ladé, you're not praying.”

Ladé looked at Moní. She tried to open her mouth to pray but she couldn't take her focus off the pictures springing in her mind. When they finished praying, Moní sat on the floor and Ladé could tell she was thinking about something. Had Barnabas done something to her too?

“What did Barnabas do?”

Moní sighed and shrugged. “I don't know. But I know he's hiding something.”

Ladé sighed. *Men!*

They heard the sound of a car horn. David was there to pick his wife, Barnabas had come back with the kids who were fast asleep and Ladé's parents were also back from the family function they went to attend at Èjìgbò. Ladé was detached from the banter and buzz of the night and David wondered why.

On their way home, David asked Ladé what the problem was. Ladé didn't respond, she kept her eyes fixed on the window.

“Did I do something?”

Nothing.

“Please talk to me, Mfon.”

David's pleading made her think of her Dad lying prostrate before her mum, begging ever so passionately after betraying her and breaking her heart. The sound of David's voice irked her.

“Babe, we agreed to work through our differences



together. Don't shut me out now."

Ladé inhaled and exhaled slowly. "I just need some space."

David swallowed. He started scanning his mind, trying to find what he might have done to offend his wife. He went over everything he'd said earlier that day. He went to the previous day, trying to recall her reaction to every joke. He couldn't put a finger on anything. He went to the previous day, the previous week. It was torture.

At the Ojo's residence, Moní sat on the bed, waiting for her husband to step out of the bathroom. He came out toweling his hair. He winked at her.

"Do I have suds in my ear lobe?" He leaned close. "Help me check." With a fluid move, he grabbed her and started playing with her.

"Stop." Moní pulled him off her. "We need to talk."

"Ha..." Barnabas sat slowly.

"Spit it out."

"What am I spitting?"

"You've been hiding something. I know it."

Barnabas sighed. "Alright. I'll tell you, but please promise me you won't freak out."

Moní swallowed, bracing herself. She nodded.

"Two weeks ago, Pastor Ekwere called me to his office to inform me that the pastorate wanted to ordain me..." Barnabas paused, gauging Moní's reaction. Her face remained impassive.

"Go on..."

"He said I should pray about it and discuss it with my family, then get back to him with my response."

There was a pause that seemed to stretch endlessly.

"So, have you prayed?"

"Yeah," Barnabas scratched the back of his head.

"And?"

"I... it seems... I think the Lord is calling me."

Moní said nothing.

"I know you told me you vowed to never marry a pastor because of your experience growing up. That's why I've been struggling to tell you. Look, if you say no, I will tell Pastor Ekwere no and that would be it."

"Let me get this straight, if I say no to the Lord, you'd say no to His call?"

Barnabas nodded. "I know God respects the agreement of couples and Pastor Ekwere understands that."

Moní sighed. "Is this how immature you think I am?"

Barnabas didn't know what to say.

"Yes, I said I wasn't going to marry a pastor because I saw a misrepresentation of ministry in my growing years, but now I know better. I see the way Pastor Ekwere makes time for his family; I see the way his children have a healthy atmosphere about them. Moreover, my perpetual response to the Lord is 'yes.' He is the Lord. He instructs and I follow. He made me; I didn't make myself. I am his, a sheep of his pasture. My place is to follow. If the Lord says he wants my husband to be a pastor, who am I to stand in his way?"

Tears gathered in Barnabas' eyes. "You don't know how relieved I am right now. You have no idea. Long before Pastor Ekwere spoke to me, I saw a vision. I was kneeling beside a pulpit and Pastor Ekwere was pouring oil on my head. I knew then that the Lord was calling me to pulpit ministry but I didn't know how you'd take it."

Moní held his hands. "This is not what I envisaged and I won't lie to you, I'm not very pleased. But I trust the Lord and I will follow him. Barnabas, I will follow you as you follow Christ."

Barnabas embraced his wife, this time she didn't fight him off when he nuzzled her neck. But later that night, long after Barnabas had fallen asleep, Moni got up and went to the living room. She sat there and cried. She knew nothing would remain the same. This call will affect her, it will affect her children. She thought of her mother and her tears wouldn't stop pouring. Scenes rolled in quick succession across her mind. Scenes where her mother had to sacrifice time, money, food supplies for people at the church. Scenes where she got treated with contempt by church people. A yearning overcame Moni. A yearning to sit with her mother and talk. She wanted to ask her questions. She wanted to know how she fared inside while she saw to the welfare of everyone else.

It occurred to Moni that this was the first time she was crying for her mother. It took her almost eight years and this call to ministry to grieve Ma Olanipekun Abosedé.



The next day, Nathan waited after service for a brief meeting of media team members, after which he left for the hospital to see his Dad. He sat beside his almost inert Dad and tapped away on his phone. A notification came in for a WhatsApp message on the 'Peculiar FYB' group. He wondered why the group had not yet been dissolved after all those years. The group was created for final year brethren when he was still in school and now it was mostly dormant but people rarely left.

He clicked on the message from Bro Pelumi.

-My people, help me thank God o. I had a very terrible experience yesterday evening. I was home alone and I started experiencing pain in my stomach. At first I thought it was just stomach upset but the pain kept increasing till I couldn't move. Honestly I thought I was going to die. I wanted to get my phone and call someone but I just couldn't move. I was sweating and panting. Till now I don't know what made the pain stop, but just help me thank God.-

Nathan sent Pelumi a private reply.

-Wow. Thank God, was this around 6:25?-

-Bro Nathan. That was the exact time the pain stopped. I checked the wall clock when the pain stopped and it was 6:25-

Nathan's jaw fell. When he exited the toilet he checked the time on his phone and it was 6:27, few minutes before that time was when he got the note of victory in his spirit.

His phone started ringing.

"Bro Pelumi..."

"How did you know? Guy, I've never experienced

something like that before. I was so scared. My life literally flashed before my eyes. My body just dey shake."

"Around that time, I was praying and I started feeling the same abdominal discomfort. I didn't know what was happening then but now I get that God was prompting me to pray for you."

"Omo! Burst my head." Pelumi chuckled. "See, I won't lie to you. This one shock me. God actually made you pray for me. Hmmm. So, God really like me like this?"

Nathan frowned. "Of course. He loves you."

"I know we sing it in church and all, but..." he sighed and hissed. "I felt like God was angry with me."

"Why would you think that? God's disposition towards us is always love. There's never a time when he looks at us with anger or a desire to make us pay."

"Bro Nathan, you no get. My ways no pure o. I'm not the Bro Pelumi you knew in school. I no fit even remember when last I enter church."

"Bro Pelumi, no change in man can change who God is. Even in our unfaithfulness, he remains faithful."

"I just feel far from God."

"That distance you feel is not because he left, it's because you've drawn yourself away from fellowship. All you need to do is get back up. The father is waiting for you."

Pelumi sighed. "Omo, thanks men."

"So, what's the plan?"

"Err... I go like pray, but everything just dry for this

side. I will try to go to church next Sunday sha."

Nathan smiled. "Where are you now?"

"I dey house."

"Then, let's pray together."

"Now?"

"Yeah. Let's just begin to pray in tongues."

"You hear wetin I talk at all? I've not prayed since forever."

"So, pray." Nathan said and started praying in tongues.

"Are you there?" Nathan asked.

"I'm here."

"Pray out now."

Pelumi sighed and started muttering under his breath. Nathan increased the intensity of his prayers.

He led them to worship the Lord. Gradually, Pelumi's voice rose. They prayed for some minutes more.

"How far? Engine warm small?" Nathan teased him.

Pelumi chuckled. "E warm o. I no wan stop again."

"Then don't. Continue."

Nathan listened to Pelumi pray for some seconds before he ended the call. The smile on his face narrowed when he looked at his Dad.

He prayed and the Lord healed Pelumi. He rose up from his seat and went to stand by his Dad. He gently laid his right hand on his Dad's head and started declaring God's word over him. He prayed wholeheartedly and gave glory to God. When he said his final amen, the only things he heard were the

plopping of drip and the sound of the patient Monitor. He went back to sit.

*I won't be discouraged. The word of God is sure. The word of God is enough. He sent His word and healed them, and delivered them from their destructions.*

His Mum walked in.

“Èyítáyò, we need to pay for dialysis.”

“But we just paid now.”

“That was for last week.”

Nathan inhaled. “I'll sort it.” He stood up. The money he'd been saving up for a car was depleting with each bill that came. His Dad needed three dialysis every week and each session cost fifty thousand naira.

*How long, Lord Jesus, how long?*



## CHAPTER ELEVEN

### **BAG AND BAGGAGE**

Ethan chewed on his inner cheek as he went through the power point presentation for the umpteenth time. He was so embroiled in proof reading the bullet points that he didn't see Tájù coming. Tájù snapped Ethan's MacBook shut and stuck his tongue out at him.

Ethan sucked air through his teeth and gave his boyfriend a look that communicated his annoyance. Tájù revelled in it and wagged his tongue.

“Is it Naija heat that's making you behave like one serious human being?”

Standing up from the dining of the small apartment they settled for after four days at a hotel and horrid experiences with Lagos realtors, Ethan picked an apple from a tray and took a



greedy bite. "What do you mean? I've always been serious."

Tájù tutted. "Of course."

He walked to the room; Ethan followed.

"Let's go to that spot na," Tájù said.

"You're too adventurous for your own good, T. You hear of a lounge for queer people in Nigeria and you immediately embrace the idea. Look, I'm not about to be rounded off by police men or some power drunk task force officers."

Tájù threw his hands up and brought it down, he ran his fingers over his face and blew a raspberry. "When did you become so boring? I've done my homework. That place is safe. Things are not as bad as they seem, mate. There are powerful people who frequent that place. See that Rogba dude that was all over the internet some months back, do you think he's the only rich queer person in Nigeria? The whole law thing against us is a sham. Think about it, how many arrests are really made against LGBTQ individuals?"

Ethan sighed. "I have work to do. I can't leave anything to chance. I have to make an impressive presentation tomorrow. This is the first school that has given me a chance to speak to the students."

"And it's the first school you've pitched the summer bootcamp to. You crushed the pitch, I'm sure you'll crush the presentation. Those kids would love the idea. But you've been behind your laptop since morning, you need to unwind."

"Are you sure they'd like it?"

"Of course! Who wouldn't love two weekends of art

without pressure and networking?”

“A generation that has TV games, social media and Netflix would rather sit at home.”

Tájù grabbed him by the shoulders. “Stop stressing. Get dressed; we’re going out.”

“No...”

“I’ll drag you if it comes to that.” Tájù said and gave him a gentle shove.



Ethan watched people mill about, dance with their partners, and make out. There were the dealers too with their small bags and hustle for customers. The air was redolent with weed and machine fog. Tájù looked at him and gave a shrug. *You see, pretty safe.*

Ethan rolled his eyes. *Whatever.*

Tájù smiled and leaned close, raising his voice above the din of hardcore rap. “Remember when we used to do this?”

“Do what?”

“Communicate nonverbally, back in primary school.”

Ethan sniffed a chuckle. “Let me get the drinks.”

He walked over to the bar and placed his order. While he waited for the bartender to attend to him, he observed the place and bobbed his head to the music as an effort to counterbalance the dizzying effect of the spinning lights.

When the bartender served the drinks, a man in a navy

suit slipped his card across the counter at the same time Ethan asked for the bill. Ethan looked at the man with a slight frown, not because of the gesture, his meaning was clear enough, but because the man seemed to have appeared out of thin air.

Suited guy looked over his shoulder and pointed with a jut of his chin. "With love from the gentleman over there."

Ethan chuckled. He followed suited guy's gaze. The bald man in the corner was leering at him, running his finger over the rim of his shot glass slowly. Ethan froze. He looked at suited guy and back at the bald man. The bald guy stood up and walked towards the shadows, to a side where a transparent flap led to a corridor, never taking his eyes off Ethan.

"Take a message to the gentleman for me, will you?" He shouted at suited guy. But the guy leaned closer, showing he didn't hear him. Ethan repeated himself.

"What message?"

"Tell him I said, 'hello, *omọ Ibo aláṣọ*'." The suited guy looked at him askance. Ethan repeated himself, raising his voice even higher.

He picked the drinks and walked back to Tájù, he tried to find suited guy in the crowd, but in the midst of waltzing bodies and erratic lights, he was difficult to follow.

He handed Tájù his martini.

"Who was the guy?"

"Take a wild guess."

"Some loser trying his luck?"

"Voilà." Ethan responded with a contrived smile. His

heart was still pounding. Was that really Chibi? Was his mind playing with him? Was it the blue light flash that deluded him? He decided to wait. If it was indeed Chibi, he'd sent suited guy back.

Throughout the night he was distracted. He was thankful Tájù carried every conversation on the back of his enthusiasm, leaving him with little to talk about. Tájù rattled on to a stud female about Ethan's upcoming bootcamp for budding artists. How could Tájù not tell that she was bored of the discourse?

Ethan kept stealing glances around, hoping to spot a navy suit but he never saw the guy, instead, he took note of a young girl with a crotchet tube top having a shisha session with some other girls. Ethan furrowed his brows. The girl could be no more than fifteen. No trace of Chibi or navy suit. The disappointment he felt the evening he was flogged at the market junction came back. Chibi would always be an evanescent shadow teasing him, mocking him. He decided to take his mind off Chibi, but the memory of that night was nest of bees: easy to trouble, difficult to settle. The bees had taken flight and they were stinging him all over from within. They stung with every gulp he swallowed, stung when he forced laughter, stung when he danced with Tájù.

They were exiting the lounge when the bag came over Ethan's head and he was carried into a car. He heard Tájù shout his name but the speed of the person carrying him was something he knew Tájù couldn't keep up with.

In the car, the hood was lifted from Ethan's head. Beside him was navy suit and Chibi was seated on the front passenger's seat.

"Who are you?"

Ethan took a moment to catch his breath. "A boy familiar with every cartoon in your warehouse."

Chibi's neck swivelled and his wide eyes settled on Ethan. "Eth..an?"

Ethan lifted his chin. "One and the same."

"Theo, excuse us."

Navy suit opened the door and stepped down. Chibi stared at Ethan, dumbstruck. He reached out to touch his cheek and Ethan recoiled. He took off his shirt and Chibi's eyes glittered as he wet his lips. Ethan turned his back to Chibi.

"They did that to me when you," he faced Chibi, "hung me out to dry." He put his shirt on.

"What did you expect me to do?" His tone was clipped, self-defending.

Ethan scoffed and shook his head. "You swore to stand by me. You taught me to stand up for myself."

"Let's leave the past behind us." Chibi crossed over from the front passenger's seat to the backseat. "I've missed you."

Ethan swallowed. Even after all these years, Chibi still had that effect on him. Sitting this close to him, he could feel yesterday's flame smoulder between them. But when Chibi reached for him, he slapped his hand off.

"Don't push it, Chibi. I've spent all my adult life

thinking of harming you.”

Chibi laughed low. “I’m shaking. Listen, I kill people for a living. I wish you all the luck you’ll need to harm me.”

That chilled Ethan’s blood but he didn’t let his face show it.

“My boyfriend must be worried by now. I want to leave.”

Chibi touched Ethan again, holding his gaze. The crashing of Ethan’s will urged Chibi on. Ethan came close to melting completely, but he decided to grab the helm with reason. Feelings could not control him, he had chosen Tájù. He would stick with his commitment.

He reached for the door and tried to open it. The door wouldn’t budge.

“Have some decency and let me go, Chibi.”

Chibi stared at him for some seconds before he unlocked the car doors.

Ethan walked away from the dark alley on wobbling knees. He called Tájù.

Tájù came to get him. On the way home, Tájù apologised profusely, taking every blame for forcing Ethan to come out against his will. He asked if Ethan was hurt but Ethan said nothing. He was too busy with his thoughts. He’d come face to face with the man who groomed him into the man he’d become, the man around whom his desires were largely formed. After many years of giving in to every whim and desire, he was alone with Chibi and he chose to walk away.

He sold his house at Atlanta, left a well-paying job and moved to Nigeria. He was hard at work to kick start his artist bootcamp which would launch him into mentoring boys like him. He'd found a man who loved him truly and whom he loved back. He'd chosen to go against the grain of emotions and called Chibi's bluff. He was brave. He had found purpose in himself and he was living it out. He had reclaimed control of his life. He had finally found satisfaction and structure in his life and this he did without bending the knee to a god. He was god to himself.

He smiled and turned to Tájù, cutting off another apology. "T, thank you for making me come out tonight. Thank you for everything."



That morning, Ladé woke up grumpy. All she wanted was to be able to lay on her back, but with her watermelon abdomen, she could only lie on her side. She heaved and sat up biting her lower lip and breathing through lips alternately. She could hear David's prayers from the living room and even that annoyed her.

"God, I thank you for my wife. I thank you for Mfon, your gift to me. I don't understand what's going on with her. I know pregnancy is like world war going on inside a woman and I can't fully ever wrap my head around what she's going through but I just want to be there for her... God, please help me

touch her heart. She's been ignoring me for three days and I don't know how much longer I can manage in this... atmosphere. We are having a baby in less than a week, we can't bring a child into this..."

Ladé fought her squirming conscience. She knew she shouldn't be fighting David for something he hadn't done; she shouldn't be dwelling on the thoughts dominating her mind, she knew it was affecting her prayer life already but the longer she gave in to her imagination, the harder it was to snap out.

When she heard David's approaching footsteps, she quickly lay down and covered herself up. David entered the room.

"I know you're not sleeping."

She kept up the pretence.

"We are going to see Mummy Uduak"

Ladé sat up and scowled. "No, we are not."

David walked to the bathroom. "Oh, yes we are."

"I don't want to discuss anything with my mum."

"Why? She's been our counsellor ever since... she has our track record; she knows our progress and history."

"We don't need counselling."

David scoffed and Ladé opened her mouth to say something before David cut her off.

"You do realise this is the first time you're responding to me in three days, right? I've called Mrs Jíre to book an appointment. I'll pick you later this evening and we'd head to her office."





"Let me get this right," Uduak took off her glasses and rubbed the bridge of her nose. "You are shutting David out as a way of bracing yourself for the hit you see coming?"

Ladé nodded and looked away.

Uduak sighed. "With your words and your thoughts, you can create your reality. You can build a stronghold by just negatively engaging your imagination. If you continue pushing your husband away because you don't want him to have the power to hurt you, you'll be giving the Devil an inroad into your home and before long that home will implode. To truly love is to trust someone with your heart and hope they don't break it. When you become sensitive to potential hurt, you start hurting your partner without realising." She turned to David. "How did you feel when the silent treatment started?"

"I was confused. I was wondering what I had done wrong. I ran over every event I could remember and second guessed every statement I made recently. I don't know, it was like I was fumbling in the dark."

"All of these because of imaginations."

Ladé blinked back tears. "You don't understand..."

Uduak inhaled. "Actually, I think I do. Your husband is not the man he used to be, he's not your father's mistake and he's not Terrence."

David looked between his wife and mother-in-law in confusion.

"Who told you about Terrence?" Ladé asked her mum.

"What happened to bro's T?"

"My heart went to Jádesølá yesterday and I called her. She assumed you'd already told me. So, she let it flow."

"Did you tell her I didn't tell you anything?"

"Yes, I did, but by then she had already spilled the beans. Ladé, I think I know what you're afraid of and I can understand why. But one thing I admire you for is your ability to see people like God sees them. You must hold that close. When the Devil paints pictures before the eyes of your heart, discard them immediately. Go back to those notes where you wrote what God told you about David to sharpen your focus. When fear creeps up on you, discuss with your husband, don't retreat into your shell."

Ladé couldn't hold back her tears. David held her hand beneath the table and stroked the back of her palm with his thumb.

"Your wife needs to know that she's secure with you, David. She needs to know that she has no reason to fret. And Ladé, you must take responsibility for your peace. Trust God and trust your husband. Communicate and please don't project the errors of others on your husband. You're about to be a mum, trust me, you need all the peace you can get."

Ladé chuckled and looked up at David. "I'm sorry."

"I'm just relieved to know it's the smell of my shoes that's causing all these."

"Oh, God. That's another thing we need counselling on."

That and the fact that my husband always scatters the room."

Uduak smiled. "My work here is done, go finish up your squabble at home."

Uduak's smile did not last long. After David and Ladé exited her office, she rubbed her nose and focused her thoughts on Jadesọlá and Terrence. What went wrong?

Ladé got in the car, brought out her phone and called Terrence on WhatsApp.

"Ladé! Long time, G."

"Terrence, how could you?"

Terrence chuckled. "You don't start your drama, abi?"

Ladé furrowed her brows. "The Californian red head, Terrence." That killed his mirth. He went silent. "I introduced you to Jadesọlá. I vouched for you. How could you even do this to my friend?"

Terrence remained silent.

"Say something."

"I don't know what to say."

"God! Terrence, this is not who I know you to be. What has happened to you?"

"I don't want to talk about this."

"Don't hang up on me."

David beckoned and Ladé gave him the phone. "Bros T,"

"Dave." Terrence's voice was thick.

"Bros T," *you found me when I was in prison. You got me saved; you raised me.*

"Dave..."

"Bros. T." *Where did you break? When did you change?*

"David." In that final response, David heard Terrence's SOS. *I don't know, but I need help.*

"Bros T, we'll be praying for you."



Terrence slinked into the bedroom, striving to maintain calm.

"Jádesọlá,"

She was breastfeeding their second son, Nífẹmí and tapping away on her phone. "Babe?"

"How long have you known?"

She didn't lift her head. "Known what?"

"I just got off the phone with Ladé..." Terrence let his voice peter out. He saw that she held still for a second even though she didn't lift her head. He waited.

"And?"

"Don't play dumb with me, Jáde. For crying out loud, we went out on a date just yesterday. We made love and all that... for how long have you known?"

Jádesọlá met his eyes and chuckled. "So, it is true."

"Why didn't you confront me? I get to find out that my wife knows from Ladé who's all the way in Nigeria. Do you realise how weird this is?"

"What is weird," Jádesọlá uttered with eerie composure,

"is that you are confronting me for not confronting you about your affair. I never got the necessary schooling on how to deal when my husband decides to bless every lonely heart in San Diego, pardon me." She stopped feeding Nífémi and pulled down her top. She stood up to put Nífémi in his cot.

"You have some nerve, Terrence. You..." her mouth hung open and her chin quavered. She fixed her eyes on him and he looked away, swallowing.

"Jádesọlá, I promise you nothing has happened."

"Nothing? You call those messages nothing? You call trading nudes nothing? You call shagging another woman on the bed of technology nothing?" Jádesọlá burst into laughter, a long hearty laugh. "You are hilarious, I have to give you that. Just go back to your studio and head to San Diego from there. When you see your girl in San Diego, you can finish off your nothing. It will be nothing because Terrence, that's exactly what you mean to me: nothing."

Terrence went back to his in-house studio and sat on the floor. The floorboard creaked under his weight and he longed for it to give way beneath him. He wanted to be swallowed up in the earth, buried far from this nightmare he'd built and walked into. He sat there for minutes looking through the floor-to-ceiling window that overlooked a bridge, unable to think. He heard a knock on the door of his studio and knew it was Jachike, his three-year-old son.

"Daddy?"

"Daddy is busy." He squeezed his eyes shut and

ground out the words.

Terrence lay on his side and closed his eyes. He forced his mind to travel back to when he was still in Lagos: the time he lived with David, the evenings at Ladé and Moní's apartment, the church, Mr. Bákàrè and the evangelism unit. He let his thoughts lead him off to the dream land. He dreamt of the New Year dinner he had with his friends the day David was released from prison. He dreamt of the Saturdays he drove Jádesọlá to church and how he assisted with the decorations and set up. When he awakened, he was disoriented for a bit and when he came into full consciousness of his environment, he could almost hear the widening of the fissures in his breaking heart.

*"Bros T"* David's voice echoed in his mind. He covered his face with both palms and hissed. He decided to trace his spiralling. He started from when he was still on course.

When he was still in Georgia, the sale of his art works slowed, causing his personal income to flow in trickles and that displeased him. Thankfully, Jádesọlá's income was enough to anchor them, but the African in him wanted more. He wanted to be able to provide singlehandedly. He sent out applications and pursued every opening that surfaced on the radar. While he hoped for better, they served faithfully in a local church under Revd. Lilibeth; he in the love outreach team and Jádesọlá in the intercessory team. Love outreach was what the evangelism team of Revd. Lilibeth's church was called and it was the most dormant team in the church.

Terrence had the burden to kindle the kind of fire he

experienced at his Lagos church in Love Outreach, but it was difficult to achieve when they only had thirty minutes to meet after service twice a month. There were only four other members and they worked multiple jobs. Every suggestion Terrence made met a brick wall. Saturdays were extremely busy for hustlers. Evangelism on a Sunday was counterproductive, because people were either saturated from church or averse to church. He prayed and the first strategy the Lord dropped in his heart was to start the love outreach from within the church.

The Lord drew his attention to the fact that some people were filling out pews without having known Jesus. Many people went through the motions and did religious activities yet they lacked an understanding of the gospel. So, he started engaging different people after church, prodding them with questions, getting to see the loopholes in their understanding of God and His word and giving them insight in the way he could.

He sold the 'Love Inreach' idea to the other members of the team and they bought into it. Revd. Lilibeth loved the concept and even gave them a few minutes to talk to the church one Sunday during service. Before long, Love Inreach played out. Now that virtually all the people in church were saved, Terrence had to trust the Lord for a new strategy. After all, the commission given was not to go into the church, but all the world. He was grateful for the wisdom God gave him with Love Inreach, but he knew there was more. Love Inreach was only a springboard.

As though God had been waiting for a man to align to

the longing of His heart, he began to flood Terrence's heart with ideas for a media gospel campaign. He wrote down every idea and shared them with Revd. Lilibeth. The day he met with her, she had tears in her eyes as she looked through the piece of paper filled with scrawls of ideas: a checklist for collaboration with the media team; a collection of graphic design concepts for the media campaign; a list of campaign strategies for different demographics.

The words she spoke to him that day rang loud and clear in his mind. "Terrence, you and your wife are like Aaron and Hur to me. God brought you along at a point when my hands were failing because of weariness." That Sunday afternoon, she laid hands on he and his wife and blessed them from her heart.

The blessing she decreed upon them materialised quickly. On Tuesday, Terrence received a mail from QinTech, a start-up in Los Angeles. They'd seen him on LinkedIn and they wanted to bring him in for an interview for the position of creative designer.

Terrence corresponded with the HR of QinTech and by the following week, he was on a plane to LA for the interview. He got the job and the pay was almost double Jádesqlá's earnings at the time, but there was one issue, he had to move.

He discussed it with his wife. She was sceptical and that baffled Terrence. How couldn't she see that this was the blessing of God? Was it a coincidence that the offer came two days after their Pastor prayed for them? Surely, this was God's way of repaying them for all their service to the kingdom.



But the campaign, what about the campaign? What about all the Lord had committed into their trust?

God would raise men to continue. They had played their part. *Remember, Jádesqlá, we are only stewards here. It's God's work, we can't monopolize it. Paul plants, Apollos waters, but only God gives increase. It's time to pass on the baton. God has a new assignment for us in LA, we can't afford to dawdle because of fear of the unknown.*

When he broke the news to Revd. Lilibeth, her face was inscrutable. "Have you prayed about this?"

"Yes, yes, I have ma. And I have peace."

"What did the Lord say?"

"He didn't say anything but I have peace."

Thinking back on it, Terrence wondered if this 'peace' was the rest the promise of financial security gave or the speaking of the inner witness. Didn't Jesus say he gave a kind of peace the world cannot give? That statement indicated that there was in fact a breed of peace that the world could offer. Was that what Terrence felt? An emotional sense of safety instead of a fruit of the regenerated spirit. Was that what fuelled his hurry?

Revd. Lilibeth told him to wait on the Lord and get a word from him. She reminded him of all he knew about divine direction. But Terrence's heart couldn't stay still. When he prayed, his mind busied itself with imaginations of what his life in LA would look like.

He was the first creative designer QinTech hired and that gave him an advantage in the coming months. When

QinTech's profit margin widened and they superseded their quarterly projections, twice in a row, they decided it was time for expansion. More income meant more capital which meant expansion and invariably a beefing up of the work force. Two intern designers were hired and Terrence was made team lead. Three months into the job and he'd gotten a promotion and a raise. *Isn't God wonderful?*

With more money came a larger appetite. He wanted a better house, a better car. He wanted a top-notch inhouse studio, not to forget the trust fund he had to set up for his sons. He had to start making plans for their future. College was expensive and time flew before one realised. He had to plan ahead; he had to double his hustle.

Terrence learned to court other companies while working with his company. He did remote jobs and contract jobs. Every job he did well landed him many more potentials.

He had to move a few things over here and there, make a few compromises. Pretend not to know what the rainbow in the design meant. What does it matter if the design is going to be used in a campaign for themes that went against his faith? He was only doing his job. With time, he learned to master plausible deniability. He learned to avoid questions, the less he knew the better.

Art was no longer a thing of inspiration or a channel of ministration. It was simply work. A means to an end, the key to his empire. He kept telling himself that if he hustled hard enough, his future will thank him. His children will thank him.

If he earned enough to be financially liberated, he could settle to do whichever work he wanted.

To be able to chase the bag effectively, he had to drop some baggage. Baggage like excessive religiosity. He went to church when he could and he gave generously. Surely, a good God would understand that the kind of schedule he worked with didn't leave room for consistent prayers and study. He listened to worship while he did his daily workout routine. He prayed with his family in the car before they set out for the day. He convinced himself that it wasn't a matter of intensity. He didn't have anything to prove to God. His walk with God was not based on his performance. *The Lord understands.*

After sometime, he became uncomfortable with Revd. Lilibeth's calls and messages. He felt claustrophobic under her cloying gaze. She was no longer his Pastor, why was she all up in his face? He started watching her calls ring, sent replies late and kept his responses abrupt.

-I'm sorry ma, been really busy. Everything is fine. Thanks—

He was sure he was doing okay. He didn't cuss like his other co-workers, he didn't drink, didn't smoke, and didn't sleep around. He was a decent man. He was a Christian like many others. In fact, he was better than most he could see. But there were times when he thought of his days in Nigeria and he wondered, *Terrence, are you burning?*

*I'm in Christ. This is not Nigeria.*

He met Annette Costello at a symposium in Belgium.

She was the kind of person who wore her money on her sleeve- she never wore sleeves actually. She looked the part of someone spoilt. Watching her from afar, he assumed she was either born to old money or married into it, he knew better than to air such a *misogynistic* thought in a world where being politically incorrect could cost one a career. She loved everyone's work, saw the angle in every argument.

They had their first conversation over lunch. Terrence was alone at his table, digging into croissant for desert when she joined him. He read her name aloud off her tag and casually added, "cool as AC."

"The name or me?"

Terrence chuckled. "Who said it couldn't be both?"

Annette chuckled. "So, you've had an eye on me, huh?"

Terrence knew then that she'd mistaken his casual friendliness for flirting. He wiped his forehead with his left hand for no other reason than to flaunt his wedding band. He saw that she got it.

She flicked up her brows. "She's lucky."

Terrence smiled. "As am I."

"I didn't catch the name." She said and sipped her lemonade.

"Terrence Osigwe." He left the Elochukwu out, he didn't want her to do the 'toe' joke even though he doubted she had the wits for it. The great toe joke was he and Ladé's thing, he didn't want this Costello staining it.

She wanted to see his works. She said his work was

tasteful, twiddled with her fingers as she sought a more fitting word and added, refreshing. Terrence thought to himself, *yeah, right? How many other people have you told that today?* As though answering him, she told him she wanted him to do a graphite piece of her, she wrote him a cheque immediately. When Terrence saw the amount she was paying as advance, he was sold.

She said she'd send him the picture. They exchanged contacts and parted ways after the symposium. Two weeks later, Annette sent Terrence a nude picture of herself.

-I know you're married and all, but I also know you're a professional. I grew up hating my body but now I'm ready to embrace body positivity. I'll hang the piece in my room as a reminder that my body is art, a temple. Counting on you, Osigue-

The first thing Terrence wanted to type in response was that the temple expression was from scripture and it ought to be used in the context scripture used it. Secondly, was this even right? And why won't she just call him Terrence? *What the hell is Osigue?*

*Don't embarrass yourself please. It's totally unprofessional to turn down a client after taking advance, all for what? Your chauvinistic view? Imagine how she'd feel if you reject her. This lady said she grew up hating her body. Come on, Terrence, you're not a child. Seeing the naked human form won't undo the screws of your morality. Aren't there born-again doctors? Don't they interact with the human body all the time? Moreover, you don't even like this*

*woman. She'd never be competition enough for Jádesqlá. Nudity is art, has always been. From the classic sculptures and paintings to the works of the renaissance age, the unclad human form has held an artistic value. Think about it, even at creation, God didn't make clothes. Clothes came after the fall, nothing but a flaw to the purity of the creator's art. If Costello wants to adore the work of her creator, why would you deny her that? Why would you deny her the privilege to live her truth?*

Terrence made a good argument till he convinced himself. But the bottom line of it all was the money. There was no way he'd kiss a deal so juicy good bye.

It was pitch black now and Terrence was starting to feel the pangs of hunger and that made him feel ashamed. Why would he be thinking of food at a time like this? He grunted as he rose to his feet. He walked to the door and unlocked it. When he opened it, he saw Jachike huddled by the door, crying.

"Jachike, why aren't you in your room?"

The child hugged his Dad's knees. "I want to stay with you."

Terrence let out a long-suffering sigh. Jachike's clinginess could be very tiring.

"Jachike, go to your room."

"Daddy, please."

"Just go."

"I'm having bad dreams."

"What dreams?"

"I can't remember but I'm scared, Daddy."

Terrence sucked air through his teeth. "Fine, are you hungry?"

Jachike nodded.

"Let's get some cereal from the kitchen."

The boy wiped his tears and beamed. Terrence set the ground rules for their little late-night moment: no talking, no questions. He had plenty going on in his head without his son adding his endless string of questions.

Terrence poured milk from a glass jug before he poured the cereal. He always poured milk first. He recalled taking cereal at the office the day he started work on Annette's piece. He'd told her he was opting for something minimalist, something subtle yet assertive. But the real reason he'd opted for minimalist art was because he wanted something he could lock in his bottom drawer when he wasn't working on it. Something he didn't have to put on an easel.

Before he started working on the canvas, he tried his hands on sketches using his handy sketch pad. It was his usual practice, his way of getting acquainted with the art he was trying to express. He devoted one week to the piece. He hurried the work, believing that the effect her image had on his mind and body would wear off as soon as he started working on something else.

He sent the picture of the work to her when he was done. He knew she'd love it; he'd put his all into the work, wanting to give her value for her money. Moreover, this was Annette who saw the passion radiating through the drabest pieces. And so,

it caught him by storm when she said she wasn't pleased with the work. "Your art is magical, that's a given, but this piece isn't capturing the essence I want. I need this piece to give me a certain energy and I can't feel that just yet. Look, Osigue," she said over the phone, "this is very crucial to me. You can send this; I'll pay the balance and the shipment fee. But I'll need you to work on another. There's an energy the piece I want must give me. Manifest that for me, will you? I will send the picture and all my crystals to support you."

Terrence sat in his office listening to her prattle and he gritted his teeth, striving to contain his annoyance. For everytime she called him Osigue, he felt an outburst hit the back of his tongue. He'd clench his jaws, swallow and push down his tetchiness. When the call ended, she wired him the balance. He could never have charged that much. His irritation gave way to cynicism. If this spoilt brat had money to waste, he'd gladly indulge her. She sent another picture, a lot more provocative and this time, she asked him to return the favour. She wanted to do an illustration of him. He said he wasn't comfortable with that.

-Lol. I want to show you how to infuse positivity into body art. Come on, think of this as a peer review work-

-Annette, this is not peer review. This is work. I'm getting paid. I'll give you what you want, don't worry-

-Hmm... I see. It's okay for a woman to put her body on display but it becomes too much to ask when the roles are reversed-



Terrence was confused. Before he could make sense of her absurd reply, she called him.

"You know what Osigue, you are just a toxic, toxic person. Why are you giving me all this bad energy? Why are you making me feel bad about my body all over again? Christ! This is all so triggering!"

"Annette? Annette, are you crying?"

"I feel like I'm back in high school bathroom where all those mean girls said mean things about me."

Between sobs, she went on to give every graphic detail of what the girls from high school had to say about her body.

When she sent Terrence the cartoon illustration she did of his body, Terrence felt something he couldn't fully fathom. It was a mix of coy self-consciousness and flattery. In the way she presented his form, he could tell that she adored his body; that this was passionate on a level that felt illicit. He could feel the *energy*.

This energy lingered in his mind. Before long he found himself wondering what her body would feel like, comparing it with Jádesqlá's body. Somehow, the whole thing dissociated her from her body. He didn't like Annette, but he was growing a tender spot for her body.

The segue into sexting was easy, almost seamless. And then, Annette told him that she was organising an art exhibition for him in San Diego, because the world needed to feel the electricity of his art.



## CHAPTER TWELVE

### DADDY

Terrence looked at his phone's screen. The time was 12:02am. Today was Thursday. His flight to San Diego was booked for the next day. He swallowed.

*How did I get this far?*

And even as he asked the question in his heart, he knew the answer. He had allowed the root of all evil sink deep roots in his heart, what he was seeing now were only the fruits.

*How do I tackle this? Is Jádesqlá going to ask for a divorce? What will become of my children? What will people say?*

*Leave the leaves, Terrence. Face the root.*

He sighed deeply as he stroked Jachike's locks. He laid him carefully on his bed, knowing full well that if the child awakened, he'd insist on staying the night with him.

"God," Terrence whispered, walking back to his studio.  
"My God."

Tears gathered in his eyes. "I have failed you."

He bowed his head and drew a shaky breath. "I've gone too far."

*Never too far.*

"God, I'm sorry. I don't have the words to express the grief in my heart, but you see it all. I know I've sinned against you, my father. But I also know Jesus died for my sins. I know I have offended you, I know I have grieved your Holy Spirit. But I also know that you've not given up on me. I know you are still merciful. I know you still love me. You are the father that keeps watch for the prodigal."

His body wracked with sobs and he fell to his knees.

With a heart full of contrition, he said, "I come boldly before your throne of grace to obtain mercy and grace to help in this time of need. I'm repentant, ashamed of what I've done but I won't hide from you. I won't run from you. I come boldly. Fix me, Jesus. Prune me. Vinedresser, tend me."

*Cancel the exhibition.*

Terrence's heart stopped for a second. The exhibition was the biggest thing in his career so far. He'd spent months working on the collection he was going to put up for auction at the event. Annette had invited highly placed men and women from all over to that event. On Saturday, his life was going to change. He'd be a step closer to his dream of being inducted to the NYFA hall of fame. Not to talk of all the money he was going

to make from the auction of the pieces. He had thirteen pieces prepared for the collection he'd tagged 'Truce Dance' and each piece held the promise of raking in thousands of dollars.

"God, please. There has to be another way."

*Pick your phone now. Tell Annette to cancel the event and block her.*

Terrence breathed through parted lips. He picked his phone with a shaky hand.

-Anete, cancel the exhibitin. bye-

*Now, block her.*

Terrence obeyed. He felt sick to his stomach. No one would ever take him seriously after this. His career was literally over.



"Bro Edward, I only agreed to see you because I respect you." Mr Maduka said, taking off his cap and setting it on the table. Edward's attention was drawn to his hands. His finger nails were clean and well clipped. Was he the kind to clip his nails himself or did his wife do it for him? Was he one of those who bit their nails so expertly that the fingernails look like they were clipped? Edward took his eyes off Mr Maduka's hands.

"I appreciate that sir. I know you love Ijeoma and you want what's best for her, but her happiness is important, I'm sure you don't want to jeopardise that."

"Of course. I'm not jeopardising anything, in fact, I'm rescuing my daughter from making a colossal mistake. I'm not

trying to foist a career on her. Ever since Ijeoma was a child, she'd always said she wanted to be a medical doctor. All of a sudden now, she wants to be an artist. Do you know what Ijeoma's problem is?" He didn't wait for Edward's reply. "She doesn't know the difference between a hobby and a career path. She can't just turn her back on her lifelong dream."

Edward sighed. "When I was much younger, as the pastor's son, I used to take the church bulletin to the typist down the street for typesetting. I'd sit with Boda Ladi and watch him strike the keys, I'll watch the type bars hit the paper with wonder. It was so fascinating to me and I was certain I'd grow to be a typist."

Mr Maduka let out a burst of chuckle.

"It's laughable now, isn't it? Imagine I stayed loyal to that dream just because it was my childhood fantasy."

"This is different, bro Edward. Medicine is never going to be obsolete."

"While that might be true, the bottom line is, times are changing and plausible career paths are being forged in places we didn't see coming. Allow Ijeoma pursue her passion, Mr Maduka. Have you seen her works?"

He nodded. "She's talented but she's always wanted to be a doctor."

"Children won't always get it right with their first fantasy. Even adults don't have the future all figured out. The truth is Ijeoma is barely coping in science class. You know how the Bible says if footmen weary you, how would you contend

with horses, right? If Ijeoma is getting miserable trying to understand taxonomy, how would she manage medical school? I don't mean to frighten you, sir, but even people who have the knack for the course get to the end of their mental fortitude in med school. In my university days, news of medical students taking their lives..."

"God forbid! My daughter shall not die in Jesus's name." Mr Maduka levelled him a scowl.

"Amen. Please consider what I've said sir. Thank you for your time."

On his way out of Mr Maduka's office, he checked the time. He decided to head straight to Déyemí's school to pick him and his siblings up. It'll be better to get there a few minutes before closing hour than to show up late.

Thankfully, his timing worked fine and he was able to escape rush hour traffic. He got to Déyemí's school about fifteen minutes before the closing hour. He used that time to look through a business plan sample. He knew that Ed Motors would soon be expanding. He'd begun to feel the kind of unease that spurred the sons of the prophets to tell Elisha that their current habitation was too narrow for them in 2 Kings 6. He'd been praying and searching his spirit but he had yet to see clarity. While he waited for divine leading, he could start by enlarging his mind.

*Uyo.* It dropped in his spirit unceremoniously and Edward knew at once where the new branch of Ed Motors would be established. The next course of action would be to

bring Zwalatha Zamani, his business analyst that almost always wore bob wigs, on board for a feasibility study. When they put together a workable plan, it would be presented to the team leads. He made a mental note to make some changes to the pitch deck he'd be taking to Nnewi the following week. He had to land Innoson at once. He'd sit with Zwalatha, Nathan and Jared Isah, their company lawyer to make sure the proposal was airtight before leaving Lagos. The peal of the school bell stopped his thoughts short.

He came out of the car to wait for Déyemí and his siblings and he felt a frisson of nervousness. Would Déyemí's sister like him? What did he call her name again? Sandra, yeah, Sandra. He had a three-year old brother in pre-school too and Edward could not forget his name, not when he shared the name with his brother-in-law.

Déyemí approached him, squinting and holding his brother by the hand. His sister, a spitting image of Şolá, held onto the strap of her back pack for dear life.

Déyemí did the introductions.

"Thank you, Uncle Edward, for rescuing us from that annoying school bus." Sandra said with a straight face. Her cold demeanour confused Edward. Was she being sarcastic? Was she just tired? She probably didn't like him.

The children settled in the car; Sandra and Barnabas at the back and Déyemí took the front passenger's seat.

"What's your music preference?" Edward asked.

"I like Afrobeats." Edward wished Yemí wasn't so quick

to respond. He was hoping to get Sandra to speak.

"I've got you." Edward connected his phone to the Bluetooth speaker and played Anendlessocean's 'Nazarene'. Déyemí bobbed his head and hummed along throwing in comments on how impressed he was with the music, how surprised he was to find gospel music with this kind of tune. But Edward was looking at Sandra through the rear-view mirror. She was looking through the window; she seemed bored.

When the track ended, Déyemí asked for a repeat but Edward said they had to take turns to pick the music. He asked Sandra what she wanted to listen to.

With a shrug she said. "Anything."

"Anything is not anything." Edward retorted.

"Actually, I don't want anything."

"She doesn't care much for music." Déyemí said.

"My turn!" Itùnú Barnabas squealed. "Siri, play 'this girl is on fire'."

Edward laughed. "You like that song?"

"No, no." The child whispered, poking his head between driver's seat and front passenger's. "I love it!"

"Why are you shouting?" Déyemí asked, testy.

"Because that is my song! She's walking on fireeee!"

"Barnabas, please sit back, okay? Lean your back on the seat and Sandra please buckle him in."

Déyemí shook his head. "You're not even a girl. I don't know why you love this song so much."

Barnabas paid him no mind. He continued singing and



snapping his fingers. Moments after the song ended, the boy was quiet. Déyemí looked back to see him slouched on the car seat, fast asleep.

"Why did mummy send you to come pick us?" Sandra asked eventually.

"I offered to help and I insisted." Edward replied.

"Why?"

"Cos I'm Yemí's friend and I want to be your friend too."

"Hmm... Weird."

"How is it weird?"

She didn't respond. She was back to looking through the window.

*How do I get through to this girl?*

"Sandra, my best friend is having a baby really soon and I need ideas on what I could get as a gift."

"Did you say gift for a baby?" Ìtùnú Barnabas piped up.

Edward furrowed his brows. "When did you wake up, Barnabas?"

"I wasn't sleeping!"

Edward sighed. *Does he shout all the time?*

"If not for the seatbelt, you would have fallen out of the seat." Déyemí said.

"I wasn't sleeping!" Ìtùnú Barnabas maintained.

"Right. Wipe the drool at the corner of your mouth."

Sandra demonstrated with her own mouth. Edward watched them through the rear-view mirror as the traffic came to a momentary standstill. Ìtùnú Barnabas wiped his mouth

cautiously. All of them burst into laughter.

“There's nothing there *jo!*” He folded his arms.

“You wouldn't have wiped your mouth if you knew you weren't sleeping.” Sandra tapped the side of her head.

Déyemí hissed. “She likes feeling smart.”

“It's not a feeling, dear, it's a fact. I'm a born scientist. I prove things and I provide solutions.”

That reminded Edward of Ijeoma. Did she sound this convinced as a child? What if she was indeed a born scientist going through a vacillation phase? What if she was one of those multitalented people who had a flighty approach to interests? What if she had it in her but she just didn't know it yet? What if he'd misled her Dad? What would happen if she turns up dissatisfied with the arts? On the flipside, he found himself worrying about the genuineness of Sandra's claim, he wondered if she was in this science thing for the long haul. Would she wake up someday in the future to say she was a born business woman? What happens in that case? How can one prove the veracity of a child's interest? Perhaps track record would be a more valid proof than the words of their mouth. Maybe the only observable indicator of what career path a child is meant to tow would be their sustained proclivities rather than whimsy fascinations. He decided to observe Sandra moving forward. He'd watch to see if she was indeed a born scientist. He'd pray too. He'd pray for Ijeoma and Sandra and all his teens. A decision as pivotal as choosing a career path could be overwhelming in a world of changing times and fickle people.

"Uncle... sorry what's your name?" Ìtùnú Barnabas asked.

"Edward."

"Yes, uncle Edward, I'm the right person to ask for baby gift because I'm the youngest here. Old people only give boring ideas."

Sandra tsked. "What do children know?"

"They know about children better than old people."

Edward looked at Déyẹmí. "Are they always like that?"

Déyẹmí made a sound in his throat. "What do you think?"

"As I was saying before old people interrupted!"

"Barnabas, sit back."

He leaned back. "Comic books. My favourite is *Bible Stories With Aunty Tolú*. I know the baby will like it too."

"Terrible. A new born can't read comics."

"When he grows up, he will like it." It was Ìtùnú's turn to tap the side of his head with his stubby index finger.

By the time they got to Şolá's home, they had wearied Edward with their quibbling. Somehow, the home beat his expectation even though he didn't know what he expected of it. He could see a few broken tiles and wears on seats, the home wasn't burnished but there were lustrous drapes and a plush TV cabinet matching the centre table. It wasn't squalid.

"Hey, Edward."

"Nice place."

"Don't do that."

“Do what?” Edward asked, creasing his forehead.

“When you compliment something about me, my brain goes into overdrive thinking of everything wrong with what was complimented. So, when you say nice place, I think of all the things that are not nice in this place.”

Edward curved the sides of his mouth and nodded. “Interesting. Now I know what I can use to torture you.”

She chuckled and shook her head. She walked past him to the children. “Thank you for helping out with the school run.”

Edward waved her off. “I had a swell time with these champs.”

“I bet you did.” Şolá said. “Children, what do you say to uncle Edward?”

“Can we do this again tomorrow?” Barnabas asked at the same time Déyemí and Sandra chorused, ‘thank you sir.’

Edward laughed. “Well, mummy, can we do this again tomorrow?”

All eyes were on Şolá. “Wa.. wait, I’m sure uncle Edward has other things to attend to... he won’t be free tomorrow.”

“You don’t say, mum.” Edward cooed with a nasal voice.

“Mummy, please...”

“He’s not complaining...”

Şolá shook her head. “Maybe some other time.” She clapped her hands, ignoring their groans of protest. “Hurry along, go to your room to change.” After they left the living

room, she turned a stern look on Edward.

Edward knew then that he had overstepped himself.

"They mean the world to me."

"I know that."

"Do you, really?"

Edward kept mum.

Şolá inhaled and stared off at a wall. "Kúnlé begged for weeks before I allowed this little compromise. I know they need a male presence, but..." she puffed her cheeks and exhaled. Edward wanted to cup those cheeks in his palms. Were they soft? Did that black spot have a lumpy feel? All of a sudden, he wanted desperately to find out. To trace a line on that cheek... *focus, Edward focus*. "I don't want to delude them. Déyemí sort of sank into himself for months after his Dad's death. They've experienced some things..."

*What things, Şolá? What are you thinking about? What are your burdens? I want to share them.*

"You want to know if I'll be in for the long haul."

Edward helped her form her thoughts.

"And I know that's an unfair thing to demand of anyone. You're not obliged to..."

"They're not a burden, Şolá. I genuinely enjoy their company."

"But for how long? What happens when you move away or travel or when they start hoping you show up for visiting days and open days... I don't want to leave them high and dry. Moreover, I don't know you well enough."

"What do you want to know?"

"Mummy!"

*Ugh! Barnabas!*

"Mummy! I'm hungry! If I don't eat now, I might just die!"

"You will not die in Jesus's name. You will live to declare the goodness of the Lord in the land of the living."

"Amen but food! Food please!"

Şolá was already turning her heel to the kitchen. Edward turned with her.

"Let's hang out one of these days, Şolá, let's get to know each other better."

Şolá scoffed. "And while I'm out rendezvousing with you, where would my children be?"

"In school."

"Ah-ha, so you want to get me fired."

"I'll come to your office."

The mere thought made Şolá's eyes go wide with horror. She imagined Rogers barging into her office like he always did to find a man with her. In mere seconds, the whole salon would know that Şolá had a love interest.

"No way."

"I'll pick you up for lunch tomorrow."

"Mummy! I'm hungry!"

Edward wanted to snap at Barnabas. Şolá opened the freezer and picked a Tupperware containing frozen stew.

"You can't say no to my request to pick the kids and say

no to picking you up for lunch. That won't be fair."

Şolá put the Tupperware in the sink and turned on the tap. The idea of a date tickled her in a way she hadn't felt in a long time. Her youth revived within her. She loved her children and she could give anything just for their well-being, but her life had been monotonous lately. It had become a monochrome of duty and responsibility. She could do with some excitement.

*When last did you let down your hair, Şolá?* Tola (who now lived in Abuja with Moses and Christy) had asked over the phone the last time they spoke. *Go out. Live a little. There's fun in abundant life.*

"Fine."

Edward wanted to hug her. *Is this how love starved I am? God abeg, as soon as you give me clearance, I'm marrying this woman.*

Later that night as he paced the hallway of his house, praying in tongues, Şolá was in his mind and scenes of he, Şolá and her children shuffled themselves on the table of his heart.

In Şolá's home, Barnabas Itunú was in one of his moods. He was crying and wouldn't sleep. Şolá had had a long day and wasn't ready for his antics. She told Déyemí to attend to him, she had to retire for the day. Barnabas said he wanted his mum. Şolá marched to the room he shared with his brother, ready to give him a lecture on how selfish he was.

"I want a daddy." He mumbled with a pout. "Why can't I have a daddy like my mates?"

Şolá sat on his bed. This was the exact reason she wanted to keep Edward away from her home. Barnabas had not thrown

one of these 'I want a daddy' tantrums for some weeks and Şolá was starting to think the boy had finally outgrown it... no, not outgrow. He might not have outgrown the need for a father, but she hoped that he was finally coming to terms with the fact. This new stir she was seeing in her son was triggered by Edward's intrusion.

*I never should have allowed him. I never should have succumbed to Yẹmí's plea.*

She looked at Barnabas and her heart broke. In his face she could see Femi. She touched his face and traced a line on his nose, Femi's aquiline nose on a smaller scale.

"Ìtùnú, you have a Daddy."

"I know God is my Daddy but I want a Daddy I can see."

"God sees you, Ìtùnú and he loves you. Talk to him."

Ìtùnú did the spasmodic jerking of knee and shoulder that was his signature move of recalcitrance. "I want a Daddy!"

Şolá stood to her feet. "That is enough, Barnabas. You will keep shut now and go to sleep."

"It's not fair. All my classmates have daddies."

"You think it's easy on me? You think I enjoy rising every day to feed three mouths and keep the house and work my job all alone? You think it's fair that I go to bed with a splitting headache almost every day? You think what you are doing right now is fair?" The cork had come off the troubled wine bottle and all the froth was blasting on Ìtùnú's face. Ìtùnú so named because he was a child of comfort was now discomfiting his mother. But she loved him. He was still her son of



encouragement even though at that moment she wanted to toss him through a window.

Şolá put trembling fingers on her forehead. "Goodnight."

She left the room. Barnabas lay on his bed, quiet. But he didn't stop crying, he just made sure to bury his sobs in his pillow.

"Come." Déyemí whispered. He had banned Barnabas from climbing his bed, since the boy never made it after scattering it. He had the ability to lay on a bed for five minutes and somehow manage to throw the sheets off the bed. But tonight, he welcomed him. He watched him as he clambered up.

"We will soon have a Daddy." He whispered conspiratorially.

Even in the dark, Déyemí could see his brother's eyes go wide. "Really? Who? How? Is Daddy coming back from the grave like Jesus? Oh my God! That's going to be so cool. We're going to have like another Easter for..."

"Shush. Bring down your voice. Daddy is not rising from any grave."

Barnabas' shoulders slumped. "How are we now going to get a daddy?"

"Let's ask God to give us a new Daddy." Déyemí said, deciding against his initial instinct to tell Barnabas all his heart. The child lacked tact and he'd run his mouth by morning. He kept the fact that he'd pressed his ear to the passage curtain and

overheard Uncle Edward asking his mum to lunch to himself. Barnabas prayed and slept off.



“Why won't you let me drive into your office premises?” Edward asked as soon as Şolá entered his car.

“Good afternoon, Edward.”

Edward shook his head. “So, where are we going?”

“Somewhere close. There's a restaurant on the next street.” Şolá supplied.

Edward pursed his lips as he started the car. “I'd have loved to take you to D's place. But it's quite far and I don't want to spend the whole time in traffic. You look good by the way.”

“You've forgotten what I told you about compliments so quickly?”

“Maybe you need to learn to take compliments.”

“I've known you for how long and you're already helping me make better life choices. Wow.” Şolá's statement dripped with sarcasm.

Edward laughed. “So, what do you want to know?”

“How old are you?”

“Thirty-seven, you?”

“You don't ask a lady for her age.”

“Double standards.”

“Are you married? Slightly married? Do you happen to have someone with whom you might have accidentally entered

Ikoyi court?"

Edward guffawed. "What the hell?"

"This is Lagos. You can't be too sure."

"Educate me, what does slightly married mean?"

"You tell me. Isn't it men like you that use those lines?"

They pulled up in the parking lot of the restaurant. Edward got down quickly and went around the car to open Şolá's door. He stretched his hand to open the door but she had already opened it and had stepped down. She gave him a quizzical look.

"What are you doing?"

"Trying to be a gentleman."

She scoffed.

At the restaurant entrance, she beat him to opening the door and as though to mock him, she pulled out a seat for him.

"I'm a mother of three, really bold of you to assume you can look after me."

Edward shook his head.

"You've not answered the question."

"Oh, I'm slightly married."

Şolá appraised him for a bit. "Let me see your left hand."

"You're a palm reader?"

She shook her head.

"An astrologer?"

"No."

"You believe in zodiac signs?"

"God, no! Just give me your left hand."

Edward did reluctantly. She studied his ring finger, looking out for the fair imprint rings leave at the root of the finger. Edward laughed and waved a waiter over.

"I'll have the regular." Şolá told the waiter.

"I'll have what she's having."

Şolá smiled.

She kept asking questions. Where he worked, about his family... he was talking about his family when their food arrived. Edward was surprised.

"Fufu is your regular on a work day?"

Şolá stood up and walked over to a sink where she washed her hands before she returned. "I need the energy."

"Interesting. I hate the smell of fufu."

"Oopss... Next time, don't presume. You can order something else."

"And this would waste?"

Şolá shrugged. "I could help out."

Edward burst into laughter. "I'll eat it." *Let me see what you enjoy in it.*

As they ate, Şolá said it was her turn to spill the beans. She talked about her family. About Femi's sudden demise and all that happened thereafter. She gave every gory detail with an air of indifference.

Edward's heart hammered in his chest. How could she speak with ease about seeing a decapitated body?

She talked about her experience with the Morris family. The different encounters she had and all the while, she ate her

fufu and ègúsí.

*Do I really want to get into this? This is Amara all over again.  
Why do I always find myself with women who have baggage?*

"Why are you telling me all these?"

Şolá shrugged. "We are here to get to know each other better, aren't we?"

"You are trying to spook me. You're trying to scare me off."

"Is it working?"

"Why?"

"If you're going to run eventually, now is the best time, Edward. And if you choose to run, there'll be no hard feelings." She glanced at her watch. "I've got to run; lunch hour is almost over."

Edward drove her back to the office. She alighted few buildings from the office and walked the rest of the way. Edward watched her.

"God, why am I always getting into this kind of situation?" He muttered.

He had thought accepting Şolá's kids would be the hardest hurdle to scale. He'd been thinking and praying about her for weeks. Since the second teens' hangout where Déyemí introduced him to Şolá, he'd nursed an interest. He'd decided to accept and love Şolá's children as his own. He'd loved Déyemí from the start. He loved Barnabas and Sandra. He'd been praying for them. He thought of how the Nwafors accepted him. How they'd stayed by him through the years, even when

he hurt them. He'd love Şolá's children the same way. If Şolá agreed to be with him, he'd adopt her children wholeheartedly.

But now that he'd learned about her past and the shadows that loomed over her children, he wasn't so sure. Déyemí had been through an initiation ritual before? Yes, it failed because of God's intervention but what happens if the shadows resurface sometime in the future?

Wouldn't the Morris family come at him if he tied the knot with Şolá? Wouldn't they want to strike at the man who dared to adopt their spawn? Fear took hold. Şolá had given him a chance to run.

*Run, like you always do.*

*"God, what should I do?"*

*What do you think love is?*

*Love is commitment. He thought. Love is putting the needs of another before mine. Love is giving. Love is forgiving.*

*Do you love her?*

The question stayed with him for the rest of the day. When he left the office later that day, he called Mr. Nwafor.

*"Good evening, Daddy."*

*"Eddy,"*

*"Daddy,"*

*"Eddy,"*

*"Daddy,"* He said with a chuckle.

*"Eddy, is it good?"*

He knew what Mr. Nwafor was talking about. It had been a while since he last heard from him. "I'm sorry sir. Are

you around?"

"Yeah, why?"

"I want to come by the house."

"Don't darken my doorstep if you don't have good news for me."

He smiled. "I might have good news."



Jáde walked to Terrence's studio, she stopped at the door to do a breathing exercise before she opened the door. She saw him sprawled on a mat with a Bible open beside him. She had expected to meet an empty studio. She'd come here to cry, to mourn her lost home. But there he was. Today was Friday and he should have taken off.

"Was your flight rescheduled?"

"I cancelled it."

She should be happy. She should feel relieved. But all she felt was rage. Did he think cancelling an exhibition would cancel out his sins?

She scoffed. "You should have gone. You really should have gone."

Terrence lifted his eyes to meet hers. "Are you going to ask for a divorce?"

She chuckled. "Why would I do that to myself? I didn't get married with the plan of having a failed marriage. Why would I punish myself for your sins?"

"Jáde..."

"I will punish you, without punishing myself."

"I'm sorry for betraying your trust, Jáde. I'm deeply sorry for dishonouring you and our marital vows."

"Don't be dramatic." She moved closer to him and lay beside him, moving her hands over his bare chest. "I want you."

He withdrew.

"You won't deny me my nuptial rights. That would be violation of our marital vows all over again."

She confused him. He could hardly recognise her. What was she doing?

When it was over, Jádesqlá sat up smiling and Terrence felt cracked inside. When he was a child, his mum would hold him by the wrist, if he did something wrong, and slap him with his hand. When he cried, she'd say, "*Ogini?* Why are you shouting? Is it not your hand? Are you not the one who slapped yourself?" He felt like that little boy again. Jádesqlá had used his hand to slap him. What transpired between them was not love, it was retribution. She used him to take her revenge on him.

Terrence covered himself up with a blanket and faced the wall. While his body took pleasure, his soul bled. While their bodies were in intimate contact, they had never been farther apart. He felt reduced, used.

*But I deserve it. If I feel this way, how must she have felt finding about Annette? I deserve it.*

He listened as she rose up and walked out of the studio.

*God, please heal us.*



Jádesọlá went into her room, picked Nífẹmi from his cot and started breastfeeding him even though she breastfed him before she went to Terrence's studio. She needed the calmness breastfeeding afforded her. Tears burned her eyes. She lifted her head and blinked.

*Go back. I won't shed a tear on his account. Go back.*

She blinked again and the tears vanished. Her phone rang. She ignored the call from 'Pastor Uduak'. She wasn't ready to listen to a lecture on how she had to pray and fight for her home. She wasn't going to fight for anybody who didn't think she was worth fighting for. She wasn't done with Terrence. She'd cut him up and watch him bleed out. He'd regret ever causing her heartache.



## CHAPTER THIRTEEN

### ART ATTACK

The night Nathan got back with Rénikè, he had just finished praying and his eyes were purged of sleep. He was bored, lonely. He wanted someone to talk to, someone he could bare his heart to. He wanted the kind of camaraderie that existed in romantic relationships. So, he texted Rénikè. He'd missed her and he figured they could work around their differences. He still liked her, but he wasn't sure she'd feel the same way.

*You won't know if you don't try.*

She did feel the same way. They talked over video call till 12 am that night. Rénikè said her days without him lacked the enthusiasm that came with looking forward to telling him all about the day. He chuckled and said he felt the same way.

She talked about the stress that came with working in the sales department of a company, having to wheedle clients to make sales and sometimes she just wanted to scream, '*ẹ sàánú mi*, (have mercy on me) my pocket and KPI need this.' Nathan talked about his Dad's health and God's dealings with him lately. Rénikẹ̀ said, 'hmm... it is well o. How are you now holding up?'

"Well, it's not all bad. My mum's here now. So, I'm delivered from noodles."

Rénikẹ̀ shook her head. "You better learn to cook. If you don't know how to cook, who will marry you?"

Nathan laughed. "I know how to cook *jo*."

She sneered. "I hear you."

"No, I'm serious. I actually know how to cook. I just don't like cooking."

And on and on they bantered till Rénikẹ̀ started yawning every three minutes. When the call was over, Nathan had a wide grin on his face. He considered how silly he was to have let a small disagreement ruin the beautiful thing he had going with Rénikẹ̀. He decided then that he'd ask her to be his girlfriend the next time they went out.

Before his four o'clock alarm got the chance to wake him, Edward's call did. When he looked at the screen of his phone and saw that Edward was calling him, his instinctive reaction was panic. He feared that he had overslept. He looked at the time on his phone 3:49am. He exhaled. Why was Edward calling him so early?

"Hello,"

"Nathan, sorry to disturb your sleep. Can you spare a few minutes?"

"What's up?"

"Ladé, she has gone into labour."

Nathan sat up. "Is there a problem?"

"No, David just called and asked that I intercede. Are you game?"

"Yeah, sure."

*Nooooo. I want to sleep.*

By the time they finished praying, Nathan knew he couldn't go back to sleep without either turning up late at work or missing his quiet time. But that didn't stop him. He set five alarms between 5:30 and 5:45. He slept through them all, he even did a slow dance with Rénikè in his dream to the tune of his alarm.

What awakened him was his mother's voice. "Have they finally fired you?"

"Jesus! What time is it?"

"To seven."

Nathan jumped out of bed and made a beeline for the bathroom.

*God, I'm sorry. I'll make time in the night, I promise.*

He got caught in traffic which wasn't exactly a surprise and to pass time, he started chatting with Rénikè. He joked that she was the reason he ran late and in response she said she hoped they'd make him work extra hours.

-My boss is not wicked like...-

-Like who? Finish am if e sure for you-

-Like your boss now-

-Omo. I just received a mail from him o-

-Who-

-My boss na. classic speak of the Devil case-

-Further proves the point that he's the Devil. Shey you did not tear your shoe on your way to work today?-

-You're not nice.

-Nateee! Who will save me from the office bayi ntori Oloun? How am I supposed to get to Onikan before 10:30?-

-What are you going there to do?-

-Apparently, there's a client I need to see. prospective client actually-

-Tears. Order UBER sharply-

They switched to video call and walked each other through their day. Nathan propped his phone up against a stack of books on his desk and listened to her through his ear buds while he worked. Keeping the company's books didn't seem so laborious with Rénikẹ's company.

She got to Oníkàń at 10:45 and had to end the call to take her boss's call. Few minutes later, she called Nathan again.

"That man didn't even let me explain, he was just shouting at me. 'Why would you go late to see a potential client?' What was he expecting? That I'd fly?"

Nathan chuckled. "You could have told him to provide helicopter next time."

Rénikè scoffed. "That miser? If I hear. We'll talk later. Pray for me o, pray that I do this pitch right and close this deal."

"Yes ma. Sha watch your steps before you tear your shoe again."

"Go away jo."

Later that day, Edward stopped by his office.

"Nathan, how you dey?" Edward stretched his hand to Nathan for a handshake.

Nathan shook his hand and bowed slightly. "Boss, good afternoon sir."

"Stop this thing *abeg*."

"What shall I offer my lord, the king?"

"Wine. Straight from the winepress."

Nathan chuckled. "My lord no go vex oh, na water we get." He opened his fridge and dropped a bottle of water before Edward. "Ladé don born?"

Edward scoffed. "You think it's that easy? When Moní had Sèyí, she was in labour for almost 20 hours."

Nathan gasped. "20 hours of pushing?"

Edward laughed. "No now. This thing has stages. Wò ó, *bóyá* you should ask google o. I'm not here to discuss childbirth."

Nathan smiled. "What's up, boss? Anything for your boy?"

"Actually, yes. I have something for the man of God."

Edward told Nathan about the teenagers' hangout he'd been hosting for a couple of months and the progress they'd

made so far.

"Wow. That's really nice o."

"Yeah, thanks man. Now, this is where you come in, I want you to minister at the next meeting."

Nathan exaggerated his shock and they laughed.  
"When sir?"

"Next week Saturday."

"Okay, topic *ńkọ*?"

"As the spirit leads, sir."

"No wahala na, but please remind me as the day draws closer o."

"No problem sir. We'd send follow up mails to the guest minister."

Nathan eyeballed Edward. "Guess what?"

"What?"

"I want to ask *Rénikẹ* out to dinner this weekend."

Edward frowned, chuckled and wiped his smile off when he saw that Nathan wasn't smiling. "You're serious?"

"Yes now."

"I... wow. I certainly didn't see that coming. You guys have started talking again?"

With a smile, Nathan nodded. "I've decided to put the past behind me and appreciate the gift that *Rénikẹ* is. After all, what is Christianity without love walk?"

"Hmm..." Edward glanced at his watch. "we go see *na*; I have to go now." He shook Nathan's hand before he left his office.



"How far? Any update?" Edward asked as soon as he rounded a corner and saw David pacing and biting his nails.

"Nothing o. God, abeg."

They could hear Ladé's screams.

"How hard is it for God's sake? Why won't the child just come out once and for all?" David was on the brink of tears. He lifted his eyes heavenward. "God, please don't let my wife die abeg, abeg, abeg."

"*Fara balè* (calm down). Nothing will happen to Ladé."

"Is it not to just come out of the womb? Why is this child taking his sweet time?"

Edward shook his head. "Didn't you say you were going to read pregnancy for dummies?"

"Yeah, I did and a ton of articles online."

"Then you can imagine that birthing is not that easy."

"I just want my wife to be fine. I want to be sure she's fine."

"Then go in there."

"They sent me out."

"Why?"

"My panic wasn't helping. This child should come out now. The time is 8:37pm, *haba*. Since morning."

"Look at things from the child's point of view for a moment, David. If you were the one being born into Nigeria, are you going to be eager to come out?"



David chuckled and the tears in his eyes spilled. "I hate you, Edward. I hate you with all my heart for making me laugh while my wife is in there hanging in the balance and-" David's breath hitched as he heard the cry of a child. He looked at Edward and covered his trembling lips with a fist.

A nurse met them with a smile. "Congratulations, Mr. Kómoláfé, come and cut the placenta."

David erupted with a squeal. He jogged on a spot and pummelled fists into the air. "I don born. I don born. I don born."

Edward guffawed. David gave him a bear hug.

"I don born. I don born."

"Baba calm down. Technically, no be you born."

David hissed. "Is that how to congratulate a new dad?" He followed the nurse.

Edward's cheeks hurt from grinning but he couldn't stop. His heart was bursting at the seams with joy. He watched David hold his child. David was a mess of snot and sniffles.

"Do you want to carry him?" David asked, turning to Edward.

Edward shook his head. The child looked so fragile, so peaceful in his sleep that Edward feared hurting him. He touched his slick hair.

"God is good." Edward mouthed.

David nodded.

On his way out of the hospital, he took out his phone to call Şolá. He'd made up his mind. Since he visited Mr. Nwafor,

he'd prayed and decided to stay with her but he kept procrastinating reaching out because of hesitation and the fear of the unknown still niggling in his heart. But something about seeing David with his son gave him the push he needed. All of a sudden, he couldn't wait to call Yemí and siblings his children and most of all, he couldn't wait to have Şolá. To have her and hold her. To have her and be held by her, for as long as he lived.

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Ijeoma looked at the e-flier on her phone one more time and assured her Dad that they were at the right address.

"When am I coming to pick you?"

"Three pm sir." Ijeoma said as she opened the door.

"Thank you, Daddy."

"You won't hug me?"

Ijeoma rolled her eyes, but she gave her Dad a hug. This was a major show of support on his side and she was truly grateful. Whatever it was uncle Edward told him had worked magic.

The day Mr. Ethan came to their class to pitch his artist bootcamp to SS 1 students, she didn't sign up partly because the thought of meeting new people didn't intrigue her and mostly because she knew her Dad wouldn't allow her. Then the conversation with uncle Edward happened and her Dad told her he was going to let her do whatever she wanted provided she knew what she was doing.

She went to school the next day and asked the class captain for the list of students who were signing up for the

camp. She skimmed over the names and stopped when she saw her name. The name of the girl that surfaced in her dreams every often, the girl whose kinky afro called for her attention every time she was in class. The girl who made her want to hide when she was close. The girl whose voice she listened for when the other girls in class talked. Even now, as Ijeoma looked at the name etched with her squiggly penmanship, she could hear her voice in her head, in all its rich glory. Every time that voice called her name, which had only happened three times, her heart stopped. The first time Adaolisa called her was when they were in JSS 2. Ijeoma was on her way out of class and Adaolisa wanted to know if she was going to the tuck shop. Ijeoma nodded. All of a sudden, she forgot how to speak. She became acutely aware of her rumpled pinafore and the acne on her face.

“Can you help me get short bread?”

Ijeoma nodded again. Short bread for snacks. She only took short bread when her Dad deemed a special treat necessary. Her eyes lingered on Ijeoma's neck, on the tendons that tensed and relaxed with her speech.

“Thank you.” She reached into her bag and pulled out her purse. She held out a thousand naira note to Ijeoma.

Ijeoma took the money. Her breath caught in her throat when their fingers brushed. She walked to the tuck shop wondering what was wrong with her. She had never felt something like *that* before. She didn't know what to call it. Later, she'd feel the same kind of shyness around other girls, girls like Ini Momodu.

5.) *Adaolisa Ogbonna*

Ijeoma wondered what Adaolisa would look like in mufti. What kind of clothes would she wear? Would she wear makeup? What kind of art would she create?

"Are you going to write your name or not?" The class captain snapped.

Ijeoma swallowed, took out her pen and wrote her name.

6.) *Ijeoma Maduka*

Ijeoma sighed, standing before the door and an urge to call her Dad and run back home overtook her. Her breathing became shallow. This was an entirely new environment. How would she cope? There'd be so many new faces. There would be interactions; at the thought of having to interact with new people, a shiver ran up her spine.

She took out her phone to call her Dad.

"Hey."

She turned around to see a short dude with round glasses.

She made a sound that was supposed to be 'hey' but sounded more like 'hmm'.

"Is this the place for the bootcamp?"

She nodded and shrugged.

The boy extended a hand. "Tími,"

She took his hand. "Nice to meet you, Tími. I'm IJ."

*Arrgghhh! So, it begins.*

Tími pulled the knocker and let it clang against the gate.

"It's not locked," someone called from inside.

They stepped into the compound to see a few other teens already settling into the outdoor space. Ijeoma took in the space. There were easels, tubes of paint, brushes, sketch pads and a projector set up. There was a table with novels opposite where the folding chairs were arranged in a semicircle. She found herself sidling to the books, picking them, examining their titles, reading their blurbs and synopsis, and marvelling at the brilliance of a particular cover design. Her eyes caught a small frame propped on the table. It had letterings within a thin, almost imperceptible, rainbow ring. It read: *to be queer & black is to walk out of the closet into a casket* – Donte Collins.

The question she'd been asking Google for weeks came back to the fore of her mind. *Am I a lesbian?*

The gate opened and Adaolisa waltzed in. She donned a black top and black shorts with a street-stylish jean hat. Her shorts gave her long olive legs plenty room for show. Ijeoma didn't realise she was staring until Adaolisa clocked her. Her eyes skittered away as a feeling of embarrassment tumbled over her.

*Are you not?*



Jádesọlá ordered an original acrylic painting by Kata Billups on eBay and the purchase was on Terrence's tab. The 60 inches piece cost nine hundred and ninety-seven thousand

dollars and that single purchase plunged Terrence's account in deep red. That was the goal.

When Terrence got the billing mail, his heart cut. He raved and shouted and smashed chinás. Jádesqlá's triumphal smile only served to infuriate him. He called her names. She was unreasonable. She was wicked. She was vengeful and vindictive. How could she? Did she know how hard he had worked to gather the money she squandered in a heartbeat?

Jádesqlá said nothing.

Terrence wanted to strangle her and this urge made him realise that mammon really had him in a chokehold. He found himself wishing that Jádesqlá cheated back on him like he did, instead of tossing his precious coins in a river. His reaction was actually what she'd hoped to achieve and, in that moment, all he felt towards her was hate. A million dollars, gone. Just like that.

Jádesqlá installed the piece in their room, knowing full well that every time Terrence saw it, he'd squirm in guilt and anger. It would be a relic, an evidence of his sin.

*Where did you learn this, Jádesqlá?*

She ignored the voice of the Holy Spirit, took a step back and appraised the work.

*When have I ever dealt with you according to iniquities? Where did you learn this, daughter?*

Jádesqlá chewed on her lower lip. *I won't cry. I won't cry. I'm the victim here. Terrence wronged me.*

*And you are grieving the Holy Spirit. Come aside. Come spend some time with me, daughter.*

She closed off her heart. She was not interested in a retreat or the gaslighting of scriptures. God will tell her to forgive, to submit, to turn the other cheek. She wanted none of it.

Her phone started ringing. She hissed. But when she saw that the caller was Ladé, her frown dissolved. Her mind went back to the last time they spoke and she figured Ladé must have put to bed. She picked the call.

“Hey, Ladé.”

“Jádesqlá, I want to say well done. Ha, women dey try.”

Jádesqlá forced a chuckle. “I take it you’ve put to bed.”

“My sister, I have o. A constantly-crying baby boy.”

“Awww, I’m happy for you. Congrats sis.”

Ladé sighed. “I just wonder how people go through this and still decide to have another child.”

Jádesqlá scoffed. “It’s a toxic relationship, what exists between women and the whole pregnancy, child-birth, child-rearing cycle. In an odd way, after some time, you’ll start missing being pregnant.”

“What’s there to miss?”

“Different things for different people. I love the pregnancy glow. I love the unhinged mood swings. See pregnancy has its own pains o, but the fact that I get a nine-month respite from menstruation, PMS and ovulation bloating is a big perk.” Jádesqlá chuckled, then she became quiet, “and he’s a lot more considerate when I’m pregnant.” She said eventually.

Ladé remained quiet.

"It's not like he's not considerate on other days, but he actually pampers me..." she chuckled, "treats me like a crate of eggs and trust your girl now, I don't miss a chance to maximise spoiling."

"Jádesọlá 'Fried Rice' Osigwe."

"You're still as dry as ever."

"I wish you were here, Jádesọlá."

"Stop all these mushy nonsense abeg and send pictures of the baby."

Ladé tutted. "Whatever. How are you?"

"Fine."

"How are you really?"

Jádesọlá sighed. "You don't want to know."

"Duh,"

"Do you know how autoimmune disorders work?"

"Huh?"

"Autoimmune disorders, do you know how they work?"

"It's Ladé on the line, not Ìyanu."

"Let me give you small schooling. When the body identifies a foreign body, it fights it off and destroys it to ensure its safety. Now, in the case of an autoimmune disorder, the body identifies part of itself as a foreign body, starts fighting it and ends up self-destructing."

"That actually happens?"

"Yeah."



"Quite dark."

"I know, right?"

"When did you get an MBBS?"

Jádesọlá chuckled. "It's a habit I picked when I was pregnant with Jachike. I read a lot of articles on pregnancy off the internet and it just sort of became a hobby. I was reading on rhesus factor when I came across the whole autoimmune disorder gist."

"Interesting..."

"I think I have something like an autoimmune disorder with my home. Deep down, I love Terrence and I don't want my marriage to fail. I don't want my children to grow without their father. I want to meet Terrence half way. I see that he's making efforts to make things right... I don't even know why I'm saying all these." She hissed. On the other end of the line, Ladé prayed under her breath.

"On the other hand," Jádesọlá continued. "A part of me thinks fighting Terrence is the only way to ensure safety. If I keep striking at him, he won't be able to hurt me. If I push him away, I'll be screening off future hurts. Even though I know he's not the enemy, I find myself treating him like he is... I know I've not made much sense. I don't know why I'm bugging you with all these nonsense talk."

Ladé smiled. "My dear, I understand you even beyond your explanation. I understand you because I've been there too. I have a question *shá*."

"What question?"

“Jádesọlá, why are we like this?”

Jádesọlá chuckled. “Like how?”

Ladé went on to narrate how she gave David a cold shoulder for three days and fought him for what she imagined. She told Jádesọlá of how they sought counsel and all mummy Uduak told them.

Jádesọlá laughed. “Why are we like this?”

“See, in this marriage thing there's no middle ground. We can either choose to partner with the Lord intentionally in building our homes or go with the flow of emotions and unwittingly work with the Devil. Now, where's the wisdom in that? That's why scripture says a wise woman builds her home.”

Jádesọlá sighed. “I've been ignoring Pastor Uduak's call, just like I've been ignoring the Lord.”

“You should talk to both of them. Listen, my mum is one person that understands what you're going through. She's walked in your shoes and worse and she knows where it pinches, and it's exactly the same with our High Priest. Talk to them, Jádesọlá.”

Jádesọlá drew a deep breath. “It feels good to breathe again.”

Ladé smiled. “We are praying for you. Moní and her husband are praying. Mummy and Daddy are praying.”

With tears in her eyes, Jádesọlá added, “Terrence has been praying too.” This time, she didn't fight the tears. She had done enough of fighting; it was time to unclench her fists.



Ethan was seated on the floor, looking at his laptop screen and tapping his pen on his notepad. He was trying to put together a little inventory of how the first day went.

"T, I think I've landed my first match."

Tájù scoffed. "Fairy godmother."

Ethan laughed and rose to his feet. He came to sit on the same couch as Tájù. Tájù hissed.

"Ethan, I'm trying to work here."

"Aren't you curious to know who the first couple would be?"

Tájù continued working on his iPad. "Who?"

"There's this girl, very deep in her shell but from the first rough sketch she did, it was easy to tell she's got real talent."

"And?"

"I think she has a crush on this other girl, Ada."

"How do you know?"

"Well, I caught her staring like four times."

Tájù shrugged. "Could be curiosity, friendly interest or anything at all."

Ethan sat up. "That's the thing, I looked through the registration data and it turns out they're from the same school. The same class." He tapped Tájù's thigh. "Listen now..."

"I'm listening."

"No, you're pressing iPad."

"I can multitask."

"Oh ho, who's the other guy?"

"Huh?"

"The one you're multitasking with."

Tájù smiled and dropped his iPad. "Happy now?"

Ethan smiled. "It gets better. The girl of interest looked vaguely familiar."

"Who do you know in Lagos?"

"Same thing I asked myself. I've been trying to place the face all day and it just clicked."

Tájù folded his arms. "Are you going to make me beg for the rest?"

Ethan curled his lips into a smile. "I saw her at the 'safe spot'." He dropped finger quotes with his hands.

Tájù raised his brows.

"Whooa... and you're sure it wasn't the finger of whiskey drawing images in your head?"

Ethan shook his head vehemently. "I remember vividly. I can even draw it."

Tájù smiled. "Then draw it. Draw it and show her."

Ethan's eyes widened. "Ah, yes."

Ethan jumped to his feet and ran to grab his Wacom tab. When he returned, he told Tájù that he allowed Ijeoma go home with a novel that had pro-LGBTQ themes. He was going to water their love and watch it bloom.

"I'm doing it, T! I'm living my freaking purpose."

Tájù reached for Ethan. "You are and I'm proud of you. Can I continue my work now?"



"I thought I succeeded in scaring you off." Şolá said after drinking from her glass.

Edward tsked. "I don't spook easily." He reconsidered. "Actually, that's not true. You got to me." He went on to tell her about his past relationship experience and a little about his childhood.

Şolá smiled. "Grace was angry at me. She said I pushed you away before giving you a chance and when I didn't hear from you for about two days, I thought it was true."

"And how did that make you feel?"

"Don't push your luck."

"I just want to know."

"I'm not going to discuss my feelings with you. We're not there yet."

Edward rolled his eyes. "See, I really like you, Şolá and I want..."

"God! What are you doing?" Şolá stopped him. "We are not there yet. I still have questions for you."

Edward sighed. "Ask, thy servant listeneth."

"Where do you see yourself in the next five years?"

"In Christ. You, where do you see yourself in the next hundred years?"

With a smirk, Şolá retorted, "With Christ."

The duo laughed.

"See, Şolá..."

"Every time you say see, you're about to *mis yarn* so no, I don't want to see."

Edward threw his hands up. "Fine. What's the next question? Let's get this interview phase over and done with so we can move and get *there*."

"What's your life philosophy?"

"*Que sera sera*."

Şolá pushed her tongue into her cheek. "You think you're sleek, you don't know you're selling yourself as unserious."

"I'm pretty serious about spending the rest of my life with you. Next question."

"Who's your best friend?"

"The Holy Spirit."

Şolá tried to keep a straight face. "Can you try to be serious?"

"David Kómóláfé."

"How did you meet?"

Edward rolled his eyes.

"You roll your eyes too much for a man close to forty."

"And you drag your feet too much for a woman equally close to forty."

"You don't know my age."

"Oh, I do. You're four months away from clocking thirty-six. No?"

Şolá reclined.

"You said it's rude to ask a woman her age, no one said

anything about asking their son."

Şolá chewed her lower lip, a failed attempt at concealing her smile.

"See, Şolá, I really love you."

She took the last morsel of her *fufu*, smacked her lips and said, "I see."

"Hmm?"

"Isn't that what you've been trying to do all day? Get me to see?"

"No, no, I want you to do more than see."

"What else do you want?"

"I want you to tell me how you felt when you thought you succeeded in pushing me away."

Şolá glanced at her watch. "Uh-oh, lunch hour is over."

Edward rolled his eyes.

Şolá shook her head. "If you roll your eyes at me one more time, I won't say yes."

Edward clamped his eyes shut and the two of them burst into laughter



## CHAPTER FOURTEEN

### WEEKENDS

Terrence did absentminded strokes on a canvas, trying to calm himself. He made a large smear of gold paint on the canvas and spread it out with a brush. He wasn't painting anything particularly. It might come to him with time or it might just turn out to be a kooky doodle. If he was lucky, it would turn out to be something beautiful in an obtuse way. But the outcome of what he was doing was the least of his concerns.

"God," He muttered, blasting gold across his canvas. "I've lost it all."

He poured white paint in a palette, mixed in red, then orange. What was his goal hue? What did it matter? He picked a tube of green paint on the shelf and added it to the mix. He stirred it all together.



"I've lost my career. I've lost my savings."

*You've lost nothing.*

He let out a mirthless cackle and poured his colour mix on the canvas, not minding the splatter on the floor and wall. As the fluid trickled down the surface of the canvas, he turned the easel this way and that so that the paint snaked down.

*You could have lost worse.*

"Oh, really? What could be worse?"

*You could've been lost yourself.*

The thought took hold and left him no chance of shaking it off. What if Jádesqlá didn't find out about his affair? What would have happened after the exhibition? He would've slept with Annette, no doubt. And then after that, what would have happened?

*What would all the money in the world count for, if you're lost?*

Terrence sighed.

He heard something that made him perk his ears.

*Hack!*

He stood up from his stool, to find out what was going on. When he got to the living room, he saw Jádesqlá doubled over, splitting the expensive piece she bought on eBay with a kitchen knife. Terrence erupted with a shout.

"What are you doing?"

Jádesqlá straightened and wiped sweat from her brows. She heaved and said, "What does it look like?"

"Frankly, it looks like madness."

Jádesọlá laughed and even that looked to Terrence like madness. What's funny? What had gotten into his wife's head?

Jádesọlá hacked off a portion of the frame and fed it into the fire place. Terrence' eyes widened, but he didn't say anything. Gradually, it dawned on him. The piece was her monument of revenge, the statement of his offence, but she was willingly letting it go up in flames.

*Even though. Even though. She could have sold it back and returned my money. Ugh! This woman.*

*Terrence. Your money or your wife?*

It sounded like something a Nigerian street robber would say to their victim and that amused him. *Your money or your life?* They'd say, pressing the muzzle of their gun to their victim's side.

He walked over to the fireplace and hunkered beside her. He watched her tears and sweat drip on the piece.

*"Let me help you with that."*

Jádesọlá shook her head. *"I've got this."*

*"Let's do it together."*

*"I need to do this alone."* She struck the wood with a grunt.

She broke off another fragment and threw it into the fire. She stopped to pant, bent down and continued hacking. When she was done, she tossed that last portion in the fire and stood upright. Terrence stood beside her.

Both of them watched the work of art hiss and crackle. Jádesọlá's shoulder grazed the bulge of her husband's arm as

they stood there. Neither said nothing but they could both feel the relief rising in them. With a sigh, Jádesọlá allowed her head loll on Terrence's shoulder. It was then he caught the whiff. He inhaled deeply to confirm what he was perceiving.

“Jádesọlá,” He faced her.

“Yes?”

“You are pregnant.”

Jádesọlá never perceived it herself, but she carried every child with the same smell.

“What nonsense are you saying? Have you forgotten I'm breastfeeding?”

Terrence smiled. “You are wearing *eau de pikin* again. If you're in doubt, you could take a test.”

“Breastfeeding prevents ovulation, you know I know these things.”

“Which is why I'm surprised that your online med school didn't cover the caveat, which is, breastfeeding is not an absolute contraceptive.”

“You're enjoying this, aren't you?”

“What can I say? My daughter is finally here.”

Jádesọlá lifted her eyes. “God please, let this one be a girl.”

“*Chineke*, from our lips to your ears.”

Their heartfelt prayer came a bit too late. The sex of the foetus growing in Jáde had been determined since conception. He was a boy and when he'd arrive eight months later, he'd have to wear the flower print clothes his presumptuous parents

bought. They will name him Dylan Ayomikun Osigwe.



Ijeoma sat on her bed, scrolling through Adaolisa's Instagram, reading through the comments and visiting the pages of commenters of interest. One particular @starznike\_ was under every post with effusive compliments and emojis—fire, fire, peach, drops of water. Ijeoma clicked on starznike's handle. Much to her disappointment, starz's page was private. She considered sending a request but decided against it. She dropped her phone and called to memory what happened last Saturday.

The first thing she noticed was that the main instructor, Mr. Ethan showed Adaolisa something on his tab and a knowing look passed between them before Ada chuckled. Ijeoma felt a press of curiosity. What were they chuckling about? What did he show her? She decided to nerve up and talk to Ada. How hard could it be? It was time for teamwork and networking. When the instructor put Ada, Ijeoma and Tímì on the same team, Ijeoma's heart rate increased. All the confidence she'd been building fizzled.

"Is the instructor toasting you?" It was Tímì who asked.

Ada tutted.

"I saw him showing you a meme or something and you were laughing."

"And how is that your business?"

"I think he's into you. If he's trying to make you laugh, he's probably into you."

"That bothers you?"

"Don't you see a problem here? Isn't it pervy for a teacher to be making passes to his students?"

Adaolisa laughed and folded her arms. "And you're the knight in shining armour that would rescue this damsel in distress from the predator, right?"

Tímì frowned, confused. "I'm just trying to look out for you."

"Why do you think I need your looking out?" Ada didn't wait for his response. "Because I'm a girl and that means poor, helpless victim, *okwaya*?"

Tímì looked to Ijeoma for help. "IJ, weigh in now."

Ada and Tímì were looking at her. "Let's work on our group assignment."

Adaolisa was the muse Ijeoma and Tímì drew from different perspectives. All the while Ijeoma worked on her sketch pad, she wondered if Mr. Ethan had truly been hitting on Ada and it made her resent him.

While the others left the compound, Mr. Ethan asked Ijeoma and Ada to wait behind. He needed their help with clearing things up. They stacked the folding chairs on the veranda of the house and Ijeoma was acutely aware of Ada's presence, of her own drabness. It became worse when Mr. Ethan excused himself. Ada suggested they clean the paint stains with alcohol.

“Where do we get that?”

Ada made a sound that stopped in her throat. “I’m sure we’d find some in his fridge. Come let’s check.”

Ijeoma was not sure about checking their host’s fridge without taking permissions and she voiced her concern.

“Who needs permission for anything?”

They found bottles of beer in the fridge. Picking one up, Ada gave Ijeoma the ‘I-told-you-so’ look.

As they cleaned the stubborn smears on all fours, Ada cleared her throat to break the silence and Ijeoma tensed. She focused more energy on scrubbing the floor.

“You know I’ve caught you staring a number of times.”

Ijeoma coughed.

“Don’t choke. There’s no crime in staring. It’s just that I wonder... is there something you want to say?”

Ijeoma shook her head, keeping her eyes on the floor. Ada sat in front of her.

“I like you, Ijeoma. I think you’re incredibly talented.”

Ijeoma’s chest heaved. She raised her eyes slowly, stopped at Ada’s jaw and looked back down.

“What are you afraid of?”

Ijeoma stayed quiet. Ada traced a line along her thigh. A soft gasp escaped Ijeoma’s slightly parted lips. She looked at Ada finally.

Ada smiled and returned to cleaning. “Like I told you before, you don’t need anyone’s permission to live. You only have to spread your wings to see that you can fly.”

Since then, her words stayed with Ijeoma in the day and played out before her mind's eye at night. In the mix of emotions swirling within her, there was also guilt. She'd been around church long enough to know that anything homosexual was sin.

She was in sin for what she felt towards Adaolisa. Her dreams were sin. The wandering of her thoughts was sin. God had to be mad at her and she didn't know what to do to win his approval, she didn't know what to do to squelch the thoughts dominating her mind.

Her phone beeped beside her. It was an Instagram DM from @oli.sa\_ada.

-I see you found me here-

*If I can't talk, at least I can type.*

-Yeah. Stumbled on your page-

She replied with laughing emojis.

-How is your day going?- Ijeoma asked.

-It's boring. Can't wait for Friday-

-Same here-

-Hmm... what are you looking forward to?-

-Seeing you- Ijeoma sent the message and figured it was too forward, too flirty. She quickly deleted it.

-Lmao. Why did you delete it? Why do you keep holding back?-

-You're right. I'm afraid. I've never been this way with anyone before and honestly it doesn't feel right.-

-It doesn't feel right?-

-Yeah?- Ijeoma was a bit unsure.

-By whose standards?-

-I don't know. It's just weird.-

The door of Ijeoma's room banged open and she threw her phone under a pillow. Odinaka gave her a mischievous grin.

"You're being sneaky, huh?" He inched closer to her bed. "Who are you chatting with?"

He made to grab her phone and Ijeoma didn't fight him.

"You think I don't know your password?" He took the phone and tried to unlock it. "You changed it."

Ijeoma hissed. "What do you want?"

"I want to know the boy you're chatting with."

"Why?" Ijeoma asked and folded her arms.

"So, I can fight him off."

"Why do you think I need you to fight anyone off for me? And why does it have to be a boy I'm chatting with? You boys flatter yourselves too much." She snatched her phone from him.

"Who vex you?"

She hissed. "Get out of my room, abeg."

"Nawa o, person no fit play with you?"

"Go and play with your mates." She lay down and faced the wall. She heard Odinaka walk away and close the door behind him. She picked her phone and continued chatting with Adaolisa.





“Rénikè, *ó ti sú mi*. I'm tired. I don't know... when is this miracle going to happen? Ehn? Is it after we're deep in debt? Why won't God show up now? Why the delay?”

Rénikè chewed her lower lip and adjusted her phone. “I wish I had all the answers. I hate to bring clichés, but Nate, God knows what he's doing. He's always right on time. This morning, I read the story of Lazarus and how Jesus raised him and it got my imagination going. I wondered what would have been going through the disciples' minds as they watched Jesus take his sweet time. Did they think that Jesus' seeming delay was due to nonchalance? Did they think that maybe he didn't love Lazarus so much? Did they secretly judge him in their hearts for prioritising ministry over the welfare of their friend?

“We know how the story goes and we know the end result. Mary and Martha said if Jesus had come earlier, things would have been better. But the arrival of Jesus at the time he did, was very significant. There are a lot of theological schools of thought on the importance of the miracle and the time it happened. I saw online that there was a Jewish belief about the soul of the dead lingering for three days and Jesus resurrecting Lazarus after four days showed him to be the resurrection and life. God is working with a bigger picture. He's working with a perfect plan. I think it's wise to trust him as we watch the pieces fall into place.”

Nathan inhaled. “It's not as if I don't know all these things. It just gets overwhelming at times. I-” He stopped, striving to contain his emotions.

"I can imagine. Even though Jesus knew Lazarus would come back to life, he still wept. Acknowledging the pain of the present does not mean we don't trust God, or we don't have faith in his promise. While rejoicing in hope, you can still allow yourself feel the pain of the present and God would not be offended at all."

Nathan nodded. They remained quiet for a bit.

"I should get back to work." Nathan finally said.

"Same here, I have some paperwork to sort through, but hey, don't end the call."

Nathan sniffed an inaudible chuckle. "We're the kind of couple service providers like."

"Oya, face your work."

Nathan opened his laptop and looked through a spreadsheet for the computational error that might be the reason behind the imbalanced sheet. Through his earbuds, he could hear Rénikè whistling a tune. He chuckled and his mind sang the song along.

*Nate, Nate, don't be late... It's almost eight... security go soon lock gate.*

He took his phone, minimised the video chat and pulled up Twitter. He typed a tweet.

'In this life, be with someone that  
can lift your spirit when you're down o.  
E really get why'

He knew some of his friends would come with inquisitive comments and quote tweets. He really wanted to tell

them. He wanted to show Rénikè off, to tell everyone who cared to listen how fortunate he was to be with a woman who was beauty and brains and wisdom. But they'd agreed to keep their relationship away from social media for the time being.

Nathan heard a knock on his door.

"Come in."

Zwalatha stepped in.

"Zee-Zee, what's up?"

"Who is Zee-Zee o?" Rénikè asked.

Nathan chuckled. "Colleague."

"Mr. Edward wants to see you in his office."

"Ah, I hope I'm not about to be fired?"

"I guess there's only one way to find out." Zwalatha was on her way out of his office.

"Rénikè, I'll talk to you later."

Nathan knocked on Edward's door before he walked in.

"Good morning, boss." He bowed his head.

Edward hissed and shook his head. "You better sit down."

"My lord, the king, let thine servant stand before thee."

"Ha ha ha, very funny. Sit down *jo*." Edward unplugged his phone from its charger and tapped on its screen. "There's this business summit in Johannesburg coming up next month, see the details." He passed his phone to Nathan.

"I've been invited but I won't be able to make it because of the whole Innoson deal and the journey I'd have to make to Nnewi. So, I want to send you to represent me."

Nathan's eyes widened. "God knows I need a break. I can't wait to see all the sights in SA."

Edward cleared his throat. "You're going for a business summit, not for vacation. If I were you, I won't get so excited."

"Let me be excited. I've never been to South Africa before."

Edward smiled. "I'm sure you'll enjoy it but hey, keep your focus sharp. I'm going to ask for a detailed report when you return and you'll make a presentation to the rest of the team."

"No problem, sir."

Edward nodded. "Hope you've not forgotten about Saturday's meeting?"

"Haba. I haven't now."

"I trust you. We wait on you, MOG."

"Abeg o, let's all be waiting on God."

Edward inched forward. "I might have gist."

Nathan leaned in. "Woman?"

Edward nodded.

"Ayyy! I'm all ears."

Edward wiggled his lower jaw. "Like you say, company time is not for banter. Don't worry, I'll host you and David one of these days and I'll spill the beans then."

Nathan hissed. "I don't like suspense."

Edward sniggered. "I know. But you need to learn patience."

"Is she someone I know?"

"Thank you for stopping by, Mr. Nathan. You are hereby dismissed." Edward reverted back to boss mode.

Nathan nodded slowly. "Nice one." He stood up and walked out. Edward had a good laugh. Just before Nathan turned the knob, Edward spoke.

"I'm getting married this year."

Nathan spun around and bolted to where Edward sat. He camped on his desk.

"Start talking. Start from the very beginning."

Edward was choking on laughter. He raised a hand. "Alright. She gave me her 'yes' the day before yesterday."

"Who is she? Start from the top, Baba."

And Edward did. He regaled Nathan with the tale of how he met and fell in love with Şolá. Nathan hopped off the desk and jogged on a spot howling with excitement. Edward tried and failed to calm him.

"This is why I didn't want to tell you. See how you're doing like hyena."

"Allow me to hyena o. Allow me to hyena in peace. God has broken the yoke."

"Which yoke?" Edward asked jabbing Nathan's side.

Nathan laughed. "You know now. Remain small I for recommend *orí-òkè* (prayer mountain) for you. But *ọpé ni f'Ólúwa, idè ti já* (thanks be to God, the yoke is broken)."

"Get out of my office." Edward said, giving him a shove.



When Nathan got to the hospital later that day, he was on the phone with Rénikè. She was caught in heady traffic, and had plenty to say about a client who made advances to her the previous day. In the ward, his mum lay beside his Dad, he was asleep but she was wide awake.

“Rénikè, let me call you back. I'm in his room already.”

His mother gave him a weak smile.

“Ìyá Mákànjú,” Nathan hailed her like most women at their home church did.

She exhaled. “How was work?”

Nathan raised and dropped his eyebrows. *So, so.*

“I've been hearing this Rénikè from your mouth for some days now.”

Nathan yawned and covered his mouth with the back of his hand.

“When am I meeting her?”

“Someday soon.”

“Tell me, what's she like?”

Nathan groaned.

“What? Do you know how long I've been praying for this day?”

Nathan tutted. “The day when you and I sit in Dad's hospital ward?”

She hissed. “You know what I mean. Answer my question.”

Something caught his side eye and he did a double take towards the door. He frowned a bit and excused himself from

the ward.

“Ìyanu?”

She turned to him. Nathan chuckled.

They caught up. How did he never know she worked in this hospital? She'd been doing posting in the paediatrics department before and that was why their paths never crossed. What was he doing in the hospital? He told her. She knew his Dad; she'd attended to him a couple of times. She apologised for her inappropriate behaviour the last time. Nathan brushed it off as nothing, even though he still felt self-conscious in her presence because a part of him feared that she'd see something to laugh about again. The little hiatus Ìyanu had to rest between seeing patients was spent on Nathan who had a ton of questions about medical practice, cancer and what her experience was like schooling at Babcock. If not for the beeping of her work line, their conversation would have continued.

Ìyanu drew air through her teeth. “I have to go.”

“Give me your number, so I can track you down when next I'm around.”

With a shrug, Ìyanu extended her hand for his phone. She punched in her number and handed it over.

“Thanks, see you around.”

Nathan watched her do a brisk walk down the corridor and decided that he'd take her as the sister he never had. Also, he could do with someone in the medical know to talk with when he was in the hospital.

When he entered the ward, his Dad was awake.

“Èyítáyò, doctor said I have less than a month left,” he paused for effect. “I thought you said God said...” he let his voice peter out.

Nathan smiled and nodded. “God said and God will. Daddy, God's word will never return to him void. The probability of that happening is zero.”

Elder Mákànjúplá sighed.

“Your family has been able to raise a million naira to support the bills. Aunty Àṣàbí really went over and beyond to rally the support.” Hearing his mum say this almost made Nathan sigh his relief.

*Ọpẹ́o (Thank God).*

Elder stayed deadpan. “I've become a burden to everybody.”

Nathan pulled his chair closer to the bed. “That's one way to look at it, but this is how I see it. You have people who love you and are ready to sacrifice for you.”

Mrs Mákànjúplá nodded and held her husband's hand. “We will be here till the very end, Débò.”

No one said anything for some minutes but Nathan could feel his mother's eyes on him.

“Táyò, how are you so strong?” She finally said.

Nathan smiled. “There's no special strength in me. I'm simply drawing upon the strength that comes from knowing God.”

“But the people that do know their God shall be strong, and do great exploits,” Elder mouthed with a small smile.



“Èyítáyò, you will read Daniel to me today.”

Nathan brought out his phone to read the Bible to his Dad, but on a whim, he searched Ìyanu out on WhatsApp and thumbed a text to her.

-Have you ever witnessed a miracle in the hospital?-

He went on to pull up his Bible app and he started reading. He'd read eight verses before Ìyanu's reply came in.

-Sorry, who is this?-

He tapped on the notification.

-It's Nathan-

He resumed reading.

-Oh. Lol. Weird way to start a conversation-

Elder Mákànjúqlá had started nodding off. Nathan stopped reading and focused on his chat with Ìyanu.

-Don't mind me. But have you?-

-No... This is a hospital now; miracles are more of a church thing-

-Lol. Don't worry, my Dad's healing will be the first you'll see-

-Hmm...-

Nathan sent a smiling emoji.

She said she had to go.

Before he left the hospital, he told her. She said she could walk him to the gate, since she had about an hour before her scheduled OR session.

Nathan yapped on and on about the many different ways he imagined his Dad's healing would happen. Ìyanu was

skeptical but Nathan was too gleeful to be dampened.

“Are you sure this isn't denial?”

Nathan laughed and said, “it's faith.”

Ìyanu pursed her lips and Nathan knew she was trying to pick her words carefully. Eventually, she sighed and said, “When next you're around, holla me.”

Nathan nodded. “I will. Enjoy the rest of your vigil.”

Ìyanu smiled. “Good night.”

And so, they fell into a routine for the rest of the week. Even when Ìyanu's call ended before evening, she'd wait to spend a few minutes with Nathan and that always turned to spending the entire time with his family in their ward. When she was on call, Nathan hung around to take up the crumbs of time sandwiched in her activities.

What were they discussing? The interplay between divine healing and medical intervention; what they had learned in their personal devotions; sermons they'd heard and recommended and to top it all, Ìyanu too was an avid fan of horror movies. At first, Nathan probed Ìyanu on how she was faring spiritually considering her choked up schedule. She told him she was getting by. She managed to read a chapter of scripture daily, listened to gospel songs and sermon bits while in traffic or between work duty. She was doing okay on the word end, but prayer was a struggle. Nathan suggested waking earlier but that was not workable seeing that she spent most of her nights and early hours of the day at work. They eventually agreed that stealing some time from her free time at work could

serve, plugging one ear to online devotions while setting lines, resetting lines that had *tissued* and praying under her breath would also work. Of course, she had to take out the earphones while clerking patients and when she was in the middle of a procedure that needed her full presence of mind.

They discussed books. Nathan was into Myles Munroe's writing and he recommended a few titles but Ìyanu got bored after reading a chapter or two. He suggested Kenyon, she didn't 'feel it'. Tozer got her snoring in minutes. Meyer was okay but she easily zoned out while reading. After going through his litany, Nathan realised that Ìyanu was not cut out for books. Sermons would have to do for now, but he told her that he'd be back with more titles. 'we must find your size.'

Both of them spoke about their romantic partners and they were clear on the fact that what they had was a platonic friendship. When Ìyanu showed Nathan Nsikak's picture, she beamed and said, 'see, he's an eye candy. I'm lucky.' Nathan tutted and said, 'yeah, he's okay. But have you met you? He's the lucky one here.' Ìyanu laughed and said, 'nice one. Continue mocking me.' And that confused Nathan. 'I'm not mocking you now. I'm serious. You're all that, take your flowers and move.' She seemed confused for a second, disoriented, but she quickly switched the subject. Nathan brushed it off. She was probably being excessively modest.

When they discussed in the ward, Mrs Mákàńjúọlá listened with rapt attention. She never said anything but Nathan could tell from the way her brows were always

furrowed that she was sponging in every word. Ìyanu herself was sound with scriptures even though she had a lot of questions that the average church person would consider sacrilegious. Nathan hated the sound of her beeping work line because it always marked the end of their gist.

Nathan was in the BRT bus on his way to work, scrolling through twitter when his mind just brought something random to fore. *Inguinal hernia*.

Did he hear it in a movie? He wasn't sure where he'd come across those words but they were now ringing in his mind. He tried to search it out on google but he didn't know how to spell it. He sent a voice note to Ìyanu.

"Hey, Ìyanu, please what's the meaning of inguinal hernia?"

But Ìyanu wasn't online. He decided to ask Bixby instead. Thankfully, Bixby brought up a lot of online articles on the subject. Nathan started reading one and he was so engrossed that he almost missed his stop.

He was still wondering about the disease condition when he walked into the company premise.

"Oga Nathan, I hail o."

Nathan waved without looking up. He recognised Mr. Ọkànbí's voice. "Good morning, Oga Rufus."

He continued walking towards the entrance.

"Anything for your boy?" Mr. Ọkànbí asked, scratching the back of his head with one hand and wagging a napkin with the other.

Nathan chuckled, but stopped when he sensed something in his heart. He turned to the man.

*It's him. He has an inguinal hernia.*

Now, Mr. Ọkànbí Rufus had been working with Ed's Motors as a cleaner since its inception. Nathan met him on the job. This man had never taken a sick leave, not that Nathan knew of. He stole a glance at the man's groin. Nothing seemed out of place. It was simply ridiculous to assume that this man had part of his intestine pushing towards his scrotum.

*You're not assuming.*

*Are you not?*

"This one wey you dey look me, like this. Show your boy love na."

Nathan sighed and approached him.

*Please for the sake of common sense, don't embarrass yourself.*

"Mr. Ọkànbí, how far now?"

*"Mo wà o (I'm fine), but you know, country hard..."*

Nathan hmmed and ohhed as Mr. Ọkànbí prattled about the national economy and his financial woes while fighting a full-blown war in his mind.

"Mr. Rufus, do you know Jesus? Are you born again?"

Mr. Ọkànbí laughed, wagged his napkin and looked away. "Oga Nathan, *e fí'yẹn lẹ* (spare me) I no dey do all these òyìnbó religion. Na the way of our fathers I dey follow. *Lààlú ògiri òkò, ni mò'ń sìn* (I worship lààlú ògiri òkò), na for Ojúẹlẹgba ojúbọ I dey worship. I no dey interested in Jesus."

Nathan sighed.

"Have you been feeling any inconvenience or pain..." Nathan wiped his forehead. "How do I say this?" He sighed again.

Mr. Rufus's face showed his confusion.

"Okay, you have something called inguinal hernia. Simply part of your *ifun* (intestine) is going outside your abdomen."

Rufus burst into laughter. "Wetin you smoke, oga?"

*I warned you. I told you not to make a fool of me, didn't I?*

Nathan swallowed. "It started when you were thirteen. You've never told anyone, but Jesus knows and he wants to heal you. He wants to save you. He loves you."

His peace returned. He had delivered the message, whether or not Mr. Rufus thought he was disillusioned. What mattered was that he had gotten the message off his chest. He turned to leave. Mr. Ọkànbí grabbed his arm and pulled him aside.

"What do I have to give this your Jesus for him to heal me? I get land for Èpé. I go sell am bring all the money to you."

Nathan shook his head. "You don't need to give God anything to buy your healing. Jesus already paid the price in full; for sickness, sin and death. Let me pray for you."

Mr. Ọkànbí dropped to his knees and spread out his arms. Nathan laid a hand on his shoulder and prayed for him. Mr. Ọkànbí started feeling his body without a hint of shame even as Nathan prayed. He cut Nathan's prayer short with a scream that curdled his blood.

“E don comot!”

*Just like that?*

It happened just like that. That day, Nathan preached the gospel to Mr. Ọkànbí, got him saved and filled with the Holy Ghost right there in front of the office building.

The following day was the Friday before Nathan's meeting with Edward's teens. Ìyanu asked him to help her buy KFC on his way to the hospital. She asked for his account details and he told her not to worry. She dropped three emojis rolling their eyes and told him if he'd not take the money, she'd not take the food.

Ìyanu was eating her chicken and chips and listening to Nathan recount the encounter with Mr. Ọkànbí the previous day when Ìyanu's work line started beeping. Nathan groaned but that was cut short by the ringing of his phone. It was his mum.

“Táyọ, come here now.”

Ìyanu and Nathan ran to the ward. Two doctors and a nurse were hard at work on Elder Mákàńjúọlá. At the same time, another nurse guided Nathan and his mum out of the private ward. Nathan heard the nurse working with the doctors say, 'he's crashing' and he knew that could not be good. That and the fact that the patient Monitor was singing a more violent tune.

That Friday, Elder Mákàńjúọlá went int

PART

III



## EPIGRAPH

O Lord, how great are  
Your works!  
Your thoughts are  
Very deep.

**Psalm 92:5 (NKJV)**



## CHAPTER FIFTEEN

### YOU ARE MINE

Ijeoma sat there watching the man's lips move but finding it hard to concentrate on what he was saying. Beside her, Kúnlé was taking copious notes on the left and on the right, Ini Mọmọdù was nodding her pretty head. She didn't fit in among these people. Her mind kept slipping to the previous day.

After the bootcamp session on Friday, Ijeoma and Adaolisa waited behind to clean up even though no one asked them. They stacked the chairs and arranged the books in silence, then it was time for them to clean the paint stains. Both of them went into the apartment and this time, Mr. Ethan was in the living room, but he wasn't alone. There was another guy there with him. Both of them half-sat, half-sprawled on a two-seater

sofa, tapping leisurely on their phones. Their proximity jarred Ijeoma, it was intimate in a way that evoked a slight squint yet they seemed totally at ease, completely unbothered by the fact that their legs were touching. It was difficult for Ijeoma to imagine any two males she knew in the same position. She just couldn't picture Odinaka so close to any of his male friends.

Ethan glanced at them. "T, meet two of my students, Ijeoma and Ada. Meet my... housemate?" he chuckled and Adaolisa too sniggered.

*What's so funny?* Ijeoma wondered.

"I'm Tajudeen Tijani." The housemate said.

Adaolisa shook his hand and said she was glad to meet him. Ijeoma simply followed suit.

"We want to steal a bottle from your fridge." Ada said.

"Ah-ha, I knew one was missing."

"We didn't drink it, we only used it to clean." Ijeoma quickly supplied.

They all laughed and that made Ijeoma feel awkward.

Mr Ethan said. "You don't have to explain, sweetheart."

Adaolisa splayed her hands, *you see*. "I keep telling her. She's too cautious. Live a little. The rules exist for one reason, to be broken."

They grabbed the beer and went outside. Ijeoma typed a message to Adaolisa.

-Is it just me or were those guys a little too close for comfort?-

Ijeoma heard the ping of Ada's phone and looked away,

but she was still watching her reaction through the periphery of her vision, so she knew when Ada smiled. Ada opened the beer bottle with her teeth before she replied.

-Well, they looked happy to me-

-Hmm... Are they like...-

-Like what-

-Nvm-

-I think you know the answer to your own questions and if you're looking for validation to spread your wings, I think you have it-

Ijeoma did not respond. She focused on cleaning. Her phone beeped again.

-If you spread your wings, you'll see that you can fly

Trapped in that shell of fear is an eagle that wants to

Soar over the rainbow-

Ijeoma drew a deep breath, acutely aware of Adaolisa's gaze.

-You're a natural with poetry-

-Do you think you'll like to have a housemate, someday?

-

Ijeoma's pulse hammered in her throat. She put her phone away and focused on scrubbing. Ada sighed her resignation and continued cleaning with her.

Her Dad called to inform her that he'd be picking her up within the next ten minutes. Ijeoma had been building her nerve and she decided she no longer wanted to be a coward. It was time to fly.

“Adaolisa, I won't mind having you as a housemate someday.”

Ada's eyes went wide and she sputtered laughs. “Knock me over with a feather.”

Emboldened by Ada's apparent impression, Ijeoma said. “I'm that type of eagle.”

“Ouuuuu.” Adaolisa ululated. “we should take some time out to write poetry together, I think you have it in you.”

But the glint in Ada's eyes hinted at more than poetry. Ijeoma's wasn't so sure. The faux confidence she'd willed was receding now.

“Let's go somewhere quiet tomorrow, find our muse and create magic.”

The unease in her spirit bubbled a little more fiercely.

“If you're worried about missing the final session of the bootcamp, we could talk to Mr Ethan, I'm sure he'll allow us come a bit late. No biggie.”

“I'm sorry. I won't come tomorrow. I've got to be somewhere else.”

And there she was in Uncle Edward's living room, thinking of all she could have been doing with Adaolisa at this very time. The man teaching them was talking about dealing with temptations and the topic of discourse hit a little too close to home for her comfort.

“The thing with temptations and sin is this, they have nothing new to offer. I'll explain that in two ways. Firstly, sin always looks attractive, always promises pleasure and

happiness but we know how it ends. There's no life in sin, all it has to offer is death. An old-time preacher from my childhood would say sin fascinates before it assassinates." The man smiled. "The pleasures of sin are only fleeting. Sin has nothing new to offer. The second perspective is the fact that there's nothing new under the sun. let's look at first Corinthians ten verse thirteen."

Ozichi read the text. Ijeoma kept thinking the man looked vaguely familiar. She was trying to place his face.

"From this verse we can see that there's no temptation you will ever face that another saint has not faced before and overcome by the grace of God. There's no sin you might have fallen into that's too great for the grace of God and the provision of his forgiveness. The Devil likes to overplay the peculiarity of our temptations, such that you feel you are the only one experiencing what you're going through. That makes you want to withdraw from other saints because you're convinced that you're the contaminant, the black sheep. But it's all part of the Devil's ploy. Once he's able to isolate you, you become an easy prey. I want you to hold this in your mind; there's no temptation that has overtaken you that is uncommon to man. Is it lust? Is it pornography? Lying? Stealing? Is it masturbation?" He took a pause to scan the faces of his audience. "There is no temptation you will ever face that is peculiar to you. Is it homosexuality? You name it..."

Ijeoma's mind drowned out the rest of his words. Apart from the fact that his words seemed to hammer on the reality of

her situation, his last statement was the clincher. Now she knew why he looked familiar. The moment he said 'homosexuality' the light bulbs came on. He looked familiar not because she had seen him before, but because he looked like Mr Ethan. Once she saw it, she could see nothing else. The resemblance was strong. He clocked her and her heart rate quickened. Could he see through her? Could he see her as plainly as she could see him? Did he know she knew he was somehow related to Mr Ethan? Did he know she was tethering on the brink of giving in to her sinful urges? Did God show him in a revelation? Was he going to shame her before all the other teens?

“The redemptive provision of Christ is powerful enough to handle the nature of sin and all its manifestations. Don't let the enemy defeat you in your mind. Don't let him push you into silence. Sin thrives in secrecy. When you bring your temptations and struggles out to the open, you make it easier to overcome the Devil's tricks. Be accountable. Talk to Uncle Edward or someone. Sin is not for you. You are the righteousness of God in Christ. Sin shall not have dominion over you, you are not under the law but under grace. Sin is below you; you are seated with Christ in heavenly places. Your body is not for sin, it is the temple of the Holy Ghost. Present your bodies, minds and spirits to God as instruments of righteousness, not to sin. If it took the death of Jesus to atone for sin, we cannot say we love him and trifle with sin. This is not legalism, this is the truth and I don't know why, but the Holy Spirit is impressing it strongly on my heart to warn, remind and

instruct you all. God has great plans for you, but you won't go far if you're entangled with sins and weights..."

Ijeoma looked around furtively. She feared that every other person in the room could tell that this message was for her. She feared that God would expose her to all these people and they'd gasp in horror at her iniquity.

"You are in that period of your life when people would suggest different things to you," the man continued. "but God's word to you is in Proverbs one verse ten."

Kazayet read this time.

"My son," the man repeated after Kazayet read. "if sinners entice you, do not consent..."

*The rules exist for one reason, to be broken.*

"The enticement will surely come. Temptations will surely come, but it's up to you to give or withhold your consent. Remember, God is faithful, he will never allow you to face a temptation you can't overcome." The man clapped for emphasis. "I don't know about you, but for me, this is all the reassurance I need. I will never be faced with a temptation God has not equipped me to overcome by his word and his Spirit at work in me.

"Greater is he who is in you," He jabbed an index finger at them. "than whatever temptation is in the world. The last thing I want us to look at is how to react to temptations, then we pray."

He went on to talk about opening up one's mouth to declare what the word says when temptations come as



thoughts. He made reference to Psalm 107 verse 2, telling them that they had to speak of their redemption. Just like Jesus spoke the word, he urged them to do same. He also spoke on the need of prayer in keeping the spirit man over the flesh, referring to the disciples who slept through the time of prayer and fell face flat in the face of temptation unlike Jesus who went into the place of prayer, the very same night, weak and overwhelmed but came out strengthened enough to face the cross without faltering. At this point, Ijeoma's mind was fully captured. His words peppered her heart like sparks.

When it was time to pray, Ijeoma found it hard to gather her thoughts to pray. She felt torn between her desires and the longing of her spirit. Her mind kept going to Adaolisa, the tingles her touch roused in her, the way her words ignited her thoughts. Why wouldn't God let her live a little? She thought of how ironic it was that this man that looked like Mr. Ethan was tugging on one end of a metaphoric chord linked to her heart and Mr Ethan was pulling the other end.

“Kúnlé, what's his name?”

“Mr Nathan.”

Ijeoma decided then that she'd meet him after the meeting. If the resemblance was a coincidence, what were the odds with the names.

“Good afternoon, sir.”

Nathan turned to her. “Hey, what's the name?”

“IJ. Sorry, you look very familiar sir. Do you have a brother?”

Edward came to meet them then. He was eager to introduce Ijeoma to Nathan, he even went to show Nathan the work of art she did for his birthday, but Nathan's mind was whirring and all his comments on the painting were half-hearted.

"You were saying something about someone that looks like me."

"Yeah, Mr Ethan. He stays in Lekki Phase 2. Do you know him?"

Time stopped. Edward looked between them.

"Back up a bit, IJ. Who is this person, how did you meet him?"

Ijeoma told them. Nathan looked like he could fall.

"Sorry, did I say something to upset you?"

Edward intervened. "No, look, it's complicated. Why don't you tell us Ethan's address? Nathan here would love to reconnect with his brother."

Ijeoma frowned. "What happened between them?"

Nathan sighed. "I can't go into details, but please can you give me his address?"

Ijeoma cleared her throat. "I'm sorry, I shouldn't have said anything." She made to leave them.

"I haven't seen my brother in six years. And, er, our Dad is dying. He went into coma yesterday. I know you feel it's inappropriate to disclose his residential address and that's fine but can you at least put a call through to him?"

Ijeoma considered that for a bit. "I don't have his

contact, but I can get it."

She typed on her phone and few minutes later, the phone was ringing on speaker. The call rang through and only when the line died, did Nathan release his breath.

Ijeoma shared Ethan's phone contact with Nathan. "That's as far as I can go."

Nathan nodded. "Thank you."

Ijeoma left them.

"Did you know he was in the country?"

Nathan shook his head, still too stunned to speak. He told Edward of the trance his mum saw.

"Wow. God is really piecing this together."

Nathan shook his head. "I don't know if Ethan wants to see me and frankly, I'm not sure I'm ready to go down that path again. I don't know if I want to see him."

"First of all, thank God you're not pushing me away this time. Secondly, sit down before you fall down."

Nathan plunked on a sofa. "I never got around to apologise. I was out of line the other day at David's."

Edward tsked. "You like dey misbehave na. But I no fit troway you, you're my boy."

Nathan chuckled.

"Tell Ethan about his Dad's health. It's up to him at the end of the day, but play your part."

Nathan sighed.

"And MOG, you preached a storm."

"I don't know if that's a good thing, cos last I checked,

Jesus calmed storms.”

Edward shook his head. “So, are you going to call him?”

“I don't know.”



The next day was Sunday and to Nathan's surprise, his mom asked to follow him to his church. Since she moved to Lagos, she'd been attending a Yoruba church in the neighbourhood and Nathan knew better than to question her choice. Nathan knew that something was shifting in his mum. She'd been listening to his conversations with Ìyanu on scriptures and doctrine without butting in like he expected. Gradually, she was showing a respect for Nathan that he found strange.

Mrs. Mákànjúqlá cried throughout the service, she sat with her fists clasped between her knees, her head bowed and her body wracking with repressed sobs. Nathan was embarrassed by the eyeballs she was drawing. Why did he sit next to her for heaven's sake? Why was she crying? Was this an encounter? Was this about the sin consciousness that loomed over her mind?

“Mummy, what's the matter?” He whispered to her.

She shook her head and continued weeping. He exhaled and gave her his handkerchief.

“I'm sorry for embarrassing you in your church, Táyo.” She finally mumbled as they commuted back to Nathan's apartment.

*Mummy is actually apologising to me? The coming of our Lord is truly at hand.*

"What happened?"

"Débò is gone. I'm a few days away from being a widow." Tears gathered in her eyes. "I'm so used to being with Débò, I don't know how to live without him. I don't..."

Nathan gave her a side embrace. "It's okay, Mummy."

And that was his tipping point. If for no other reason, he decided to call Ethan for the comfort seeing him would bring his mother.

He made the phone call in his bathroom, standing before the mirror.

"Hello,"

"Hello?"

Nathan stayed quiet for a bit.

"Hello, who is this?"

"It's me, Nathan."

A pause.

"How did you find me?"

"That's not important..."

"Are you..."

"Look, Ethan, I didn't call to catch up." Nathan said. "Dad went into comma the day before yesterday. He's been terribly sick for months but I'm sure you can't know that in your little glorious bubble." Nathan ground his teeth.

Another pause.

"I thought you might want to see him..."

“What happened to him?”

“Prostate cancer. Got discovered late, the doctors say he has limited time.”

“Please, how can I get to Gbòngán from Lagos?”

Nathan stared at his reflection. “We are all in Lagos. He got transferred here.”

“Please send me the hospital address.”

Nathan did and left the house for the hospital to wait for his brother.



All Ethan could think of was what that his Facebook messenger friend, Edward told him about how his resentment for his family made him take a decision he regretted every day. When he got his last chance to see his mother, he turned it down because of the fear of rejection and his cold loathing for his family.

And so, even though he was cold with fear, he shrugged on a shirt and stood up from the bed. He told Tájù he was stepping out. He ordered a ride, thinking of Nathan's brusque tone on the phone.

*I deserve it.*

He met Nathan at the reception, waiting for him. They stood transfixed, staring for seconds before Nathan broke the gaze and led the way to their Dad's ward.

Nathan knew that this must be a difficult moment for Ethan and he decided to give him privacy. He walked out of the

ward and shut the door. His heart was bursting at the seams with angst. He wanted to talk to somebody. He couldn't call Réniké, because they hadn't discussed Ethan since the great ugly. They had both carefully circumvented his existence and as long as they did, there was peace. He wasn't ready to stir that side just yet. So, he called Ìyanu. She didn't pick. His phone beeped.

-texts. No calls.-

-Sorry, I was too excited. Are you free?-

-Sort of. Has the miracle happened?-

-Not that one, but another-

-????-

-Lol. My brother is in the ward with my Dad-

-And???

-Chill, you have a brother? Why did I think you were an only child?-

-Where are you?-

-I'll come out to see you now. Only five minutes tho. I have surgery in a few-

Nathan brought Ìyanu up to speed, making sure to leave out every part of the story that had to do with Ethan's sexuality. He told her he was estranged because of a falling out with the family, that he was a hedonist and that wasn't false.

"Wow. This is a big testimony. I can imagine the moment you guys saw, after how many years?"

"Six."

"Six years! You must have hugged for like five minutes."

Nathan scoffed.

Ìyanu rolled her eyes. "Men."

"Women."

They laughed.

"Tell me, how did you feel when you saw him?"

Nathan sighed dramatically. "It was... sensational, mind-bending... Ìyanu lend me adjectives."

"Surreal?"

"Surreal. Another one."

"There's something called a thesaurus, use it."

Nathan squinted. "Don't laugh. Promise me you won't laugh."

Ìyanu was already laughing. "I won't laugh."

"What is a thesaurus again?"

Ìyanu sniggered and said, "Whoever taught you English would be very ashamed, Nathan."

Nathan tutted. "That's my mum."

"Even bigger shame."

"So, what's thesaurus?"

"There's something called Google, use it. I have to run now."

"Ìyanu," Nathan called after her. "you are very rude."

She swivelled her neck to him. "On these streets, I'm known as Dr. Òjó." She smirked, and hopped down the corridor. Nathan shook his head and laughed.

*Silly girl.*

Nathan knocked on the door of the ward and gently



pushed the door open. Ethan was seated beside his Dad, holding his hand and crying.

"Thank you, Nathan." Ethan mumbled. "You've been a far more decent human being than I've been."

Nathan smiled. "I'm so glad to see you again."

Ethan did not know how to react to that.

"I mean it. I've imagined what it would be like seeing you again. Of course, I never thought it would happen in a hospital, but it's still perfect."

"What of mummy?"

"She's at mine. Do you want to come?"

Ethan stayed quiet.

"It's fine, I know this is a lot to take in. Why don't you read to him, like you used to?"

Ethan squeezed his eyes shut. Nathan opened his Bible app and gave it to his brother. "Come on,"

"What should I read?"

"His favourite."

Ethan smiled as fresh tears poured down his face. "I don't need to read that. I know it by heart. Isaiah forty-three verse one. 'But now thus saith the Lord that created thee, O Jacob, and he that formed thee, O Israel, fear not: for I have redeemed thee, I have called thee by name; thou art mine.'"

When Nathan returned home and his mum asked him where he had been, he narrated everything to her. He expected that she'd jump for joy and sing aloud, instead, a snarl emerged on her face. Nathan frowned.

"He asked of you, mummy."

She hissed. "*Ìgbà yí làárọ̀...*" She remarked sarcastically. "I don't want to see him. He should go back to wherever he was hiding."

"Mummy?"

"Mummy what? Mummy what? Where was he when we needed him? Eh? He thinks he can just cat walk into our lives at any time he wants? I don't want you to talk to him again, Táyọ̀."

"For God's sake, this is what we've been praying for. This is what you've been praying for."

"As far as I'm concerned, I only have one child."

She stood up from the table, scraped back her chair and walked into the room. Leaving the door ajar like Nathan's mouth.



Ijeoma couldn't get the words Mr Nathan spoke out of her mind, neither could she stop herself from chatting with Adaolisa late into the night. She felt dirty. Every time she allowed herself engage in those suggestive conversations with Ada, she felt a stir of desire and an avalanche of shame. Shame, fear, frustration and guilt. Shame because this kind of feeling was forbidden. Fear because there was a God who was seeing her and he disapproved of her deeds. Frustration because what was she supposed to do with all these pent-up desires and ever widening fantasies? Guilt because she knew better, because as

Mr Nathan said, she couldn't claim to love God and go on trifling with sin. It was a hopeless maze. And it didn't help that she was on holiday, she had plenty of time to spend on her phone. It was difficult to avoid talking to Ada every waking hour.

*Mr Nathan said I should talk to somebody. But how do I say it? Who do I tell? What will uncle Edward think of me if I tell him?*

*Sin thrives in secrecy... Don't let the enemy defeat you in your mind. Don't let him push you into silence.*

Ijeoma knelt by her bed that Sunday night to pray.

"God, I don't understand why I'm like this. I don't want to sin against you anymore..." She sighed because she didn't know what else to say.

When she was done praying, her phone beeped with a message from Ada. She took her phone and ignoring Ada's message, she sent uncle Edward a WhatsApp text.

-I'm a lesbian. help-

Her fingers trembled as she hit send and a rush of emotions washed over her. She buried her face in her hands and wept.

*What is wrong with me?*



Ethan's mind teemed with memories of his childhood, it was the effect seeing his brother and Father again had on him. His family and Gbọngán were an inseparable pair in his mind, lumped up with that pair was the memory of their local church,

the birds, the choir, his primary school and all the other nasty things.

*Read to me, Sìnà.... He that formed thee... Fear not.... I have called thee by name; thou art mine...*

The scriptural passages he'd read to his Father kept ringing in his mind, kept him up at night. All the words Nathan ever spoke to him came rushing in. He tossed, turned and when he saw that sleep had no plan to visit him, he picked his phone. He sent a message to his Facebook messenger friend.

-Hey, Ed, been a while. I'm in Lagos, do you mind if we meet?-

He thought the message was stupid and he quickly deleted it. Ed started typing.

-Ethan, I'm glad to hear from you again. Let's meet tomorrow at 10am on Lekki bridge-

Ethan read the message three times. He'd slammed the door on Nathan several times, yet he only reciprocated with kindness. He'd abruptly cut communications with Ed, yet at the slightest of moves, he showed him wide open arms.

*The prodigal son met his Father waiting for him...* Nathan had once said over the phone. *I have called thee by name.*

Ethan shut his eyes and shook his head. He couldn't go with Jesus. He simply couldn't. If he chose to follow God, what would happen to Tájà? What would happen to his own dreams and ambitions which he had started working out gradually? How would he survive with God's impossible standards? God hated homosexuals and homosexuality, that much he had

learned from his time at Gbọ̀ngán. If God so hated him, why was he teasing him?

*For God so loved the world...*

*I can't please him. I can't fulfill his demands. I am gay.*



Ijeoma's phone started ringing. The caller was Uncle Edward. She ended the call with a trembling finger and turned off her phone. All she wanted was to be able to hide away in a cave for the rest of her life. Away from her family, away from Uncle Edward, who now knew what she was, away from God. She curled tighter and covered herself with a blanket.

*Ijeoma, you are mine.* Ijeoma stayed still, heart thumping. Uncle Edward had taught them on how to hear God. Was this what he meant by the inward witness? Was God really speaking to her?

"IJ, open your door, uncle Edward wants to speak to you." Odinaka spoke from outside her room.

"It's not locked."

He entered the room and stretched his phone to her. "Uncle Edward."

Ijeoma sniffled, wiped her tears and turned to Odinaka. She collected his phone and put it to her ear.

"Tell OD to excuse you." Edward instructed over the phone.

She didn't need to, Odinaka had already walked out.

"Are you alone?"

"Yes," Her voice came out as a whisper.

"Great. Ijeoma Maduka Prudence, you are not a lesbian."

Ijeoma started crying. "Uncle Edward, I am. I said yes to being Ada's girlfriend yesterday. I've imagined... I've... oh my God."

"Listen to me, IJ. You are God's own. You are the righteousness of God in Christ. You are a daughter of God, sealed and filled with his Spirit. That is who you are."

Ijeoma shook her head vehemently. "You don't understand. Every time I see Ada or Ini or any other girl that catches my fancy, my mind runs a mile a minute. My whole... I... I know what I'm saying uncle Edward. I'm a lesbian."

"Are you born again?"

Ijeoma said nothing.

"Ijeoma, are you born of God?"

"At this point, I don't even know."

"Great... like we do with maths, we'll work from known to unknown. So, tell me what do you know?"

"I know that while other girls like me are attracted to boys at school, while they sit and gossip about the boys they like and the once that like them, my mind always finds its way to Adaolisa. I see her in my dreams. I do things with her in my dreams, uncle Edward. I know what I'm saying."

"Do you know that God's word is true?"

*Can't he hear anything I'm saying?*

"Ijeoma, answer me."

"Yes, I know that God's word is true."

"Great. We are making progress now. Do you have a Bible near you?"

Ijeoma sighed. "Uncle Edward, this is not helping at all. Do you realize the weight of what I've been saying? Have you heard anything I've said at all? I said I'm a lesbian. It is because of people like me God destroyed Sodom and Gomorrah. I'm like the worst of sinners."

"Grab your Bible and turn it to Romans ten, and read verse nine to ten."

"Fine." Ijeoma breathed the word in resignation. She picked her Bible and read the verse. "Now I'm all fixed up. Hallelujah, I'm so straight. Thank you for the help, uncle Edward."

Edward ignored her sarcasm. "Do you believe that Jesus died for your sins and was raised for your justification?"

Silence.

"Do you believe that, Ijeoma?"

"Yes, sir."

"Great. Have you at any point confessed Jesus as Lord and accepted him as savior?"

With a roll of her eyes, she mumbled her affirmation.

"Great. So, now you agree with me that you are saved, right?"

"Right." Ijeoma realized then, that her anxiety had vanished.

Edward instructed her to read second Corinthians five

verse seventeen and twenty-one, Galatians two, twenty, Ephesians two, one and two and Colossians three verses one to three.

“Now, tell me, Ijeoma, who are you?”

Ijeoma remained silent.

“If you don't say anything, I'll take it you don't understand the math problem we've just solved together and I'll wipe the board and have us start over.”

Ijeoma's voice was weak. “Uncle Edward, I don't want to lie. I don't feel righteous, I don't feel new. I feel very much like a lesbian.”

“Great. So, we're wiping the board and starting over.”

Ijeoma groaned.

“Turn your Bible to first Corinthians six, start reading from verse seven.”

“Do you not know that the unrighteous will not inherit the kingdom of God? Do not be deceived. Neither fornicators, nor idolaters, nor adulterers, nor homosexuals, nor sodomites, nor thieves, nor covetous, nor drunkards, nor revilers, nor extortioners will inherit the kingdom of God.” Ijeoma stopped reading. “You see? Homosexuals like me have no part in God's kingdom.”

“Continue reading.”

“And such were some of you...”

“And such were some of you... go on.”

“But you were washed,”

Uncle Edward started blasting tongues. “Ijeoma you



were washed. Continue reading, *nne*."

His poor Igbo impression cracked Ijeoma up but she couldn't laugh. "but you were sanctified, but you were justified in the name of the Lord Jesus and by the Spirit of our God."

"*Nne*, who are you?"

Tears poured down Ijeoma's face as she declared her true identity in halted, but meaningful fragments. "I am God's own. I have been washed, sanctified and justified by Christ. I am the righteousness of God in Christ Jesus. I am a new creation. I am saved."

She could hear uncle Edward clap over the phone and unfettered laughter erupted from her core.

"Now that you know your name, let's move to the next chapter."



## CHAPTER SIXTEEN

### ALÁŞEPÉ

“What's the next chapter, uncle Edward?”

“Having established who you are, what's left is to stand with it and live it out. Knowing who you are makes you know who you are not. You cannot be a child of God and a homosexual at the same time. You cannot identify as the righteousness of God and at the same time tie your identity to sin. The Bible makes it abundantly clear that homosexuality is a sin and homosexuals will not inherit God's kingdom, but that is not who you are.”

Ijeoma sighed.

“Your past sins or your current temptations and struggles do not define who you are. Only the word of God defines the child of God.”

Ijeoma's wedged the phone to her ear with a lifted shoulder and she scrambled for her journal. When she found it, she flipped it open with one hand while snatching her biro from its cap which was held by her teeth. She scribbled feverishly.

*I am not my temptations; I am a child of God. I am not my urges; I am the righteousness of God in Christ. My heart is God's dwelling place, it is not for lust. My body is God's temple, it is not for sin. I've been created by God and recreated in Christ for the glory of God alone.*

"Now, what we are going to do is this, I'm going to put you on a strict diet till the consciousness of who you truly are takes over your being. I'm going to ask Odinaka to take your phone from you. if you need to make phone calls or listen to songs, he will allow you if your reason is cogent enough."

"Ugh! Don't put me at Odinaka's mercy please."

Uncle Edward laughed. "Don't worry, it's for a short time. I'll send you a schedule for scriptures to read, time to pray and on Friday, I'll come to pick you up for a prayer walk. Deal?"

"Deal. Uncle Edward,"

"Yeah?"

"Thank you very much."

Edward smiled. "You are welcome. Make sure to pray before you sleep."



After his long talk with Ed, Ethan headed to the hospital. This time, he met his mother and the snarl on her face

still had those edges of ice; some ices don't thaw with time. She hissed when she saw him, a long-drawn hiss that made him worry for her cheeks. He took his place beside his Dad and watched his mum exit the ward. He stayed mute for a long time just staring through the window.

"Daddy, what made you hang on to every word of the Bible? What did you see?"

He got no response; it wasn't like he was expecting any.

"Ed said God is calling me, Nathan said God loves me. I don't know what to think."

*I have called thee by name...*

"You know what I am, you called those boys to use their fan belts on me. I've done worse things, Daddy, do you think God would want anything to do with me?"

A doctor walked in then. Ethan turned to her and her face lit up.

"You must be Nathan's brother."

Ethan nodded, feeling awkward.

Ìyanu smiled. "The resemblance is striking. I'm Dr. Ojo, but please call me Ìyanu." She stretched her hand to him.

Ethan nodded. "Nice to meet you."

"I just came to check on him, for housekeeping."

Ethan forced a smile. "That's fine."

Soon, Ìyanu left and Ethan resumed his one-sided conversation with his Dad.

"While I was discussing with Ed, he had this song playing in the background, a cool tune I shazamed. It's called

Good and Loved and the artist is one Travis and another artist who's name's a mouthful. He had the song on repeat and I know he was trying to get into my head. I guess he succeeded because the first line of that song is fresh in my mind. The artist sang, 'through your story, is my fingerprint'. Of course, the artist could not have been talking about himself, so I figured he was singing for God... is that even allowed? Anyway, if what he sang is true, if indeed God somehow orchestrated my coming back to Nigeria, then I must give it to him, he's got a good sense of humour. Cos here I was thinking I was doing my own thing, living out my purpose and he just sat there on his white glorious throne laughing at me. You know, Edward told me his own story too. His story of how God chased him down, literally. This makes me wonder about the whole concept of choice. Is choice really a thing or are we all just pawns in the hands of a quirky God?" He exhaled. "I'm tired, daddy. I want rest, true, lasting rest."

*...And I will give you rest... Take my yoke upon you...*

"It's that yoke that's the problem. Why would God say I can't love who I want? Why would he ask me to leave T? Why would he call my love sin?"

Silence.

"I don't know how to love a woman the way God demands. The mere thought terrifies me. Doesn't he know this? Can't he see that I can't be like Edward or Nathan and all his other goody-two-shoes children? Why does he bother with me? Why is he sending so many people to me? What am I that he's

mindful of me?"

Ethan rambled on and on, till evening fell. He sat there, with his back to the door and his gaze fixed on the window and he kept talking about his wandering years, the dissatisfaction that plagued his soul, his rebellion and the weariness that was now in his heart. He didn't know when Nathan and his Mum entered the room.

But when he felt a hand on his back, he jumped.

"Olúwaşínà."

Ethan's eyes could have fallen out of their sockets. The shock on his face was mirrored on his brother's and mother's.

Elder Débò Mákànjúolá smiled. "The surgery is over."

"What surgery?" Nathan asked, with a budding smile.

But his father was distracted. His eyes were on the window. He stood up from the bed and walked to the window, his mouth agape. He pulled the drapes farther apart.

Ethan could see beautiful the sunset scenery through the window, but what he could not understand was his father's theatrics. The man was blind.

"You people see this every day?" Débò asked.

"Daddy, you can see?"

The older man nodded. "I can!" He turned to Ethan. "I can and I have such beautiful sons."

Nathan's mum fainted. Nathan stared, dumbstruck. A name of God echoed his mind.

*Aláşepé.* The one who does things perfectly.



While the doctors wheeled his Dad to imaging to confirm the alleged miracle, Nathan called Réniké, David, Edward and his Pastor, bubbling with excitement.

“Réniké, my Dad said he saw doctors in white perform a surgery on him. He said he saw them take out bad organs and install new ones. He was so sure there'd be a surgery scar, but the great physician cuts and leaves no scars.”

Réniké was crying over the video call. “Nate, Jesus did it!”

“He did. He did.”

From a distance, both of them could hear Nathan's mum singing '*e wa wo'un t'Oluwa se fun mi.*' and inviting all who cared to listen -those who didn't care were still forced to listen- of the great miracle God had performed on her husband.

Réniké laughed. “I love your mum already.”

Nathan laughed. “Thank you, babe. You encouraged me, you're a part of this.”

Réniké pouted. “Now I wish I'm there with you in that hospital. I'm so happy for you and if I don't encourage you, what else would I be doing with my life?”

“True that.”

Réniké laughed. “Don't worry, I'll surprise you one of these days with a visit.”



-Can I call you?-

-Lol. I'm in the hospital already.-

Ethan read that message with a frown. He leaned against the wall of the corridor, away from the inspiring chaos happening on the opposite wing. He shut his eyes and bit his inner cheek, when he opened his eyes, he expected to find himself on his bed with Tájù snoring beside him. He blinked.

*It's real.*

*It can't be real.*

His phone beeped.

-Where are you?-

He started typing a reply when he heard his voice.

"Ethan."

He lifted his eyes to see Edward and Nathan approaching him. They were talking and giggling in a way that acquaintances would. Ethan frowned.

*What the actual hell is going on today?*

The way Ethan looked between Edward and Nathan reminded Edward of the day he and Ladé met at the prison when they both went to see David. He chuckled.

"Ed, you know my brother?"

"I work for Edward."

Ethan exhaled a cuss. "God has been using my life for stand-up comedy!" He cussed again, loudly.

Nathan smiled. "Ethan, Edward and I have been praying for you. God is not playing; he's beckoning on you."

"He's not beckoning!" Ethan snapped. "That guy has the whole thing figured. He's messing around with me and I



can't..." He was shaking now. "I can't give him what he's asking of me. He demands holiness, sinless perfection by his standards, and I'll be a joke if I say I can do that. I'm not straight. He only wants them straight..." He blew his cheeks and with a startling force added, "how the hell do I live up to that?"

Edward and Nathan looked at each other. Edward nodded to Nathan. Nathan smiled.

"Ethan, you've got the whole thing muddled up. Let's sit over there and have a little talk."

It was not a little talk. The talk dragged till three a.m. For four hours, they were trying to make Ethan see that God wasn't foisting himself on him, he was only making him an offer, an offer of life eternal. That God was not asking him to fix up before he could approach him. The call to salvation was not necessarily a call to heterosexuality. That made Ethan's eyes widen. 'Are you saying God doesn't mind if I'm gay?' 'No. No. God is calling you to a righteous life, and yes, homosexuality is a sin and is not His will for you. But you don't have to be with a woman to win His approval.' Nathan clarified.

"What we are saying is that God is not expecting perfection as a prerequisite for salvation. If you can please him by your strength, why did Jesus die? Jesus himself said He came as a physician for the sick, those who are well need no healer."

They went on to explain that all God asked was faith. Believing in Him for salvation and trusting Him enough to follow his lead. God himself would walk him through the

process of transformation.

But even at the end of the long discourse, Ethan still asked questions that took them in circles. It seemed as though he didn't understand anything they'd been explaining the whole time. It made Nathan feel frustrated, but then again, he knew that getting light into a man's spirit took time and patience. He also noticed that as the night wore on, Ethan's phone rang and rang with calls from T until the phone ran out of battery life.

Finally, Ethan sighed and said, "Even if I want to follow Jesus, what will happen to Tájù?" He searched their eyes.

"Who is Tájù?" Nathan asked.

Ethan sighed. "He's the love of my life."

Nathan cringed; it was the slightest of grimaces but it wasn't lost on Ethan.

Ethan sprang to his feet. "I know, it's cringe for you. But it's a flipping fairytale to me. Do you know how many people would give an arm and a brother to have someone love them half as genuinely as T has loved me?"

Nathan sighed. "I didn't mean to be indelicate."

"Do you know what that man has sacrificed to be with me?" Ethan was on the brink of tears. "Do you know how extremely lucky I am to find true love that endures against all odds in my first? How do I throw all of that away?"

Nathan wanted to say something, but Edward held his arm.

"T literally uprooted his life from the UK and moved all

the way back to Nigeria for me. He flew to Atlanta from Bristol at least twice every month just so he could be with me. How can I face him to tell him it's over between us because Christ is calling me?"

He paced and alternated putting his hands on his waist and using them to smooth his trousers.

"Why can't I follow God and still be with T?"

"Ethan, I don't know what Tájù sacrificed for you, but I know his sacrifice, no matter how enormous, cannot stand beside what Jesus sacrificed for you. Ethan, Jesus died for you." Nathan spoke slowly, softly, doing all he could to oil his words with grace but the impact of some truths cannot be evaded even with all the soft landing in the world.

Ethan held his brother's gaze. "This is exactly why I hate church people."

Edward smiled.

"What is funny?"

"I used that line on my sister once."

"I'm not you and my story is not going to end like yours." Ethan retorted.

Nathan exhaled. "It's all on the table, bro. The choice is yours. Death with all it's sweetened poisons and fleeting pleasure or life eternal. What's it going to be, Ethan?"

"You won't always have time to choose and dithering is a statement of choice in itself."

"Stop trying to manipulate me!"

Nathan raised his hands. "Fine."

Nathan and Edward left him alone.  
Ethan lay on the bench and slept off.

\*\*\*\*

Nathan and Edward slept in Edward's car. At 8:30 a.m.,  
Nathan's phone started ringing.

"Réniké, what's up?"

"You're still at the hospital, yeah?"

"Yeah... but I'll soon be leaving."

"Don't leave yet."

"Why?"

"You should stay with your Dad now; I think it's too  
early to leave."

"What are you saying?"

"I'm on my way there, so don't move a muscle."

Nathan brightened. He got out of the car and rushed to  
the little mart across from the hospital. He purchased a  
toothbrush and soap and dashed to his Dad's ward to freshen  
up.



When Ethan woke up, his back ached but his mind was  
lucid. He sat up and went over the events of the previous day  
and the earlier hours of the day in his mind, slowly processing  
everything.

The more he pondered on the turn of events, the clearer  
it became to him that God loved him. Jesus died for him. His  
sins were repulsive to God, as was every sin. He was doomed to

die as the payment for his sins, yet it pleased God to lay upon Jesus the punishment for his sins. Jesus died in his place. Jesus took upon himself his sin and sufferings and now, he was calling him to believe.

This same Jesus healed his father. He touched his back, felt the bump of his hypertrophic scars but instead of associating that with the beating he took at Gbòngán like he always did, he thought of the moment his Dad touched his back and called his name. He recalled the frigid waves of unbelief that enveloped him when he turned to see his father awake. He imagined what the disciples must have felt when Jesus appeared to them and at that point, he really couldn't blame Thomas for his legendary doubts.

He reached beneath his shirt and ran his fingers over his scars, but he wasn't thinking of the shame and humiliation he faced all those years ago. He thought of the beating Jesus took for him, he thought of his ripped flesh and the scars that must have rippled across his body. Thirty-nine strokes of piercing whips, a walk of shame with the burden of a cross, crucifixion, death. All for him.

Ethan doubled over, still holding his back. "My Jesus," He whispered.

How many times had he heard this story told as a church boy? How many times did Nathan try to get him to see what Christ did for him? He had despised what Jesus did. He never really understood, never really cared. But the Lord kept waiting. Kept beckoning. Kept wooing him.

Tears burned his eyes as he remembered reading, *Eli, Eli, Lama Sabachthani*, to his Dad as a little boy. Because of him, God forsook Jesus on that cross.

He knelt by the bench.

“Jesus, I know you love me. I know you want me. I believe you died for me, I confess you as Lord. But you see me,” He splayed his hands. “You know me. I’m weak and broken. How can I befit you? How can I please you? I’ve lived my life serving my lusts, worshipping pleasure. I don’t know how to serve anything else. I don’t know how to follow you. But God, God I want to follow you. You died for me; I want to live for you. Please help me. Please teach me. I don’t want to fight you anymore. I don’t want to fight anymore.”

He stayed on his knees, pouring out his heart to God with more tears than words.



He stepped out of the bathroom in time to see Réniké’s call.

He went to the reception to get her. She wore a boat-necked Ànkára crop top over culotte pants and her smile easily evoked one from Nathan.

They hugged before Réniké did a jiggy dance. “Is it forward to ask to see your Dad?”

Nathan laughed. “He might as well be in a show glass now. My mum has called the whole hospital to come and see what God has done. Come with me.”

Nathan introduced Réniké to his parents. His mother raised a song and started crying. Nathan shook his head and mumbled something to Réniké about how embarrassing his mum could get. Réniké smiled. Nathan held her hand and told her not to get anxious, he's sure they love her already. It turned out true. Even if he brought an ostrich to his parents at that point, they'd approve and append their signatures on the wedding document before thinking better of it. They asked Réniké a few questions about where she hailed from- Ilesa and by the way his Mum nodded and pressed down the side of her lips, Nathan knew this made her score higher in his mother's books- they asked which church she attended, where she schooled, what course she studied. Réniké answered every question without missing a bit, as it turned out, Nathan's little pep talk was not necessary.

Before Réniké left, she asked to meet the Ìyanu Nathan had been talking about. Nathan snapped his finger and gave her a thumbs up.

“I'll call her right away.”

Ìyanu met them in a waiting area and when she saw Réniké, she did a dramatic double take that got Réniké laughing before she even spoke.

“Sis, I've got a number of questions. Number one, why so fine? Number two, how did this brother here... now let me rephrase that, what charm did this brother use to get you to look at him?”

“Hello? I'm the charm nobody can resist.” Nathan piped

up.

Ìyanu rolled her eyes at him and went ahead to hug Rẹnikẹ. They both talked about how much they'd heard about each other from Nathan.

“Sis, this your weave is giving me life.” Ìyanu remarked.

Rẹnikẹ chuckled. “Na God dey give life oh.”

Ìyanu exhaled. “Oh God, millennials are at it again.”

Rẹnikẹ and Nathan laughed.

“Don't even go there,” Rẹnikẹ said. “You know if we start with you Gen Zs now, we won't finish.”

“I will go there. Imagine these everlasting king of glory generation folks threatening me.”

Nathan laughed and clapped. “Rich coming from 'I'm a cancer that's why I keep failing exams' generation.”

“Abi oh,” Rẹnikẹ chimed in. “I will tell my Daddy for you' generation.”

Ìyanu sniggered “Nobody says that na.”

“See you,” Rẹnikẹ pointed her hand at Ìyanu. “There's this guy they employed at my work place because his Daddy knows somebody that knows somebody. Granted, the guy is good with his graphics design but work ethic is zero. If you need something from KY, put the deadline two weeks before the day you need it. This guy shows up at work at his convenience and talks to people anyhow. One day, our boss got fed up and gave him a lecture in front of everybody. A lecture peppered with insults, you know now, typical Naija boss. The next day, my guy showed up with his Daddy.”



"No way."

"I'm telling you. The father was yelling, 'why would you talk to my son like that?' It was like a primary school teacher-pupil parent altercation."

Nathan was laughing hard. "What did your boss say?"

"Of course, he denied saying anything insulting to the boy and that was where KY pulled his joker. Do you know this boy recorded what my boss said on his phone?"

The three of them burst into laughter.

"I can't even be making this up. Since that day, all of us at the office start dey avoid KY oh, before he carry us go court with exhibit A. That's your generation, Ìyanu."

When Ìyanu couldn't find a comeback, she said. "I'm outnumbered. This is not a fair fight."

Nathan laughed. "Accept your L with your full chest *jo*."

"It will be on record that both of you ganged up against me today."

"Eh hen na, that's what you people know how to do. *Awon* recording artists." Nathan joked and laughed. He stopped laughing when he realised he was the only one laughing.

Réniké shook her head. "He likes to think he's Dave Chapelle, should we tell him?"

Ìyanu sniggered and said, "Let's leave him to blissful ignorance. What he doesn't know can't hurt him."

Nathan clapped. "Nice one. So, both of you have now formed a gang against me, right? Nice, nice."

"When last did I laugh this hard? You guys are stars."  
Ìyanu said and Nathan knew she was about to return to work.

"Bye bye."

Ìyanu turned to leave and then she turned back to them, remembering something. "Nathan, what of Ethan? Has he gone?"

Nathan's smile died. *Ìyanu! Ntorí Ọlórún!*

"He's somewhere around."

Rénikẹ́ looked between them. Ìyanu left.

"Who is... which Ethan is she talking about?"

Before Nathan could come up with a workable damage control response, Ethan walked up to them.

"Nathan, will you please go with me to see Tájù? I don't want to go alone; I don't know how he'd take it."

"Take what?" Nathan quizzed.

Ethan sighed. "I have decided to follow Jesus. Please can I stay with you for the meantime?"

Nathan wanted to jump for joy. There was a new brokenness in his brother, that he could observe. Like Jacob, he had encountered God and after a long fight, something in him given. That reinforced joint that made him think he was self-sufficient, was now out of place. He didn't need to question him any further, he knew that the man standing before him was different from the man who argued and went rabid in self-defense the previous day.

But the observable change was not only in Ethan. It was also there in Rénikẹ́'s countenance. When Nathan glanced at

her, he saw her appraising his brother and the sneer on her face was all too reminiscent of his mother.

"I'm leaving."

"Réniké, wait, I can explain."

He couldn't explain and she didn't wait.



Tájù laughed long and hard when Ethan was done explaining that he had become born again. He wheezed and wiped tears from the corner of his eyes before he looked at Nathan and said, "What you gave him must be the good stuff. You should link me to your dealer."

Ethan looked at Nathan, unsure. Nathan knew he should come in, but his mind was occupied with thoughts of Réniké. Ethan prodded him.

Nathan cleared his throat. "Look, Tájù, I know that you and my brother go way back and you share something... special to you, but Ethan has made up his mind."

Tájù nodded. "So, you left here yesterday as my boyfriend, then you saw a miracle or whatever the hell it was and now you're a born-again *yada yada*?" He chuckled without opening his mouth. "Do you even realise how retarded this whole crap sounds? You know what? Feel free, go. I'll give you two weeks to come to your senses. If after two weeks, I don't see you, I'll move back to the UK. I'll only need to switch back to working onsite from working remotely, but you must know this, once I leave Nigeria, the ship has sailed. Two weeks is

enough time for you to think and snap out of whatever lies and religious shit they've loaded into your mind."

Ethan swallowed. "I'm sorry, Tájù."

"No, I'm sorry for you. You should see yourself right now. You've gone from the confident, purposeful dude I know to this blubbering earthworm." He shook his head. "It's a shame man, a sorry shame."

Ethan looked down at his shoes, as he stood up and walked into the room he shared with Tájù. Nathan helped Ethan pack his things in silence. He knew his brother's heart was breaking but he didn't know what to say to bolster his spirit, especially now that he too was nursing anxiety. How would he explain to Réniké? What would her reaction be?

*God, abeg, help me touch my girlfriend's heart.* This heart cry rang in his mind as he packed with Ethan, as they moved his things to the bolt ride they'd ordered, on the journey to his place and when he sat on his sofa, he mouthed the same words.

"God, abeg, help me touch my girlfriend's heart." As he voiced the prayer, it occurred to him that just yesterday, he saw the manifestation of what he'd been trusting God to do for a long time. He should be giving thanks, not barraging heaven with yet another request.

"God, thank you. I'm not ungrateful--"

*So, you have a girlfriend?*

That made him frown. *Shey Holy Spirit wan dey whine me ni (Is the Holy Spirit playing with me)? Réniké and I have been dating for like two months now. God, you know now. It was from the place of*

*prayer I got the nudge to reach out to her. God, you know now.*

Nathan didn't hear anything from God after that. He continued worshipping mechanically, while his mind busied itself with the different ways he could present the matter on ground to Réniké. He remembered his journey to SA which he was to embark upon in four days' time. He had to settle things with his babe before leaving the country. It was his fault. If he had told her of Ethan's presence before, she wouldn't have been so shocked to see him at the hospital. It was just the shock effect; it'll wear off soon.

Nathan's phone started ringing. The caller was Edward.

"That boys' hangout wey we suppose do, we fit run am tonight? I don already call David and he said he's down. So, show my side around 8."

Nathan sighed. "You know Ethan is now staying with me. I can't leave him here."

"Then let him tag along now."

"I don't think he's there yet."

Edward laughed. "That sounds like Sola. Let him come, it'll be good for him."

"No wahala, I'll talk with him when he wakes up."

Ethan vehemently refused to go anywhere and that was understandable. His life as he knew it had just turned over, the last thing he wanted was a meet and greet. He told Nathan he'd be fine alone at home. He wasn't a child.

Nathan took the journey to Ajah, thinking about all the money he'd been spending on transportation in recent times.

Thankfully, his trips to the hospital were out of it and he'd no longer have to spend on hospital bills. That brought his mind to Ìyanu. Now that his Dad had been medically proven to be totally free of cancer and they were already planning their journey back to Gbongán, Nathan had no reason to visit the hospital anymore, so he would be seeing less of Ìyanu. The thought made him smile. Within a short period of time, he'd grown fond of Ìyanu, his adopted sister.

He sent a text to Rẹnikẹ, apologising for not giving her heads up. She read it but didn't reply.

At Edward's, four places were set at the table and Nathan voiced his question of who the fourth patron was after shaking hands with David like five times. They shook hands, took turns to say 'my guy.' 'Daddy Solo!', shook hands again, said, 'my guy.' 'freshest dad in the city.' Shook hands again. 'congrats man. I'm so happy for you. So, your Dad is cancer free now.' 'Thanks, man. Na so oh. This God no dey flop' They shook hands again. 'He no dey ever flop. Talk and do God.' 'I tell you oh. Congrats on the baby too. Sorry I couldn't make it for the naming.' They shook hands again. 'No *le le* (problem) bro.'

Edward ignored Nathan's question.

"So, the set don complete now," Edward said. "King David, Prophet Nathan and incoming King Solo."

"You forgot to add the King's butler, Edward." David said with a cheeky grin.

Edward tsked. "If you read your Bible well, you'll know that Jonathan's middle name was Edward."

*"Whiu, whiu, whiu, whiu."* Nathan put a hand to his mouth and made the sound of a siren.

Edward turned the corner of his mouth at Nathan. "What's that?"

"Heresy alert."

David laughed before he beat the table with both hands. "Now, we have a wedding to plan." He drummed rapidly, Nathan joined in drumming and finally, Edward joined them. They didn't care that they were rattling the cutleries and plate covers with their drumming. They drummed and threw their heads back in a hearty laugh.

"That's enough." David shouted over the din. "Just so we're clear, I'm the best man."

Nathan scoffed. "You wish. You don't know that married man cannot do best man duties?"

"Educate me, who made that rule?"

"Edward, please tell this Dad who is going to be too busy changing diapers on that day, that I'm the best man."

"Wow. Just wow. Clap for yourself, Nathan."

Nathan clapped.

"You are fired from being my prophet, pick your letter on the secretary's desk on your way out." David turned to Edward. "Before you make any rash decision, remember where we are coming from. Remember where we've been. Remember OAU, remember Fajuyi hall. Some people were not in the picture then oh. Choose wisely."

"Baba, stop making reference to the past. Old things

have passed away, all things have become new. Edward, the ball is in your court."

Edward took a long pause for dramatic effect. "Gentlemen, let's say the grace and dig into our meal."

"Talk *jare*." David snapped. "Who is your best man?"

Edward laughed. "Nathan, you asked earlier about the fourth patron, yeah?"

Nathan nodded.

"Jimmy!" Edward called. "Please come."

Jimmy emerged from the hallway wearing a vintage top and a pair of shorts.

"Since both of you are vying and trying to put me in the difficult place of choosing one over the other, I present to you, my best man."

Jimmy laughed. "Shock twist. You should see your faces."

"Who is this boy?" Nathan asked pointing to Jimmy.

"He is..."

Jimmy stepped closer. "I've got this. I'm his brother. Was there before OAU and Fajuyi hall and I'm not married, also I have no diaper to change."

"Show me a better candidate." Edward remarked smugly.

"Wow. Edward, clap for yourself." David said.

Edward clapped and guffawed.

David and Nathan looked at each other.

"You are fired from being my butler."



"Great, so you're not going to eat this food, since I'm already fired."

David hissed.

"Jimmy, congratulations on winning the best man election." Nathan said and Jimmy did a mock bow. Nathan shook his head and turned to Edward. "I hope Jimmy is ready to represent you in SA this weekend?"

"Don't be petty."

They bantered on and on until Nathan brought up his current ordeal with Réniké.

Edward sat up. "Bro, let me be straight with you. You know the day you told me you guys were getting back together, I was surprised. The whole thing was quite absurd."

"This one is my fault. I should have told her earlier."

David sighed. "Why didn't you tell her?"

"I never got around to tell her."

"Or you went around telling her?" Edward asked.

Nathan scrunched up his nose. "Po-tay-to, po-tah-to."

"Did you people ever discuss Ethan after you made up?" David asked.

Nathan shook his head.

"Can you see that it's not po-tay-to, po-tah-to?"

"What are you guys saying?"

"You were avoiding the subject of Ethan and his sexuality because, well, he was out of your life at the time and as long as you avoided him, your relationship functioned well. But here comes Ethan walking back into your life and the peace in

Rome is upset." Edward said.

Nathan sighed. "I can make her to reason with me. Now that Ethan is born again, I'm sure she'd accept him. Maybe not accept but at least tolerate him. She doesn't have to like him, now, does she?"

David and Edward exchanged a glance.

"I really love this babe and I want to make things work between us."

"We know you love her, but is chemistry enough to fuel a lasting relationship?" Edward asked.

"It's not just chemistry. We have C.R.K too," Nathan joked. "You should have seen her expounding scriptures and lifting my spirit when I was down. Bro Dave, you know Réniké now."

"I know her and I know she's a fervent believer. But, are you sure you want to be with someone who cannot stand your brother? Your only sibling?"

"Think about it, bro," Edward said. "Really think about it. Now that Ethan is saved and living with you, he needs you. You're going to have to be there for him to teach and raise him in the way of God, but you can't do much for him if your woman wants to pull you as far from him as possible."

Nathan chuckled. "Let's not get ridiculous abeg. She cannot pull me away from my brother now. Haba. Na my blood be that oh."

"See, I've been married for three years," David started.

"Abeg, abeg, let's hear word." Edward cut him off.

"Don't even play that 'I'm the one with experience, you kids better listen' card here oh."

David waved him off. "As I was saying *jàre*. Emotions are powerful and one undoing of any man is to underplay the power a woman he loves has over his mind. Ask Samson, ask Solomon. Ask the many men who have been turned against their families. Do you think Solomon, Solomon of the Bible oh, not Solomon Olúwáborí Kòmóláfé' oh. Eh-hen, let's be clarifying these things. Do you think Solomon expected that his wives would eventually turn his heart away from the living God to pagan idols?"

Nathan said nothing.

"It doesn't happen in one day, but I can tell you one thing for sure, the values of the person you love and choose would eventually reconfigure yours. I know butterflies are out and fluttering in your stomach now, but the outcomes of your choice will remain even after butterflies have lost their wings."

Nathan listened to their counsel but the obstinacy of a man neck deep in love won't let him be. That night after they had all retired, he took his phone and called Réniké.

"Babe, you know I can't sleep well knowing you're mad at me."

She hissed but he knew she was smiling.

"I know it's my fault. I should have told you when I knew he was in the country. But a lot of things were happening at the same time. Ethan is a changed man now. He's born again now."

Réniké laughed. "God, you are so naïve. You think because he said he has accepted Jesus he'd stop being gay? Of course, he'd claim to be born again to get you off his back, come on, Nate. Open your eyes."

Nathan sighed. "I know what I'm saying, he's born again. We went to his boyfriend's house together. He broke up with him on his own."

Réniké hissed. "It won't take a month before he goes back. Do you know what this gay thing is at all? It's who they are. It's like leopard spots but not just on the skin, it's inside them."

"And you think the blood of Jesus is not efficacious enough to wash these spots?"

Réniké hissed. "I don't have strength for these backs and forth abeg. I've had a long day."

"He's staying with me now."

"What?"

"He's staying with me."

"Hmmm..."

"Réniké, God can change lives. There's no one outside the scope of His grace."

"I hear you, but the same Bible says bad company corrupts good manners. This one that you're harboring him in your house, I just hope..."

Nathan felt drained. She hoped that what? She hoped he won't become gay too? How could he make her understand?

"I'm going on that SA trip this weekend." He changed

the subject

“Yeah, you said so.”

There was a pause.

“Good night, Nathan.”

She didn't wait for his good night before she ended the call. Usually, they'd have an extra minute on phone after saying their good nights in which they argued on who should end the call.

The thought of losing Réniké again made him go into panic.

*God, please, speak to my babe.*

*You're calling me to intervene in a relationship I didn't send you to enter?*

Now that shocked him to his bones. How could God even say that?



## CHAPTER SEVENTEEN

### FULL CIRCLE

“God, Haba now. I've been praying every day since I started this relationship with Réniké. I even made the decision to get back with her after praying. You've not said anything. How can you say you didn't send me?”

*Proverbs three, five to six.*

He knew the scripture by heart.

*Trust in the Lord with all your heart, and lean not on your own understanding; in all your ways acknowledge him, and he shall direct your paths.*

He hadn't acknowledged the Lord; he didn't bother to run his ideas by the Lord. But he still found it confusing.

*How could he have been hearing from God on other things when he was out of line with his romantic relationship and not know?*

*Talk to your pastor.*

He blew out his cheeks. Pastor AB would be disappointed in him. How could he have walked into a relationship with assumptions for convictions? Pastor AB held him in high esteem, what would he think of him now? Thankfully, it was already too late. He decided that he'd call his pastor the next day.

The next day, Nathan's parents took off for Gbòngán and Ethan was morose throughout. Nathan didn't know what to make of that. If Ethan had truly come to receive the life of Christ, wasn't he supposed to be bubbling with the joy of salvation? Why was he moping? Was he thinking of going back to Tájù?

Nathan urged Ethan to give up his phone until his feet were planted in the path of truth and Ethan agreed reluctantly. Nathan knew that he was supposed to work on a follow-up plan for his brother, but he was all over the place worrying about his relationship with Réniké and his journey to South Africa. Eventually, he spoke with Edward and asked if he could take Ethan in pending the time he returned from Johannesburg. He explained that he wanted Ethan to go through some teachings before he could gather himself to raise him. Edward understood and obliged.



The flight to South Africa was a blur. As he commuted to the hotel which served as the venue for the summit, he looked

through the window but he couldn't enjoy the beauty of the city as it rolled by. He didn't care about the glass-paneled buildings that seemed to kiss the sky or the passersby with their glorious caramel skin. The only thing on his mind was the fact that he still hadn't told his Pastor about Réniké. Yesterday, as he studied his Bible, the Holy Spirit brought it to his mind and he made a mental note to call him once he finished his devotion. He did call, he talked about his parents who were now settled in Gbongán again and were planning a thanksgiving service at their local church, he talked about his brother for the first time to Pastor AB, he talked about his journey to SA and the fact that he'd be absent from church on Sunday, but he ended up leaving out the sole reason why he called.

Nathan wondered why he found it hard to own up to his mistake and seek counsel. Why was he so afraid of what his Pastor would say? What he'd think.

*Do not think more highly of yourself than you ought. Guard your heart against pride.*

The caution reverberated in his spirit, the Word stood before him as a mirror, as a discerner of his thoughts and heart's intents. As he alighted from the chauffeur-driven Toyota Avensis, and walked to the reception, checked in and walked to his suite following the bellhop, he realised what was going on in his mind's recesses. He'd healed a number of people; he was getting revelations from God. He'd trusted God till he laid hold of the healing of his father. Surely, he had become too big to be rebuked; how could MOG like him admit that he walked into a



relationship against better judgement?

"I remain humble before God. I understand that pride is foolishness. Pride only attracts resistance from God. I don't need God's resistance; I need his assistance. I need the grace he gives to the humble. Everything I have, everything I've ever achieved and all I'll ever achieve are by God's grace. I humble myself under the mighty hand of God." Nathan knew the importance of keeping his confessions and faith in line with God's word. He knew to instruct his soul and body like the Psalmist very oft did.

He picked up his phone and put a WhatsApp call through to his Pastor.

"Pastor, let me say this upfront, I messed up. I messed up bad."

"Shock absorber activated; you can drop it now." Pastor AB responded.

Nathan told him everything.

Pastor AB sighed. "Did you get physical with her?"

"Physical?"

"Did you guys, you know... engage in sexual immorality?"

"Oh, no, no sir."

"Whew! Here I was thinking you'd impregnated someone."

"Ah, God forbid oh." Nathan said and chuckled, feeling a wave of relief.

"See, Nathan, poor relationship decision is one stone

that trips up a lot of saints. I can tell you that it happens to the best of us. There is just something about emotions that tend to becloud our judgement and that's why I keep telling you people to open up about these things. Seek counsel before making moves. Submit your relationships to reliable spiritual oversight. Do not be wise in your own eyes."

"Yes sir. I'm sorry for not carrying you along."

"It's okay. A lot of heartaches and scars can be avoided by being humble enough to admit that you might be wrong. That you don't know it all. But for some reason I don't understand, believers these days would rather enter into relationships casually, get their fingers burnt and come back crying. The truth is, I'm happy you've realised your error and you did sooner than later, because no matter how painful a broken relationship is, it's better than a marriage filled with regrets."

"True... But, Pastor. Ah, I don't want to let her go."

"The choice is yours. Pray and let me know what you decide."

But he had already prayed and he knew what he had to do. "It's hard sir but I know I have to end this relationship."

"Don't worry. You will cry small; you might lose your appetite and carry face for a few days but the pain won't last forever. Try to enjoy your stay in Johannesburg, too. Take pictures and live in the moment. This is not the end of life."

When he asked his Pastor how it was possible for him to hear God on other things and not his relationship, his Pastor

reminded him that the Holy Spirit doesn't meddle. He didn't acknowledge God in his relationship and that was why he didn't get direction on it.

Before Nathan could decide on the best time and way to drop the bombshell, Réniké sent him a text the same evening.

-Let's not waste our time. There's nothing here for us-

Nathan read that text over and again. He felt dizzy. What did she mean by 'nothing here for us'? Did all the memories they shared mean nothing to her? It took her beating him to the break up for him to see that he wasn't fully prepared emotionally.

He threw up all the basmati rice he had for lunch and the after taste of chyme in his mouth didn't wash off after he gargled water and spat in the immaculate sink. He had to brush his mouth to get rid of the taste. Needless to say, Nathan came to hate basmati rice after that evening.

The next morning, Nathan lay on his back, staring at the crystal chandelier that hung at the heart of an array of recessed lights. He went over the dream he'd just had again in his mind. It was a follow-up dream on the one he had around the time Ethan blocked him. The dream where he got tossed by the body-of-steel bouncers.

In today's dream, there were no bouncers and instead of trying to gain access into the imposing building, Nathan found himself within the pristine walls of the mansion. He ambled down a hallway with doors lining either side. He turned the knob of a door and opened it. The room had a floor-to-ceiling

bookshelf and the books arranged on the shelf showed thick spines bearing golden letterings. An oak table was positioned on the other end of the room, the end that was adjacent to the heavy drapes. The table was the same rich tone of brown as the chair in front of it and the sheen of its surface gave Nathan the impression that it had been recently installed. There was a blossoming potted plant on the table, another by the window opposite the table. The plant by the window was larger, its luxurious leaves fanning out in all directions.

Nathan shut the door and walked down to the kitchen and pantry. The pantry looked more like a supermarket with its colourful array of foodstuff. When he opened the double doors of the fridge, he let out a whistle.

Every room he walked in took his breath away. The gilded canvases that hung on the walls compelled him with their raw beauty. Nathan couldn't remember what the art looked like but he remembered the feeling they evoked; that sense of sweeping awe that made his ears ring and the tip of his tongue dance over the inner part of his lower incisors.

He walked his way through the house, running his fingers on surfaces, filling his lungs with air of Ethan's home (an air tinged by Ethan's oud fragrance and the lavender of an air freshener) till he got to the front door. He opened the door and what he saw on the veranda startled him. A man in threadbare clothes was seated on the floor, back hunched. When he lifted his face, Nathan saw that the man was Ethan. Ethan was seated on the veranda of his house with his nose running with snot.

Nathan knew in the inexplicable way one knew things in dreams that Ethan was hungry, thirsty and tired. What he couldn't understand was why he chose to stay outside when the whole house was his; why he chose to wear threadbare clothes when he had a walk-in closet of neatly folded silks. And how could anyone leave such a pantry to starve?

Nathan stood up from his bed and walked to the sitting area of the suite.

"Holy Spirit, give me light." He whispered and started praying in tongues.

*1 Corinthians 2:12*

Nathan picked his Bible and turned to the verse impressed on his heart.

*Now we have received, not the spirit of the world, but the Spirit who is from God, that we might know the things that have been freely given to us by God.*

Nathan pondered on that verse as he continued praying in tongues. Ethan had received a spirit different from that of the world. What he had in him now, was the Spirit of God.

"Halleluyah."

The Spirit of God was given that he might know those things which had been freely given to him by God. Ethan had free gifts from God. Nathan thought of the mansion and all its lovely facilities.

*Freely given.* He let his heart dwell on that. *By grace, through faith.... Not of works... The gift of God.*

He continued praying as his mind drifted to a verse of

scripture he loved.

*As his divine power has given to us all things that pertain to life and godliness, through the knowledge of Him who called us by glory and virtue.*

“Thank you, Father. Thank you for blessing Ethan with spiritual blessings in heavenly places. Thank you, God, because you have freely given him your Spirit. You have enabled him by your divine power with all he needs for life and godliness. All my brother needs to live a life that pleases you has been made available by Christ. All he needs to live above homosexuality has been made available,” Nathan laughed. “Thank you, Jesus.”

*Through the knowledge of Him who called us by glory and virtue...*

Another light bulb came on in his spirit. Even though his brother had now received eternal life and the free gift of the Holy Spirit, he would remain shut out of what was actually his until he laid hold of knowledge. That was why he was on the veranda languishing while he had a house full of all he needed to live abundantly.

Nathan thought of Galatians four from verse one, where Paul used the metaphor of an heir as a child not being different from a slave even though he was in fact owner of all to explain why the law was necessary before Christ. Even though the original context of the metaphor was to show that the law was like a guardian and tutor to the people under the dispensation of the law, Nathan could see another perspective in light of the

dream he had. The difference between the heir as a child- who is said to be no different from the slave- and the heir as an adult was knowledge. Knowledge is the reason why the child heir was set under tutors and instructors. Knowledge was the bridge that took a man from being afar from his possession to actually laying hold of it.

*Lambano*, Nathan could hear his Pastor's voice echo in his mind. *To lay hold, to seize, to take possession of something.*

It wasn't enough that his brother now had eternal life resident in his spirit, if he was going to lay hold of eternal life, he had to be taught. He had to be disciplined.

Nathan inhaled deeply. "Lord, I lean on you for strength and wisdom. I can't disciple Ethan on my own, I can actually do nothing meaningful without your help. Lord, I look to you, like a servant looks to his master's hand, I look to you."

When he was done praying, he sent Edward a voice note explaining the dream he had and its interpretation. He also made an online order for Christ-in-Vogue's journal and a brand-new Bible both of which were to be delivered to Edward's apartment for Ethan.

He was getting ready for the first day of the summit when Edward's VN came in. He played it on X 1.5 as he did any voice note he received since the fast-forward feature.

"Nathan, na man you be. I was actually thinking of discussing this with you. I wanted to know if you had a curriculum drawn up for Ethan's discipleship and then I woke up to your VN. Na man you be. Don't worry, once I get back

from work today, I'll start a study with him. I think God has given us a direction already. We should start with unpacking the free gifts one receives upon salvation. I'll try to break it down to small assimilable bits and when you return, you'll take over."

-Fantastic. I ordered a Bible and a journal for him too. It'll be delivered to the house later today... Now let me go for the first session of the summit. I hope I don't sleep-

-If you like, sleep. Shebi you will come and present to us when you return-

-Lool. I'll try not to sleep. *Kẹ ní* nice day boss-

-Gerarahia-

Nathan did not sleep during the summit. How could he when he reconnected with Osere Ighalo as soon as he stepped into the venue?



Edward started the study with Ethan that night as he'd told Nathan. That night they looked into the first aspect of the gift of God: eternal life. For an hour, Edward walked Ethan through scriptures beginning at the book of beginnings with the fall of man, till they arrived at Christ who is the focal point of scriptures. He made Ethan see how the man outside Christ was dead in sin, how he was doomed for destruction and how man could do nothing in his power to overcome the nature of sin inherent in him and the consequential death. He made Ethan see the weight of *Zoe*, the very life of God activated in the man



who puts faith in Jesus for salvation. Ethan scribbled in the journal Nathan ordered for him.

The next day, before Edward left for work, he gave Ethan a schedule for the day. The schedule was very relaxed, he knew he couldn't put Ethan on stretch prayer routines just yet, but he also knew it wasn't wise to leave a new believer with idle time. His activities for the day included, singing worship to God, going over his notes from the previous day, making his lunch, an hour of siesta, thirty minutes of prayer and time to do some freelance illustrations.

When he got back, they ate rice and settled for the day's study. They studied the gift of forgiveness of sins. Edward had barely covered a third of what he prepared to teach before Ethan started with the questions. He simply couldn't wrap his mind around the fact that God had totally forgotten his sins. The indoctrination from his childhood roiled violently against this new teaching he considered 'false'. Didn't the Bible say no sinner will go unpunished?

This led Edward to delve into the gift of righteousness which he promised to teach in full the next day. He made Ethan understand that he was no longer a sinner but a saved, sanctified, saint.

"Saint?" He sounded alarmed.

"Yes, saint."

Ethan made a sound that stopped in his throat.

"Do you understand what it means to be washed by the blood of Jesus? Do you know the gravity of having the life of

God in you?"

"But saints are people like Mother Theresa, people that have done great things for God and humanity."

A conversation on good works and salvation ensued. "Mother Theresa did not become a saint because of the good things she did, no, she did those good deeds because she was a saint."

Ethan laughed. "What is the difference?"

"There's a world of difference. It's like putting a cart before the horse when you make good works a criterion for salvation. Let's look at Ephesians chapter two from verse eight to ten."

Half an hour and several scriptures later, Ethan kept quiet long enough to consider the truth of God's word.

Edward yawned. "Let's stop here, for tonight. Tomorrow before I leave for work, I'll give you some scriptures to study during the day, write out everything you understand from those scriptures in your journal and when I return, we'll look at your notes together before we move to the gift of imputed righteousness."

The next evening, when Edward got home, he found everywhere cleaned and Ethan had made spaghetti. He met him in the kitchen smiling.

Ethan had studied the scriptures Edward assigned to him for the day and he was gradually accepting the truth of God's forgiveness. Before they went into the study for the night, Edward played Daniel Bentley's 'Blessed Anthem' on his phone

a couple of times and by the third time, Ethan sang a few lines along but when they got to the 'I'm that man, I am blessed chant,' Ethan lost his cool.

He clapped and sang with abandon.

"You sing quite well," Edward said.

Ethan laughed. "Nathan and I used to sing in the choir back in the day."

The Saturday Nathan returned from SA, they held the study on the gift of the indwelling Spirit in the morning. Edward taught Ethan on how the Holy Spirit was united with the spirit of the saint. He that is joined with the Lord is one spirit with him. He made him understand that this union with the Lord is the source of life, power and victory. He showed him from scriptures that the Spirit of God was upon his heart as a seal, an eternal stamp of ownership; as a guarantee, a down payment in view of the final redemption at the coming of Christ. The indwelling of the Holy Ghost was the assurance every believer had of being a part of God's family, the basis of our confidence in eternal life. Because the Holy Spirit dwells in you, Edward told him, you will reign with the Lord eternally.

Even though this was new to Ethan, he had learned to humble his heart before the authority of God's word. That day, Ethan received the baptism of the Holy Spirit with the evidence of speaking in new tongues.

They went to pick Nathan at the airport that evening. Ethan met his brother with a smile and a bear hug that embarrassed Nathan. His family always found a way to do that.

But beyond his embarrassment, his heart was glad. Glad because his brother was out of the dumps, because he could tell that his brother had left the veranda. He was also glad because of how the week-long business summit turned out.

He'd walked into the conference hall after clocking in and picking the materials for the day at the entrance. He stopped when he heard his name and turned around. She approached him, locked hair coiffed high in a doughnut, A-line sheath dress bearing her participant tag. It took Nathan ten seconds of squinting and dialing through faces in his mind before he gasped and said her name. "Osere!"

She laughed and they shared a side hug.

"You look different." Nathan said.

Osere rolled her eyes. "I get a lot of that. But you can't blame me now, we were all suffering in school."

"Haa, so you're chopping life now, show us the way ma."

Osere sneered. "Be forming modest there, are we not in this summit for CEOs together?"

Nathan laughed and explained that he was only representing his boss. They sat next to each other during the session and in the breaks in between, they caught up.

Osere had been one of the sisters from school fellowship. She, Sister Naomi and Bro Pẹlúmi formed a threesome thick as thieves. Back then, Sister Osere or Sist'Ose like most fellowship people called her, was a slender usher known for her winsome smiles and insistence on waking

anyone who dared to doze during service.

She was now a serial entrepreneur in agriculture with her pig farm in Ijebu, a fish farm and a poultry farm in Şagamu. Every day, they sat next to each other in the conference room and she never failed to tap him as soon as he started nodding off. Nathan would rub his eyes, smile and mutter something about old habits. They sat together at lunch, discussing business and faith.

Before Nathan could start getting ideas, Osere let him know that she was not in the dating space, this she tucked subtly into their conversation so that it sounded like a random remark, but her intention was not lost on Nathan. He smiled and gently probed. Was she seeing someone? No, she just wasn't interested in relationships for the time being. Nathan gave her a look. She hissed and said, 'let's just say I've seen enough *şégè* and I'm not ready to try again.' That made Nathan laugh.

“How about you? Who's the lucky sister?”

He shook his head. “My story is similar to yours, except that in my case I contributed to the *şégè* I was shown.”

One thing his interaction with Sist'Ose did for him was to awaken a hunger for business in him. The eye-opening seminars, round-table talks and interactive sessions at the summit added to the effect. Nathan saw that there was money to be made, there were risks worth taking and more on the horizon than keeping books. He wanted all of it. He wasn't sure if it was greed whispering to him. He wasn't sure if it was even right for him to nurse such thoughts after all Edward and Ed

Motors had done for him. But the thoughts droned on in the recesses of his mind. He could do more than keep books.

He told himself he'd subject the matter to prayer and give it time. If indeed God wanted him to do something else, he'd have to start by building capacity. So, every night in his suite after the day's activities, he sat in the living area and collated his thoughts and gleanings from the seminars in a document. He put more attention to the preparation of the report not just because Edward had asked him to, but because he wanted to apply it himself. At the end of the summit, Nathan had tidied up the report and presentation.

"Boss, thanks for the opportunity. Your boy is grateful." Nathan said as Edward's car crawled through traffic.

Edward scoffed. "Hope you enjoyed it small."

"I did oh."

"And you didn't sleep throughout?"

"*Haba*. You no even rate me. Wait till you see my report. I'll send the google doc tomorrow."

"No rush o, you can submit it on Tuesday and we'll have the presentation on Wednesday or Thursday."

"No. I'll send the document tomorrow and I'm doing my presentation on Monday."

Edward rolled his eyes. "Suit yourself. Speaking of suits, we are going to see the bespoke designer next week Saturday. I'll tell David too. Ethan, you'll come with us."

"Me?"

"Yeah, you. Join my train of men in suit."

"I'm flattered but I'll have to pass." Ethan mumbled.

"Why?"

He shook his head. Being amongst many boys at once always made him anxious since he was a child. Everything about their bond, conversations and deportment highlighted the fact that he didn't fit in and they always found a way to pick on him. "I just can't."

Edward nodded. "It's fine. But at least, come with us on Saturday. It's going to be fun."

Ethan kept quiet and he could feel himself sink into a sour mood. Fun for other boys was never fun for him. Making fun of him was fun for other boys and the other things they did for fun bored him out of his mind.

"I'm not interested."

The mood in the car changed and for that Ethan felt guilty. He was a bag of bad energy, he dispensed dark clouds anywhere he went. If Edward had gone to pick Nathan alone, they'd have laughed and bantered all the way home. But now there was silence in the car and Edward had to turn on music to shake up the tension in the car.

*No matter what they tell you. No matter how hard you try, you can't be like them. You will always be that boy struggling to be one of the boys.*

All he wanted was to hide away.

"I want to go to Gbongán." Ethan announced, shocking himself.



Nathan tried to talk him out of it, but Ethan's mind was made up. He said he had to visit Gbòngán for closure but the very concept of closure seemed to Nathan like one of those airy meaningless things Western people threw around. What had happened had happened. As far as Nathan could see, no good could come out of poking and picking at scars. He tried to get Edward to dissuade his brother but Edward urged Nathan to give it a rest. Ethan was a grown man and he'd have to respect his choices. If he said he needed to visit Gbòngán, Nathan should let him, because he'd go anyway with or without his permission.

The memories of his childhood were stinging him all over, peppering his dreams and hanging over his day. He might not function well until he revisited that town that haunted him. He wanted to walk the streets he'd walked in shame. He wanted to revisit his primary school. To see the fence of his secondary school, the one he'd often scaled to be with Chibi. Was Chibi's warehouse still on Alara street? What had become of the place? He needed to know. And most of all, he had to climb those hills.

Eventually, Nathan followed Ethan to the park and put him on an Osogbo-bound bus after reiterating to the driver that a passenger would be alighting at Gbòngán. Nathan warned Ethan not to sleep deeply otherwise he'd be taken past his stop. He told Ethan to call him once he arrived Gbòngán safely. Ethan smiled and said, "While we were growing up, I used to be the one doing the doting. Look at you now, playing mother hen on your *ẹgbón*."



Nathan smiled and shook his head. "Have a safe trip."

Scorning his parents' house, Ethan stayed in a guest house, because staying with his family would defeat the purpose of hiding, of having a private time of reflection and feeling sorry for himself. Because, he still wasn't comfortable with his parents.

Gbongán had changed but still remained impervious to change. There were new buildings here and there, there were glimpses of advancement in civilization, but the ways of its people remained the same. Children still rolled tyres. People still cooked outdoors on earthen stoves with gaping holes for firewood. Most of the houses still had the same veil of patina on their unpainted walls. Children still sang with no regard for key or decorum during morning assemblies in primary schools. Yes, there were some street-lights on the main street, but the market maintained its labyrinth and hum-drum.

Another thing that stayed the same was how tightly knit the town was by the crisscrossing filaments of busy bodies and gossips. Ethan had barely spent an hour in his subpar lodging, when word got to his parents that their prodigal son was in town. When he saw Nathan's call, he thought he was only checking in to know if he had arrived safely. He was wrong. Nathan called to inform him of their mother's wrath. Why would Şina show up in Gbongán? Why would he stay in a guest house when his parents were alive? She'd told Nathan to tell him to report to the family house immediately. That riled Ethan up.

"If she can't stand talking to me without using a medium, why does she want me under her roof?"

Nathan sighed. "She doesn't want people talking."

Ethan let out a low laugh. "I'm only going to be here for two days. You can tell her I'll soon be out of her hair and I'm not here for her."

"You know I told you..."

"I know what you told me, Nathan. But my life is not about you people and it's definitely not about what people have to say. I'm not calling them and I'm not going to that house."

He ended the call and tossed his phone on the bed. Now that everyone knew he was in town, he might as well start his tour immediately. If he could cover all his stops before evening, he'd leave Gbòngán the next day.

His first stop was his primary school, then he went down to Alara street and from there he went to the community high school he attended. He didn't fully know what he expected but his visits felt like a letdown. It felt neutral, silly even to be back in those places. They were not like he left them and even if they were, the people that formed the bedrock of his memories were no longer there. His primary school had a new proprietor now, most of the teachers he saw were new faces and the same was the case with his secondary school. As for the warehouse that existed on Alara street, it had been bought over and converted into a 'computer center'. The only time he felt a twinge of nostalgia was when he saw kids play football on the field of his primary school. It pulled him back to the first time he

noticed Tájù.

By the time he returned from his secondary school, he wasn't sure if he wanted to go up the hills. He wasn't sure if his visit had any value. Perhaps, Nathan was right. But he was in Gbòngán already, he might as well just knock off every item of his little bucket list.

As he hiked up the hills, he saw the clouds darken ominously- a downpour was coming and it won't be pretty. Ethan knew he had to turn back but the very clouds that were warning him now snagged his attention with the refulgence of the view they presented. He took out his phone to freeze the moment in time. Before his eyes, a rainbow materialised. A thin arch of colours spanning across the backdrop of heavy gray clouds.

He tucked his phone in his pocket and started running down the hill. He thought of the rainbow not as a totem of LGBTQ+, but as God's. It wasn't the community that hung the arch of colours in the sky; the community wasn't responsible for what he'd just seen.

*Why did God create the rainbow?* His mind asked him and he had enough residual church knowledge to proffer the answer. After the deluge, Noah and his household, the only family that survived the great flood, came out of the ark and Noah sacrificed to God. God made a promise to never destroy the world with water and as a symbol of his promise, he made the rainbow.

*The rainbow is a reminder of God's grace. A symbol of his*

*mercy.*

But in recent times, anywhere he, and he assumed most people, saw the colours of the rainbow, the first thing that came to mind was pride and the community.

Ethan continued running till he saw a bike which he quickly flagged down. He told the bike man to take him to his hotel, surprising himself with the fluency of his Yoruba. He straddled the bike and it zoomed off. The winds howled in his ears and pounded his face as the first drops of rain pelted his head.

He resumed his earlier contemplation. Now, what God ordained to be a symbol of his goodness had been turned into a symbol of sin.

*The Devil is not a creator; he's a thief.* Ethan knew he didn't think that. He couldn't have thought something he found so profound up on his own. Was God speaking to him?

He got off the bike and paid the rider. Immediately he entered the guest house, the rain poured in torrents. Ethan smiled because he couldn't keep himself from thinking that God had held off the rain for him.

He went into his room. God put his signature in all of his creation. He recalled the line from Good and Loved that stayed with him.

*Through your story, is my finger print.*

Even in nature, a keen observer would see the fingerprint of an ingenious creator. Ethan recalled the wonder that made his father's eyes bulbous as he looked through the

window, seeing the sunset for the first time in decades.

*You people see this every day?* He'd asked.

*But do we see it? Do we understand? Aren't we too caught up in our activities and pursuits to actually see?*

Ethan sighed. He called Nathan and shared what he saw and his line of thought.

"This is truly insightful," Nathan said. "I think God is speaking to you."

Ethan chuckled. "Wow."

"You know, God speaks through nature. In the Bible, you'll see such things as go to the ant you sluggard... look at the birds of the air, they neither toil nor spin.... You'll see Solomon say that by observing and considering the field of a lazy man he received instruction."

"Hmm... nature is truly replete with the evidence and wisdom of God."

Nathan laughed. "Yes sir."

"How did your presentation go?"

"It was beautiful. You can ask Edward, he was floored."

Ethan tutted. "Now you're bragging."

Nathan's phone starting ringing with a call from Ìyanu.

"I have another call..."

"No problem. Bye."



"Ìyanu, what's up?"

"Do you have a minute?"

"Yeah, you don't sound too good. Is that consultant still picking on you?"

"No, it's sister Ladé."

"What about her?"

"She's becoming overbearing and honestly, I'm seriously considering moving out of her house."

"What happened?"

"She's always so critical of Nsikak. There's nothing he does that is good enough for her. I'm tired abeg. It's not as if I don't know where she's coming from. I mean I was there when she was trying to convince mummy and Daddy that Bro Dave was worthy. Didn't she meet him in prison?"

"Wait, what? Sister Ladé and Bro Dave were in prison?"

"No she wasn't... Look, that's a story for another day. Point is, Bro Dave wasn't perfect, or at least he didn't appear perfect. Why won't she let me drink my Nsikak water and drop cup for God's sake?"

"What exactly happened?"

Ìyanu hissed. "You won't even believe it if I tell you."

"Try me."

"This whole thing started with Shawarma."

"Shawarma?"

"Yeah, before I didn't like shawarma at all. I couldn't stand the smell. It used to make me nauseous."

"Okay?"

"But you see, Nsikak loves shawarma. So, he bought it for me the first time when we started dating but I told him I

hated it. He couldn't understand how someone would hate shawarma, because he thinks it's the best thing that could happen to anyone's tastebuds. He asked me to try it. I told him I had tried it before and I didn't like it. He insisted. I ate it, and I puked."

"Oww..."

Ìyanu chuckled. "Nsikak meant no harm. He said I would soon get used to it, that my system would adjust to the awesomeness of shawarma."

"Did he make you take it again?"

"Don't say it like that. About two weeks later, he took me out and yeah, he bought shawarma. He said I should take a bite. He told me that it was all about the mind, if I could take salad and hot dog on a normal day, there was no reason why I shouldn't be able to take shawarma."

"Hmmm"

"It might sound somehow the way I'm saying it, but Nsikak was just being playful and cute."

"So, you took the bite?"

"Yeah."

"Did you vomit?"

There was a pause.

"You vomited, didn't you?"

"I excused myself to use the bathroom..."

"Let me guess, that wasn't the last time."

Ìyanu sighed. "Why are people bent on misunderstanding my baby?" She sounded like she was crying.

“Ìyanu, I'm not judging, I promise.”

“Every relationship has its point of compromise. There are things we need to do for the sake of those we love. So, what if I purge myself every time I eat shawarma? It makes Nsikak happy that we get to share the experience of eating shawarma together. Why is sister Ladé calling him names?”

“What did she say?”

“She said he's a narcissist. Can you imagine?”

“Is it just because of the shawarma thing?”

“Some other minor issues like that.”

Nathan sighed. “Please don't get worked up, Ìyanu. I'll talk with sister Ladé, but I'm sure of one thing: she has your best interest at heart.”

“Thank you...” She stalled a bit. “Do you think he's a narcissist?”

From his own personal experience and from what Ìyanu just shared, blurting his thoughts might not end well.

“Are you having doubts?”

She didn't say anything.

“I think a good place to start is, what are your convictions about this Nsikak guy?”

“Why are you referring to him as this Nsikak guy?” Nathan could hear her self-defense loud and clear.

*Was this how I was about Réniké?*

“Look here, Ìyanu, if you continue making yourself believe that the world is against you, you won't be able to make sound judgement calls.”



"So, you think my being with Nsikak is a poor judgement call?"

"Stop it already. Stop putting words in my mouth. I'll talk to sister Ladé and when you're ready to have a conversation, you can hit me up."

"I'm ready now."

"No, you're not. You're interpreting my every word with your emotions, nothing productive can come out of that kind of conversation."

Ìyanu sighed. "Fine."

"Remember, you're my bro. I'm in your corner and so is your sister."

Ìyanu sniffed. "Thanks, bro."

When the call ended, Nathan felt himself sink into despondency. Perhaps true love stories were gradually going extinct. He had his experience with Réniké, Osere had her *shege* experience- whatever that was- and now, Ìyanu.

He put a call through to Ladé. They exchanged pleasantries, he asked after Solomon and Bro Dave.

"Let's cut to the chase," Ladé said. "Ìyanu has reported me to you, àbí?"

Nathan chuckled.

Ladé hissed. "Ìyanu dey fall my hand sha. That girl is smart now, it shouldn't be her. Nathan, you know that relationship is a sand castle. You know, right?"

"Sand castle or not, Ìyanu thinks she has found the bone of her bone and even though his faults are glaring to every other

person, she sees no wrong in her Nsikak. Sister Ladé, shaking her shoulders would only push her away."

Ladé sighed. "I know I need to be more patient, but I just hate what that guy is doing to her. Every time her phone lights up with his message she either becomes super excited or downcast. It's like puppet strings, like a drug."

"I've been there, done that and even modeled the T. And this is what I have to say, coconut head is real. Just keep praying for her and be there for her so that she can open up to you. Right now, keeping the line open is more important than making a point."

"Hmmm..."

"Yeah, she's talking of moving out. What if this guy asks her to move in with him?"

"Eh? God forbid!"

Nathan smiled. "God forbid."

"Thank you, Nathan. Enjoy the rest of your day." "You too."



## CHAPTER EIGHTEEN

### KEEPER

The next morning, before Ethan checked out of his guest house, he thought to take a stroll, hoping to find another of nature's allures. He rounded a corner and was tittering at the raucous way the kids in a Montessori school were singing praises during their morning assembly, when he sighted Jeremiah. Jere, like almost everyone called him, was the only son of Deacon Adélusi. Maybe it was because Deacon Adélusi bore down heavily on Ethan with his judgement after the whole discovery, market square and hill saga, or because of Jere's curious questions but for whatever reason, Jere was one of the fifty boys of Ethan's first assignment.

Looking at him now, Jeremiah had a sling bag over his shoulder and his shirt was primly tucked into his black trousers.

Was he a teacher? Ethan's heart pounded in his chest. Memories of the times they stole away from teens' camp to the uncompleted building two blocks away filled his mind. His mind quickly undressed the man, filling him with the flush of desire. His breathing became heavy and his mouth hung open. He wanted to call out to Jere. They could go to his apartment or somewhere outside town, away from the prying eyes of Gbongán people. His passion surged in him. No one would know. They could quickly check into a motel in Ede and he'd return to his hotel before 12pm. He'd check out and move to Lagos. No one would know.

*God will...*

*...And He'll forgive.*

Ethan was a millisecond away from calling out to Jere when he remembered the rainbow. God loved him. If he loved God, he wouldn't willfully do something he knew God hated. He turned around and took a bike back to the guest house because he knew if he walked, he'd turn back and gratify his desires.

When he got to his room in the guest house, he was shaking with repressed passion. Why did he pass up on that opportunity? His whole body was in overdrive and this confused him. Before he became saved, he'd worked on himself to the point where he could quell his desires. He recalled how he controlled himself when he came across Chibi. Why was he shaking now because he saw Jere? Why did Jere still have that effect on him?

*Am I not born again now? Didn't Edward say the Spirit of God is at work in me? Why is my desire stronger now than ever before? Why is my mind still working up pictures of what I could have been doing with Jere?*

*Maybe I'm fooling myself. I'm still the same person. Beneath all the feel-good hoax, I'm still gay.*

He returned to Lagos deflated because he knew that opportunity would present itself again and he would fail God. Someday soon, he'd fail God. There was no point in fighting it.

That evening, Edward drove Nathan to the house. He said he came to see Ethan and know how his trip went. The way Nathan and Edward cared for him moved him and broke his heart. He was going to return to his vomit. He was going to waste all their efforts. He wasn't worth the hassle. As though reading his mind, Nathan, who had been discussing something about work with Edward, swiveled his neck to him and said, "God said I should tell you that he thought you were worth dying for."

Ethan broke down. He told them everything. Edward and Nathan sat him down and started another indoctrination round.

"Why didn't you go with Jere, even though every fibre of your being longed for him?"

Ethan told them.

"And you think the grace of God that kept you from falling this time would fail next time?"

Ethan shook his head. "You don't understand. I

regretted turning away. I wanted to go back. For how long would I be able to hold out?"

They took him to Jude twenty-four. They taught him to repose his faith in God's keeping power and put no confidence in the flesh. They reminded him of the power of the new life at work in him, of the Spirit of God within him, the victor's spirit. They made him understand that the salvation he received was imparted upon his spirit but his body and soul would have to be brought under subjection. He'd have to walk in the Spirit in order to live above the desires of the flesh.

Instead of worrying about falling tomorrow, he had to learn to live one day at a time, trusting God. The increase in intensity and frequency of temptation was not out of place. The Devil would want to do everything to pull him back, to derail him. He had to understand that his temptations and struggles did not repulse the Lord. God was on his side. Even if he fell, he had to bear in mind the fact that God was on his side. Jesus wanted to help him, to keep him above fault and present him blameless before the father.

Whenever his mind was faced with temptations, he had to open his mouth and confess who he was in Christ. He had to remind his mind and body of the truth of his position. He had to perpetually fill his mind with God's word and energise his spirit through prayers. And if the temptation came at him physically, he had to flee Joseph-style.

"No matter what happens, don't hide. Don't isolate yourself. We're in this together." Nathan said.

Edward went on to share his own journey with being an alcoholic and womaniser and how he struggled even after being saved. He opened up about the times he relapsed. How he got drunk the night Amara broke up with him. How he battled lust for a long time.

Nathan talked about his own tendency to insist on what he thought was right, how he sometimes got proud and tetchy. He made Ethan understand that they were all works in progress.

Edward reiterated the truth he'd been teaching Ijeoma. Ethan's identity was not tied to his past sins or current struggles. A child of God cannot be identified by sin.

"Now, repeat after me, I am not gay."

Ethan mumbled.

"Stop being cute. Say it with some conviction. I am not gay, I'm the righteousness of God in Christ."

By the time they were done with their conversation, Edward was too tired to drive back to his place. They took cereal and retired for the night.

The next morning before Edward left for his place, he dropped the news. He had been considering Nathan for a much bigger role and that was why he sent him to SA. In the near future, Ed Motors would be extending to Uyo and he wanted Nathan to head the branch.

The news took Nathan by storm. He had to mull it over before making any commitment. Edward said that was understandable, but in the meantime, he wanted Nathan to take

an MBA course online on the company's tab. Nathan could scarcely contain his excitement.

"I've also been thinking," Ethan piped up. "I want to launch a gallery. I have savings enough to get me started, but I need some guidance. I need a place and maybe I can also do with a master's in business administration."

"What's the correlation between business and art?" Nathan asked.

Ethan laughed. "What I have in mind is a whole franchise. I'm going to have a clothing line with illustrations, frames for sale and maybe later on, I can resume that bootcamp on a larger scale."

Edward nodded. "Someone has really been thinking. Err... I could link you up with Terrence. He should be able to help with guidance."



Having put Solomon Bori to sleep in his crib, Ladé knocked and waited for Ìyanu to ask her in before she stepped in. Ìyanu took off her pair of crocs and came to sit on the bed.

Ladé sighed. "Ìyanu, Nathan spoke with me and I realise that I've not been very patient with you and I've also not treated you like an adult. I'm sorry."

"But..." Ìyanu helped her add.

Ladé smiled and shook her head. "No buts. You're a grown woman. Wise and full of the Spirit. You can make your own choices. But please..."



"I thought you said no buts?" Ìyanu chipped in with a teasing smile.

"Permit me this one but."

Ìyanu nodded.

"Please don't shut me out. I might not communicate it well enough, but I care about you, Ìyanu. You're my only sister." She held Ìyanu's hand.

"Sister Moní must not hear what you just said."

Ladé laughed and lay her back on the bed. "How is your house job going? Is that perv Consultant still on your neck?"

"Do you know how I found out about my biological mum?"

Ladé sat up. "Mum and Dad told us before they had the talk with you when you clocked twelve."

Ìyanu shook her head. "I knew six years before."

That made Ladé frown. "But mummy said you were shocked and you cried. I was still in Covenant then, and I remember she told me this on the phone." Ladé could still remember where she stood at the call center. She could still remember where her tears landed on her beige blouse.

"I knew when I was in primary two."

Ladé didn't know what to say.

"There was this mean girl in my class, Oyinza, who always called me Ìyábọ̀."

"Mr. Tamuno's daughter?"

"You know her?"

Ladé nodded. "They used to attend our church before."

Ìyanu sighed. "I told her my name was Ìyanu not Ìyábò, but she won't stop calling me Ìyábò. Then one day, I reported to our class teacher who he flogged her and warned her to stop calling me Ìyábò. That day, I found a note in my bag that told me to ask my mother who Ìyábò was."

"Oh, God." Ladé whispered.

"I asked Mummy, but she didn't tell me. She told me not to worry about Oyinza that Oyinza would not be calling me Ìyábò anymore. But I was curious. So, I went to Mrs. Abe."

Ladé hissed and shook her head.

Ìyanu smiled. "Even then, I knew her mouth was a leaking faucet. She told me everything."

Neither said a word for a while.

"I'm the child of a dead mistress." Ìyanu's voice came out strangled.

"Don't talk like that, Ìyanu."

"But it's true. It's true. I know mummy has..." She chewed her lower lip and exhaled, closing her eyes. "Mummy has been very fair and loving to me, but the truth remains that the woman who gave me birth was uneducated and is buried somewhere in an unmarked grave. That's the truth." She looked at Ladé for the first time and then the tears started pouring. "It's the truth, sister Ladé. I'm not like you and uncle Barnabas. I'm... I'm not."

Ladé hugged her sister. "Your ancestry is not the defining factor in your life. Look at you Ìyanu, take a good look at yourself. You're a house officer at twenty-three, you are

beautiful and smart and you know the Lord. You are a part of a family that loves you genuinely. You can't ignore all those and fixate on something as negligible as this."

Ladé felt Ìyanu stiffen. She pulled out of the hug. "She's not negligible." Ìyanu snapped. "I wish I got the chance to meet her. I wish I could hear her own side of the story."

There was another pause in which Ladé wondered how Ìyanu managed to shoulder this much emotional baggage since she was six.

"Dad is one of the most distinguished men I've ever met... yet, he... had me. And honestly, I don't hold it against him. It's something about men in general. All the boyfriends I've ever had cheated."

*What does she mean by 'all the boyfriends I've ever had'? Ladé wondered. When did Ìyanu start dating? What happened to Mummy's 'no dating till you're ripe' rule?*

"But here comes Nsikak, a true stalwart lover. He has eyes for only me despite the many options he has. He always shows me the messages his many admirers send to him. And he always assures me that I'm the one he has chosen. That I'm special."

*Because he chose you?* Ladé wanted to ask with a scowl. *Can't you see how he's manipulating you into thinking he's the golden prize? He is the one who's supposed to feel special that you chose him. But she kept her thoughts inside her.*

"Yes, he's not perfect. But he's one of a kind. He is faithful."

"One great virtue cannot compensate for other obvious flaws."

Ìyanu sighed. "Please, don't."

Ladé pressed her lips together. She looked at Ìyanu's hair. "Let me help you weave your hair. You washed it during the weekend, *abi*?"

Ìyanu nodded.

Ìyanu sat before the closet mirror and watched as her sister separated her hair into ridge-like sections with a cutting comb and gently rubbed hair products onto her scalp. It soothed Ìyanu and she was drifting off to sleep when Ladé spoke.

"Ìyanu, you are beautiful."

Ìyanu rolled her eyes.

"No, I'm serious. Look at yourself in the mirror, pay close attention."

Ìyanu didn't say anything.

Ladé's fingers worked deftly as she weaved Ìyanu's hair into cornrows. "You are a woman of purpose. God has called you a sign and a wonder to your generation. You are not ordinary. You are a daughter of God. You are not a commoner. Jephthah was the son of a harlot, rejected by his kinsmen, but when he rose to his God-ordained position of valour, his siblings had to seek him out. You know the story. Boaz was the son of the infamous Rahab, yet he became rich, honourable and he ended up being part of Jesus' lineage. Ìyanu, you are who you are regardless of who your mother was. What matters most

about your existence is not who gave birth to you, but who created you.”

Ìyanu sponged in those affirmations and Ladé could tell that hope was being revived in her sister. But the next evening, when Ìyanu returned from her shift, she got dressed in a crimson gown and off she went to hang out with Nsikak.

It took Ìyanu three whole months before she let go of Nsikak. During that period, Ladé didn't mount pressure on her. She had come to see that Nsikak was the least of Ìyanu's concerns. Instead, she focused on getting Ìyanu to see herself as God saw her. She gifted Ìyanu Laju Iren's *Mirror Mirror*, affirmed her often and made her confess words in line with what God had spoken concerning her. Nathan's presence in her life also helped. As he always told Ladé, 'I dey for my bro.' And it cracked Ladé up every time because Ìyanu was so much of a babe that it always struck her as absurd that Nathan called her his bro.

Within those three months, Edward tied the knot with Sola and they had a getaway- they couldn't call it a honeymoon cos they went with their three kids- to Paris. Nathan and Ethan started their MBA. Ethan secured a shop in Tẹ́júoṣó, Yaba for Ethereal World. He'd commissioned a few pieces and sold them for decent prices. But the piece that took off was one he titled 'Ìyá Yard'. In his art, he found a way to marry African tradition with contemporary ways. Ìyá Yard was the illustration of an Nigerian woman seated before a table, working on a laptop. She had on an Ànkára *iró* and *bùbá*, and her hands which were on the

computer keyboard were adorned with Igbo bracelets which matched the red of her *gèlè* and lip stain. In depicting her headgear, Ethan had a particular woman from the Gbongán church in mind. Ìyá Yard's *gèlè* was perched on her head just like Màmà Afọlábí wore hers, and the wide brim of the headgear was exactly like Màmà Afọlábí's. While Ìyá Yard was busy on her computer, the background was busy with a party-sized pot balanced on a metal tripod over the fervent heat of firewood and a cow was tied to a nearby tree.

Ìyá Yard got Ethan more traction than he could have imagined. The illustration was transferred to large canvases and sold to celebrities in Lagos, transferred to corporate shirts and sold under the Ethereal merch, transferred to small frames and mugs. Terrence had warned Ethan beforehand not to play with registering his intellectual properties and Ethan made sure to register every piece he made.

Ethan now attended the same church as Nathan. After concluding his Believer's course, he joined the choir.

When the break up between Ìyanu and her catch happened, it was unceremonious and non-dramatic. Ladé just figured that it had been a while since Ìyanu said anything about Nsikak, seeing him or something. Even though Ìyanu's *dependence* had been tapering, she hadn't gone that long without saying something about her boyfriend. So, Ladé asked after him.

Ìyanu didn't lift her head from the bowl she was putting the leaves she plucked off *ẹfọ* stems. "We're done."

"Are you fine?" Ladé asked quietly.

Ìyanu laughed. "You can stop the drama now. I know you want to celebrate."

"Haba, Ìyanu. Break ups can be painful regardless of who is involved."

Ìyanu scoffed. "Why do you think I was angry at you that time?"

Ladé shrugged.

Ìyanu giggled. "Cos deep down I knew you were right. The week before last, I was going through our chats and Jehovah! Shame catch me..."

Ladé burst into laughter.

"It was as if scales finally came off my eyes. I was like, 'Ìyanu see your life' I sharply told him I'm not doing again."

"How did he take it?"

Ìyanu abandoned the *ẹfẹ* and turned her full attention to Ladé. "My phone was literally dancing in my scrub pocket. This guy sent like fifty messages. I had to turn off my phone."

"Was he apologising?"

Ìyanu eyeballed Ladé. "For where? He was like who would accept you if you leave me? Who will understand you like me? Who will condone your excesses? Who will make your life better but me?"

"Please tell me you're joking."

"I can't even make this up."

"Nawa..."

"My sister, na real wa."

"Now, this calls for celebration. For my sister's sense was lost but now is found..."

Iyanu laughed. "Prodigal sense."



In preparation for his promotion, Edward made Nathan understudy him. He pushed Nathan to and beyond his limits. He made Nathan study every document in the archives. He made him review every feasibility study, every contract. This Nathan did alongside his MBA. Nathan took on the challenge even though he wasn't sure about moving to Uyo. It was a big decision and the thought was somewhat terrifying. He knew no one in Uyo, he had no family there, by blood or by church. If he agreed to this he'd literally be starting over. Thankfully, Edward wasn't breathing down his neck for an answer seeing that the Uyo establishment was still in the ideation phase. For now, it was enough for Nathan that he was applying himself and contributing to the bottom line. He could give a detailed presentation on the inflows and outflows of the company in the past three years without prior preparation. He was pleased to be able to ease Edward's burden, to be able to stand in for him in meetings. Now that Edward was a family man, he couldn't go on spending whole days at the office. He'd worked enough to earn rest.

Ethan, on the other hand, onboarded Ijeoma whenever she was on holidays as an intern. And when school was in session, she spent alternate Saturdays at Ethereal World,



breaking the weekend visits to attend Edward's teens meeting. Ijeoma did impressive paintings but her strongest point was in sculpture. She told Ethan that her carvings on soap tablets caused her mum to chide and whip her a lot in her growing years. Even before she knew sculpture as a topic in creative arts, she'd been creating impressions on soaps, what her mother called waste of money. Ijeoma made objets d'arts that were almost market ready and Ethan knew that with a little more training and practice, she could be the next big thing in that field. From his big break with Ìyá Yard, Ethan had done some networking and he knew more people in the art space, more art connoisseurs and curators in Nigeria. And so, he reached out to an acquaintance, Nosakhare who was a whiz kid with wood and marble works. He told Nosakhare he had a kid he wanted to train under him for a fee of course.

Ethan enrolled Ijeoma under Nosakhare for classes that held once a month at Nosa's atelier. Her classes with Nosa cut down her time of interning with Ethan to just one contact per month. Ijeoma found in Ethan a friend and a mentor. As kind as he was, he never minced words with critics. The first time he gave her his two cents on her work, she broke down in tears. She had since then learned to receive criticism with her head, not emotions. Ethan told her to be confident in herself and her work independently so that feedback won't ruin her.



The first time Ìyanu healed a patient, she was eight months into her house job. The patient was the child of a petty trader whom Ìyanu met on the corridor of the waiting area. The woman cradled her child and was down in tears. Ìyanu was about to walk past her, because the truth is that in the medical profession, seeing someone cry was something that happened every day. But she stopped when the woman clocked her. Looking into the woman's eyes, Ìyanu felt a stir of compassion within her. As though waiting for the slightest prod, the moment Ìyanu turned to her, she started giving Ìyanu a detailed account of her life's journey and the sickness of her child, how she didn't have money to keep up with the hospital bills, how the child's father had taken off with a daughter of Jezebel, how she had sown many a seed to her pastor yet her child remained sickly.

Ìyanu asked if she believed in Jesus and the woman took offence. "Aunty nurse, are you deaf?" She rounded on Ìyanu. "You no hear wetin I talk? I'm a foremost believer, a set apart child of God."

Ìyanu wondered for a brief moment what it meant for one to be a foremost believer. Were there second-class believers?

She prayed with the woman and in all honesty, Ìyanu didn't expect a miracle to happen. The only reason she put her hand on the child and prayed was because she felt prompted to do that and Nathan had told her to simply obey whatever God asked her to do whether or not she thought it'd make sense

eventually, after he shared his experience with the cleaner guy at his office.

*Our own is just to obey and leave the workings to God.* He'd said.

So, she obeyed and the outcome of God's workings was a child declared medically free of pneumonia. That day, Ìyanu hurried to the call room, gasping and blinking back tears. The first person she called was Nathan.

"Ah ah, Ìyanu, *omọ Olórun tó'ń ẹ́ṣẹ́ Ìyanu* (Ìyanu, child of God working miracles)." Nathan jokingly hailed her over the phone. "Medical doctor wey dey administer power of God. I celebrate grace."

Ìyanu laughed and told him to stop.

"Don't let your head swell o, you know it's already big and pride goes before... you know the rest."

"My head is perfect. Thank you."

"Perfectly big."

"It's usually ladies calling their guy friends bighead, never the other way round."

Nathan tutted. "But you be my bro now."

Ìyanu laughed. "Touché."



As time went by, Edward needed a decisive answer from Nathan because they were now at the execution phase. Edward needed Nathan to travel with him to see real estate options their realtor had for Ed Motors, if he was coming

onboard. Nathan decided to seek the Lord's face. He knew better than to assume that just because the opportunity seemed shiny, it had to be from the Lord. He'd come a long way since Réniké.

He was praying and seeking direction on this job offer, when he heard what he called 'the ridiculous four words' in his spirit.

*Ìyanu is your wife.*

Nathan paused his prayer to have a good laugh.

First off, he had a sarcastic disposition to people saying things like God said *Lágbájá* is my wife. God said *Tàmèdò* is my husband. He knew that God never forced a partner on anyone and often times people only used those God said phrases as a manipulative ploy.

Secondly...

*"Ìyanu is my bro now."*

He brushed the thought aside and continued praying.

*You and Ìyanu will settle in Uyo. There is work for both of you in that land. Souls to win, disciples to make.*

*"So, God, I should take the job."*

*Yes.*

*Thank you, Jesus. Na wetin I wan hear be that. All these Ìyanu is your wife talk no follow.*

He gave Edward his answer after informing his Pastor. He kept the rest in his heart. But after the day he heard the ridiculous four words, he couldn't see Ìyanu the same way. He tried to see her as his *bro* and joke with her like they used to but

he couldn't. All of a sudden, he realised how dainty the ever-glimmering-curve of her forehead was, how full her lips were, the perfection of her dentition. All of a sudden, hearing her voice made his voice hide so that he stuttered in an attempt to find his voice. It was totally weird.

He gave himself pep talks that did nothing to quell the feeling blooming in him.

"Nathan, come off it. You can't fall your hand oh. Ìyanu looks up to you as her older brother. She said she's closer to you than she is to Bro Barnabas. You can't approach her tomorrow and start saying *dem say, dem say*. Èyítáyò Iyìọlá Olúwagbémilé kẹ Nathan ọmọ Mákànjúọlá, please and please for the sake of your reputation and your family, come off it."

It didn't take long for Ìyanu to notice that his deportment towards her was changing.

-You've been acting weird lately, are we safe?-

-Lol. We are safe jo-

But he knew they weren't. He called his Pastor and narrated everything to him. Pastor AB laughed long and hard.

"Pastor, it's not funny."

"What are you afraid of?"

He told his Pastor. He was afraid Ìyanu would reject him, she didn't have feelings for him. He was afraid things would someday go sour between them and they'd end up as strangers.

His Pastor told him to take some more time to pray and make up his mind. Vacillating would do him no good. And

Nathan understood what his Pastor meant. Ìyanu had just concluded her House job and soon, she'd be going for the one-year youth service corps. She could meet someone else- God forbid, God forbid.

*Why are you God forbidding if you claim you don't love her?*

Eventually, Nathan had to admit his feelings to himself.



The day Ìyanu received her call up letter, she showed up at Nathan's place. She was still operating from my bro dimension, where she could visit Nathan and binge-watch a horror series, but Nathan had shifted gear and he couldn't trust himself to behave with Ìyanu in his house, even though he knew Ethan was just in the bedroom.

"Let's take a walk." Nathan suggested.

Ìyanu shrugged, grinning in excitement.

*God, see teeth. Dey suppose use this girl for oral B advert.*

"I like what you're wearing."

Ìyanu scrunched up her nose at Nathan and stopped walking. "What is wrong with you?"

Nathan splayed his hands. "What?"

"What you just said."

"Is there anything wrong in complimenting you?"

"Yes, duh, you're my bro. We don't do that here."

And that was very true. When Nathan was still in the *my bro dimension*, he never complimented her nicely. The closest they ever came to complimenting each other was, 'you look less

ugly today.'

Nathan sighed.

"You've been acting weird. I keep saying it."

"There's nothing weird about complimenting my friend."

Ìyanu continued walking and stopped abruptly. "I know what's going here," She said slowly and brightened. "You are in love!"

Nathan's heart hammered like it wanted to break out of his rib cage. It didn't even take long for Ìyanu to discover him.

"Oh. My. God." Ìyanu covered her mouth, laughing. "Who is she?"

"Who is who?"

"The unlucky woman?"

"I don't know what you're talking about."

"Ah-ha," she folded her arms. "So, this is why you've been acting nice all of sudden, behaving as if you actually have respect. It's all because you want me to put in a good word for you, isn't it?"

Nathan looked away as he sighed in relief. *Close call.*

"I will still tell the person that you're a rude boy."

Nathan forced a chuckle. "So where were you posted?"

"You'll never be able to guess."

"Uyo," Nathan uttered. It wasn't a guess.

Ìyanu's eyes went wide. "How did you know?"

Nathan smiled and looked away. *God, I see you.*

Ìyanu pushed him playfully. "You prophetic people can

be such spoilsports. Back to the matter, who is she?"

Nathan inhaled deeply, bracing himself. "Ìyanu, come to dinner with me."

She scrunched up her nose again and was about to launch into a tirade on how that too was forbidden in their 'my bro' situation before Nathan cut in.

"I'll only tell you who the unlucky lady is at dinner. You'll soon be going for orientation camp, take this as my goodbye treat."

Ìyanu wiggled her lower jaw playfully. "You better take me somewhere nice."

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"Jeez! Nathan, are you trying to run yourself into bankruptcy? This place is too much now."

"It's not more than you deserve." Nathan said with a nervous smile.

Ìyanu rolled her eyes. "Stop this slimy niceness. It's just creepy. Tell me, who is she?"

"Won't you order something first?"

"No, I have food at home, I won't let this greedy people charge me for the décor of this place because of small food."

"The tab is on me."

"I won't let you spend foolishly."

"There's nothing foolish about spending on the woman you love."

Ìyanu laughed. "You are lucky we're in this place, I would have punched you if we were outside."



Nathan waved a waiter over. He placed an order for both of them, he knew that Ìyanu loved fried rice with prawn sauce and that was what he ordered for her.

"If you insist on wasting your money, I will chop it." Ìyanu said. "Hmm... this is nice."

"How prepared are you for camp?"

"Who is she?"

Nathan sighed deeply. "I know this might come as a shock to you, but the reason why I've been acting weird lately is because I've come to fall in love with you..." Nathan paused to gauge her reaction.

Ìyanu watched him for some seconds with the best poker face she could pull, expecting him to burst into laughter and say, 'gotcha.' Instead, she saw beads of sweat on his upper lip.

"Ewwww..." She said eventually. "God, no. How can you even say something like that, Nathan?"

"I mean it, Ìyanu. I love you and I want to marry you."

Ìyanu dropped her fork and a look of distress settled on her face. "I'm sorry but that can't happen."

Nathan's heart broke. "Why?"

"You're my bro... I don't see you like that..."

"Neither did I, but you see perspectives can change. Why don't you give it some time, thought and prayers? I'll wait."

Nathan could see a glass of tears in Ìyanu's eyes. "Turning a good friendship into a relationship almost always

ruins it." She shook her head. "I don't want to ever lose..."

"I understand your fear, Ìyanu. I really do. I'll wait. I won't wait forever sha, if after two months I don't hear from you, I'll have to move on."

"You sound like you're giving me deadline for an assignment." Ìyanu teased.

Nathan let out a weak smile. "You understand the assignment."

He looked away and the smile disappeared. The pain in his eyes was unmistakable.

Ìyanu exhaled. "I'm sorry. I didn't mean to hurt you."

Nathan took her hand, across the table. "You have nothing to apologise for. You have the right to say 'no' to anyone, even if that person is me..."

Ìyanu didn't remove her hand from Nathan's grip and she thought of how Nsikak would never say something like that.

"Moreover," Nathan continued. "You're not saying 'no' to me. You've just not said 'yes'... yet."

Ìyanu smiled.

*Now that's something Nsikak would say.*

"I've not even started considering and you're already narrowing your chances. This cockiness is a red flag."

Nathan lifted a corner of his mouth, in a half-smile. "But you love red."

Ìyanu sipped her drink, thinking to herself that she'd never told Nathan her favorite colour, that she never had a

favorite colour. But she loved red.

That night, when Ìyanu got back, she met Ladé and Dave waiting.

“How did your date with your *bro*, go?” Ladé asked.

Ìyanu looked from Ladé to David and back. “It was fine.” She made to move past them. Ladé dragged her by the arm.

“Come back here *jo*.”

“Ah-ha,” Ìyanu flipped her hair. “Hope no problem?”

David hissed, not wanting to beat about the bush. “Did you say yes?”

Ìyanu blinked. “Did you guys plant a mic in my hair?”

Ladé scoffed. “This is what too much horror TV causes. Your *bro* told us before asking you.”

“As a proper child that my Prophet is.”

Ìyanu rolled her eyes.

“Are you going to make us beg? What did you say?”

“Actually, I said ewww.”

## EPILOGUE

On the day of Nathan and Ìyanu's traditional wedding, Ethan felt envy churn his insides so fiercely that he had to find the nearest restroom.

He sat on the toilet bowl and held his face in his palms. It had been over two years since he became born again and every day, he went to bed hoping that the next day, his miracle would happen. That he'd wake up and not feel attracted to males. That he'd wake up able to think of a day like this when he too would get married. But that day never came.

He still felt the pull of same sex attraction two years after as strongly as he did the day he saw Jere in Gbòngán. He had community, he had the Word, he had the Spirit of God. He was able to overcome temptations and the times he came close to giving in, the Lord always showed him that door of escape promised in first Corinthians ten.

He knew God could change his desires. God created heaven and earth. God made him. He could alter the inclination of his body. He recalled the first time he asked Nathan a question that had bothered him since he was a child. If God made him in his image, why did homosexuality come naturally to him?

Nathan explained that since the fall, sin came naturally to every man because we all inherited a sinful nature. It was the reason why no one needed to teach a child to lie before they started telling lies. Evil has always been the natural inclination

of humans.

Ethan had more questions. Was his effeminacy also part of the fall's outcome? Was it the Devil that made him the way he was? If that was the case, was God his creator?

Nathan said God made his children in different, diverse ways. The beauty of God's creation shines in the diversity that existed even amongst organisms of the same specie. It was there in skin colour, in eye colour, in height.

"So, God made me the way I am, is that what you're saying?" Ethan had asked his brother.

Nathan nodded. "Yes."

"Why then is effeminacy almost always associated with homosexuality. It's like a prophecy that never fails, once you see a male child acting like a girl, you can already tell... Is that also part of God's design?"

These were questions Nathan himself had asked and thrashed with the Lord and his word.

"Permit me to be the typical Nigerian. I'll answer you with a question. In Genesis three, the Bible tells us that the serpent was more cunning than all the other creatures, who do you think made the serpent cunning?"

"God?"

"Yes, God made the serpent cunning. But the Devil took advantage of that for his own purpose. The serpent that lured Eve operated under the influence of the Devil. How do I know that God intended for the serpent to be cunning? We see scriptures later admonishing us to be wise as serpents.

Remember the conversation we had about God speaking through nature?"

Ethan nodded.

"God created the serpent with that cunning wisdom for a reason, but the enemy came to hijack the Lord's creation to serve his purpose."

Ethan remembered then what the Lord had told him in Gbongán. The Devil was not a creator, he was a thief.

"The fact that effeminacy is now associated with homosexuality is the work of the Devil trying to hijack people created by God for his will and pleasure. God made you, Ethan and you are perfect just the way you are. What sin tried to corrupt; the finished work of Christ has restored. You are perfect."

But why did God not take away the inclination of his flesh. Why? He kept asking God till he saw light.

If God took the desire of his flesh away, how would he show the world that the grace of God was enough to overcome homosexual temptation? If every same sex attracted person reverted to conventional straightness, how would they be able to reach to the person still wallowing in homosexuality?

Ethan knew that God was doing a work in his life and through his life. He'd shared his story to a number of boys that God had brought his way. He had encouraged Ijeoma and been a practical example of what self-denial looked like. With him, Ijeoma could openly talk about her temptations and failings. But still, he couldn't help the feeling of envy that gnawed at him.

Four months ago, Nathan was invited by the local church in Gbongán as the guest minister for their annual revival and the news of how powerfully Nathan ministered the true gospel and the power of God reached Ethan over and again. Yet, he could not show his face in the same local church because they knew his history.

Nathan was getting married and moving to Uyo finally with Ìyanu. Why did his younger brother have it all smooth and his own journey was fraught with hitches and gallops? God had orchestrated a happy ending for Nathan, but for him there seemed to be none in sight.

Tears streamed down his face.

“God,” He whispered.

“This is not who I am. I am not envious...” The tears poured in torrents. “I rejoice with them that rejoice. God, help me to be genuinely happy for my brother. I refuse to play the fool by comparing myself with Nathan. My journey is different, my path is different.”

He paused and pressed a fist to his chest.

“I am alive in Christ. I have a thriving multinational business. I have all I need. God has been good to me. I am grateful. I am grateful. I rejoice with my brother.”

Having emptied his bowels, he cleaned up and stood before the mirror. He wiped his tears and sniffed. He adjusted his agbada, took out his lip gloss and applied it. He smacked his lips and exhaled.

“You will go out there, smile and dance because today is

a happy day.”

It was then his phone beeped with a mail from Terrence. Terrence was asking to collaborate with Ethan for the exhibition he was planning. The body of the mail informed Ethan that the exhibition was for pieces on nature and he wanted Ethan to submit a collection.

Ethan lifted his face from his phone. He knew which piece would be the first. It was emblazoned in his mind. He'd illustrate himself on Gbòngán's hill seeing the graying skies and the rainbow. He'd call his collection 'replete'.

He stepped out of the toilet with a smile on his face, a smile that died when he saw his mother standing outside. She inhaled deeply and took a step towards him.

They looked at each other for what felt like a long time and in that time, words and understanding passed between them without the need of utterance.

Mrs. Mákànjúọlá opened her arms. “*Ọmọ mi,*” She mouthed and embraced Ethan.

THE END





Goodness is a child of God passionate about teaching God's word through stories. He's a screenwriter, novelist and drama minister.

Other books by Goodness: Complete and Walking the Blood-Paved Path

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I look forward to reading your feedback. Stay blessed.

## ABOUT THE BOOK

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Against the backdrop of the world of characters from Complete, new characters and fresh drama emerge. Ethan's sexuality, gender dysphoria and the hurts from his years in Nigeria pull him from all sides. He's decided to live free of the yoke of religion, to live out who he's meant to be. Nathan continues to reach out to his brother with the gospel but it seems the more he tries, the harder the pieces of his life crumble, not to talk of Ethan's impenetrable defenses.

From her experiences and mistakes, Moni draws relatable and useful content for her YouTube. But her life is about to change, about to become the very thing she hated as a child.

David somehow manages to pull himself and all he loves into a new field of gooey danger when he takes what a powerful man considers his property.

Edward must surmount the limitations of his fears and negative adaptations if he will ever enjoy a healthy relationship and he wants to. He's pushing thirty-seven and he's the only one in the squad still single.

