

IN THIS TENT



ELIZABETH OLUGBENGA

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by

Elizabeth Olugbenga

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DEDICATION

To every believer, the Lord sees you and hears you. Keep trusting Him.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

To God be the glory, great things He has done. Without Him, this book would not be written. May God's name be praised forever, amen.

To Jesus Christ, the Mediator of a better covenant, which was established on better promises (Hebrews 8:6), be the glory. It is through His blood that was shed at Calvary that we gain access to the Father. May His name be exalted.

Blessed be the gentle and loving Holy Spirit who guides us into all truth. He is indeed a great Teacher.

I'm grateful to my best friend, lover, husband, and number one reader, Tolulope Olugbenga. In you, I have seen that God is indeed a perfect matchmaker. I bless the Lord for bringing you into my life. You are one in a universe. Thanks for all you allow God to do through you. I love you immensely.

I appreciate my loved ones and everyone God has placed in my life for one purpose or the other. God bless you all.

To you reading this book, I say a big 'thank you'. It would be pointless to write without a reader. May God draw you closer and keep you standing in His will till you meet Him in Glory, amen.

Dr Jack removed his eyeglasses and carefully placed them on the file tray. He leaned forward, his arms resting on the broad table and fingers interlocked. His permanently furrowed forehead, receding hairline, and grey hair gave him away—he was no longer as young as he would have loved people to believe.

Dr Jack spoke in a gentle voice, attempting to infuse compassion into every word he uttered. Relaying bad news was not strange to him. He had done it more times than could be counted in his thirty-three years of medical practice. It was almost the order of the day in his chosen speciality. However, he had determined to be kind each time he had to do it.

He stared at the couple seated before him. “Having reviewed the results of the various investigations you have undergone so far, I’m sorry to inform you that the tumour is malignant. I mean the growth is cancerous.” He paused briefly, allowing them to interpret his words in their heads.

Yemi and Tito exchanged glances. Tears welled up in Tito’s eyes in seconds. They had hoped for a miracle. They had prayed for good news.

“The good news is that we can salvage this situation through surgery and therapy.” Dr Jack hushed. He had a habit of allowing a moment of silence or response between his statements.

Yemi sighed. Looking at his wife, he could sense how much she was trying to fight back her tears. It was no surprise that her eyes were reddened and heavy. She had sobbed uncontrollably during the prayer session they had the previous night.

Yemi raised his gaze to meet the doctor’s. “What does the surgery entail?” he managed. It was time for a mind shift. There

was no doubting it. Dr Jack was the third oncologist to confirm this case.

Yemi and Tito had flown to the UK from Nigeria after they had refused to be convinced by a senior oncology consultant who gave them a second opinion in Abuja. There was no hiding from the truth anymore. The sooner they embraced the truth, probably the better.

“That is a good question. Due to the size of the tumour and its features, we will have to remove the affected kidney completely. Thereafter, you will go through a course of treatment to reduce the likelihood of reoccurrence and attempt to destroy any cancer cell left.”

“Remove a whole kidney!” Tito’s voice shot through the roof. She didn’t need to be a medical person to know that the kidney is a vital organ.

“Yes, I’m afraid. There’ll be one kidney left.” Dr Jack cast a glance at the CT scan and MRI report on his table. “Yes, the right kidney will be left intact,” he affirmed. He was aware that rarely some people were born with a single kidney. It was a relief that Yemi’s reports showed he didn’t belong to that group.

Tito shook her head. “God knows the body needs two kidneys. He doesn’t waste resources. How can a person deal with having only one kidney?” Her voice exposed how deeply troubled she was.

“I understand your fears, ma’am. However, I can tell you that there are many people with one kidney living a good life and there are others who would have been alive if only they had one. Some are actually born with only one. Of course, there will be precautions to heed to preserve the health of the organ, but it is far from being a death sentence,” Dr Jack said.

Titi drew a breath. The doctor could not be wrong, she thought.

“I’m glad the reports show there’s no significant metastasis yet. Meaning no extensive spread of the cancer cells at the moment. I suggest an immediate preparation for surgery as delay often tilts the table out of favour in many cases.” Dr Jack sat up. His job was done. It was left for Yemi to make his decision.

“Thank you, Doctor. How many weeks would you say is too long? We need more time to digest this,” Tito said.

“I can make arrangements to put you on the priority list for theatre in two weeks or three max.” Dr Jack pulled out a yellow folder from the pile and opened it, quickly scanning through the operation schedule. The next week and the subsequent one were fully booked with cases. But he knew if he tried, he could get a slot before the third week ran out.

“Alright. We will let you know what we decide. Thank you very much for your help,” Tito said.

Dr Jack wondered why Yemi was quiet. “Do you have any further questions?” he said, facing Yemi.

“No, thank you. We will get across to you as my wife has said,” Yemi said.

Dr Jack nodded. “Okay. You are welcome and I hope to hear from you as soon as possible.”

The couple rose to their feet. Yemi stretched out his hand to the doctor.

Dr Jack took the hand and shook it lightly, a smile plastered on his face. “See you later,” he said as Yemi and his wife took their leave.

2

Elder Jide Olakanmi shut his eyes, his hands clasped, as he said grace. The occasion was his family's special dinner, the icing on the cake of the biannual fellowship he and his wife held with their children and their families.

Elder Jide's five children—Muyiwa, Yemi, Bimbo, Dapo, and Fikemi—knew how important their presence at the gathering was, not only to their parents but also to themselves. As one big family, the meeting provided the avenue to pray together, feast, and catch up with whatever was going on in one another's life. And for some, it was an opportunity to showcase one achievement or the other. On rare instances when any member of the family was to be absent, a genuine reason preceded. The children knew their mother, Professor Maria Olakanmi, fondly called Nana by every member of the family, would not take no for an answer except in acceptable circumstances. Even the grandchildren had learnt to look forward to every family event.

"Amen," everyone at the large round table chorused.

Elder Jide opened his eyes and sat straighter. "Let the feast begin!" he said with a smile.

Muyiwa Olakanmi, Elder Jide's first son, was the first to comment as he ran his eyes over the many dishes on the table—from one bowl to another of assorted meals. "Nana's style of meal presentation is the best. Mum has an amazing way of making food enticing. I feel like I'm at a presidential luncheon." He raised his gaze to meet his mother's. She was seated opposite him, beside his father. Muyiwa smiled and bowed, his way of doting on his mother and affirming she was always appreciated.

“What a good flatterer you are. Remember you pass even better comments every time I cook,” Lucy said and laughed as though her statement was amusing.

Lucy has been Muiyiwa’s wife for many years but was never tired of wanting to be at the centre of attention, especially when the matter involved her husband.

“My mother’s skill is equal to none. The love and blessings in her food nurtured my brother before you met him.” The voice belonged to Fikemi, the youngest of Elder Jide’s children.

Nana spoke next. “Thank you, son.” She smiled at Lucy. “I agree with you, dear daughter. If none of you can do something better than I can, then I have failed. You are all living my dream.” She turned her head in Fikemi’s direction and shot her a look that warned her to desist from any combative comment. Nana’s joy was seeing the family united as one despite personal differences. She would not permit anything to come in between her children.

Lucy grinned, appeased by her mother-in-law’s response.

Servings began. Cling! Clang! Cutleries against plates. Cups against cups.

“These peppered snails are so scrumptious. They remind me of the time I went with a few colleagues to a restaurant on Lagos Island. A few plates of peppered snails and some cups of chilled punch cost us an arm and a leg. I was so disappointed,” Bimbo said, seated beside her husband, Wale. She was the third child of the family, a successful legal practitioner, and a second-time winner of ‘The Choice Advocate Award.’

“The prices of things in those lofty restaurants can be alarming. Imagine getting a bottle of coke for ten times the original cost,” Dapo said. His wife, Stephanie, nodded in agreement.

“You can’t criticize them. The owners believe their target customers have sufficient money to pay for their goods and still give a tip. The truth is, if those eateries were not posh and expensive, they would have a different calibre of customers,” Lucy said.

“I don’t understand the last part,” Stephanie said. “What do you mean by having different calibre of customers?”

“Well, people say like begets like. They would only command the presence of the poor!” Lucy shrugged, her brow lifted. “After all, there are outlets available for every class. Turn into a place you can afford next time.”

Stephanie simpered. “That’s funny but true.”

“True because the pride of the rich will not let them associate with cost-effective goods. To them those kinds of goods are cheap, and cheap doesn’t reflect who they think they are,” Yemi said. He was next to Muiwa in the order of birth and the seating arrangement. His wife, Tito, flanked him on the right.

“I completely disagree. It’s not necessarily pride. It’s class. Some things do not befit a person at certain stages of life,” the voice was Lucy’s. The smile on her face had faded, keen to put up a defence. “For instance, no one seated here would buy food from a street vendor and eat standing in the corner of the street. That’s unbecoming you see. To buttress that, another example is the variety of food on this table right now. It’s all class you see.” A proud smile lifted the corners of her lips.

Fikemi shook her head. She always had a reason to think in a contrasting direction as Lucy. “I don’t think those examples suit the context. I understand the place of preference, but many merely waste money to inflate their ego. The same empty pride the Scriptures ask us to run away from.”

Lucy grinned. She always had words ready on her lips. Her sister-in-law, Fikemi, probably had forgotten that, she thought.

“On a lighter note, talking of the Scriptures, the Scriptures say it is not good for a man to be alone. I suppose it is the same for the woman. Are you cooking up a plan to bring the lucky man to this table anytime soon? We would like to know. We are expectant. Am I speaking everyone’s mind?” Lucy said, not caring that her words seemed to have stilled the buzzing ambience.

Everyone knew where Lucy was headed, but no one verbalized agreement with her. She was asking a question other family members often avoided. Fikemi was the last and the only single of Elder Jide’s five children. To her parents, being single at thirty-three was not a crime. But to some people, of whom Lucy was the

ringleader, it was a matter to be extremely concerned and ashamed about.

Lucy rarely sought to sheath the sword. She said whatever she had on her mind without fear or concern for the hearers' emotions. When she perceived a person to be overstepping boundaries and not being respectful as much as she believed she commanded, she was quick to put them in their place with her words.

Fikemi rolled her eyes. She opened her mouth but words stuck to her throat. She raised a glass of water to her lips and drank instead.

"It's difficult to tell people's plans. Is it not a coded world we live in?" Stephanie said, not wanting to be on any side.

"Fikemi likes surprises. She has something up her sleeves, I bet. When she's ready to unbox the jewel, we will all meet the gentleman," Bimbo said. Her weak attempt to protect her sister.

Unbox the jewel! Fikemi forced a smile. What jewel were they expecting when her box was empty? Anyway, not completely empty. She had Goriola in her space. She was simply waiting for him to pop the question on one knee, and she would run home to share the good news with her family. "Shower your jobs and businesses with your undivided attention for now because when I bring home my man, we will have all the attention." She hand-fanned herself, grinning. If Lucy were not simple in mind, she would understand the mind-your-business message she had just subtly passed.

Lucy spoke next. "We look forward to meeting him. Our attention we will be willing to give as long as-"

"Dear, try this moi-moi." Muyiwa raised a spoon of food to his wife's lips, interrupting her. She had said enough. "It's as soft and delicious as you can imagine," he added.

A perfect opportunity to change the focus of the spotlight. "You are a bit on the sunset side today, brother. You know I don't miss the nuances. Trust all is well with you," Bimbo said, facing Yemi.

"We thank God. Let the weak say I am strong," Yemi said and lifted the corners of his lips in a dry smile.

“Amen!” Bimbo lifted a hand. “Hallelujah,” she said in a teasing way. “How did the check-up go? Any news yet?”

Yemi hesitated and did a quick scan of the faces at the table. He did not want anyone to panic. And he did not want to be hurt either by any untoward comments. The less he said the better for them all perhaps. “We are believing God for good news. The second consultant I saw said one of the last scans showed a small tumour so he has referred me. I have an appointment with a specialist in the UK next month. That’s our last point of call,” he said.

“Tumour? God forbid. Not in your body in Jesus’ name. The doctor must be blind,” Lucy cuts in. If she loved any subset of the family dearly, it was Yemi and his family. “Your body is the temple of the Holy Ghost. The devil can’t touch a holy vessel. Not your righteous self. No!”

“We are the righteousness of God through Christ Jesus. It is not of our works but of His works,” Fikemi countered. She loved her brother as well but disagreed with the self-righteous claims she perceived her sister-in-law was making.

“Hallelujah!” Bimbo said. She diverted the attention back to Yemi before the two women could start another word fight. “The Lord is your healer, brother. We will trust God for good news.”

“Can we quickly say a word of prayer together?” Muyiwa said. He was one of the ministers in his local church and always seized every opportunity to lead a prayer.

They dropped their cutleries and held hands for a brief prayer.

“...Amen. I’m confident that it is done! Come back with a testimony!” Muyiwa said.

“Amen!” Lucy nodded. “The Lord always hears us when we pray,” she said with a tone of superiority.

“Hallelujah, amen!” Fikemi mouthed with thwarted lips. She exchanged pregnant glances with her sister and they both smiled.

Before drama could ensue from that, Yemi spoke next. “How’s your business? I remember you were talking about enlarging your coast during the last dinner. How’s it going now?” he said, his eyes on Wale.

Nana nodded. "That's true. I remember too. How's it going, Wale?"

"I bless the Lord. God has been faithful. I have expanded to four other cities. We received the first shipment for two new outlets two weeks ago. Miraculously, more than eighty per cent of the goods have been sold," Wale said, beaming, his eyes lit. Many get-togethers of the family had his wife hailed and celebrated as successful. Bimbo was a thriving career woman, no doubt. But he was a successful businessman too. If the family could just take their eyes off his wife for a second, they would see how much he had achieved over the years.

"That's great news." Nana dropped her cutlery and raised her gaze to the ceiling. "Thank You, Father."

Wale continued, "I graced an interview on a breakfast show on TV last week, and as though it was an advert, our sales rose through the roof. In fact, I had to dedicate most of my time to sorting out new shipments. I've had to increase supply by over a hundred per cent. It's still like a dream to me." Pleasure filled his voice.

Distaste rose up Bimbo's throat. I did this. I did that. I- I- I, was all Bimbo could hear in her husband's self-glorifying speech. Irritating. She swallowed the piece of meat in her mouth. What could her husband have achieved without her support? Had she not loaned him some millions of naira when he was clearing the goods he ordered? Did she demand any interest as the bank would have if he had gotten the loan from there? Now he had forgotten the use of the pronoun 'we'. Besides, she could argue that she was more prosperous than he was. How could he speak as though his success was second to none?

Wale spoke on, joyfully sharing the highlights of his thriving businesses with the applauding audience.

"Business is the new gold mine," Dapo said. "I plan to venture into one myself."

"The Lord has blessed you enough. Leave the business world for those of us just starting," Wale said.

Dapo grinned. “Excuse me. No one wants more blessings than I do. I was in a meeting with some friends last week and we were strategizing on how to get investors and kick off our vehicle importation business. I am flying to Abuja next weekend to meet them and run through the plans on paper with a lawyer.”

“I hope it’s not the kind of business that will take you away from home too frequently.” Lucy turned to Samantha. “Do you agree with me that this is the time for your husband to be closer to home? We all want to coo and caw over a chubby baby, you see.”

Samantha managed a smile. Lucy had just hit her where it was most painful. She had been trying to conceive for five years, eating and drinking everything every Tom, Dick and Harry suggested. On some days, her heart was overwhelmed with pain that would not go away. On many nights, she wept uncontrollably on her pillow. And on some days she starved herself in anger for finding it difficult to achieve what other married women had—children.

Samantha wanted a child to call her own. But a thought of doctors’ reports sent chills down her spine. Only one doctor told her she and her husband were perfectly fine and would conceive anytime soon. Another doctor said she had polycystic ovarian syndrome and might struggle to conceive. And yet another one said her tubes were blocked. None of the doctors they had seen mentioned anything wrong with Dapo, her husband.

To avoid being the problem, Samantha had done everything each of the doctors prescribed. She had even tried in-vitro fertilisation twice in a renowned fertility clinic one of her doctors recommended. Not only did the procedure fail the two times she attempted it, but also left her grappling with unspeakable bitterness and anguish for months, leaving a scar on her heart.

How could Lucy scratch her wound with such ease and laughter? Did she think this matter was a joke? Did she know what waiting for a child felt like?

Samantha fluttered her eyelids, trying to keep tears at bay. She remembered her pain, the tears that dripped from her eyes each time she saw the red flag of another wasted cycle. She swallowed. She had to pull herself together. Not here, not now.

Dapo shrugged. "I doubt starting a business has anything to do with having a baby. You can ask my wife. I'm clean. And I do my best. I believe..."

Samantha trailed off, suddenly isolated from the room. Her husband's words echoed in her head. I'm clean! I do my best! She finished the statement in her head. I believe Samantha is the problem!

"I believe in God's time our joy will be full. I am sure the baby will come one day. You are all praying for us, aren't you?" Dapo said. His heart was as light as a feather. Whenever his wife accused him of not being concerned enough, he told her there was no point worrying so much about what he could not control. He believed he would have a child someday. If his wife couldn't conceive eventually, they would adopt, he had sometimes said.

"We are definitely praying for you. Sooner than you expect, we will all rejoice with you," Elder Jide said.

Everyone chorused amen except Samantha who had swollen up with bottled tears. She sniffed as the bank of tears in her eyes broke, forming rivulets on her face.

Professor Maria was a grandmother. She knew how sensitive the matter was. Most people in Samantha's shoes would be touchy once the subject was brushed.

Nana made up her mind to walk to Samantha's chair and say to her, "Walk with me, my darling." She would take her away from the table and allow her to breathe fresh air and weep if necessary. Anything she needed to relieve the burden on her heart.

As though Elder Jide could read his wife's mind, he placed his hands atop hers. "Not now. You can comfort her after the dinner," he whispered.

Nana immediately understood the message her husband was passing across to her. She could not always jump in to protect the children. They had to keep growing and withstand what the world threw in their way. They would need support, no doubt, but they needed the opportunity to develop strength.

Tito passed a box of tissues to Samantha and patted her back. Although she had two children, she had her own worries. “All will be well,” she whispered.

The dinner ended soon after. As customary, Elder Jide gave thanks for the food and they moved from the dining table to the living room, where they watched a Christian movie, sang, and prayed together before they departed to their respective houses.

3

Attendees of today's Sunday service at TFG gospel church were convinced the service was glorious as usual. The membership of the church was majorly composed of the elites.

The women finished a meeting about their preparation for the upcoming International Women's Day and a conference they were organizing to precede the date. Lucy was part of the women's committee members and had to attend the meeting.

Lucy rose to her feet as soon as the closing prayer was said. She picked up her bag and straddled it across her shoulder.

"Why are you in a rush? The lead pastor is still in a meeting with the pastors and elders. It is not yet home time," Seun, the women president said.

Lucy knew what that meant, more waiting time. Since her husband was one of the ministers, his attendance was compulsory. "No rush. I'll wait for him in the car," she said and started walking towards the side door that led to the car park with some other women.

Lucy smiled as one of the women complimented her beauty.

"It's the Lord's doing, marvellous in my sight," Lucy said with a whiff of pride.

"Sincerely, you should connect me to the vendor who supplies your dresses. You always look exquisite." The voice belonged to Dina, a wife to another church minister.

"Thank you. People often say they can't resist my dressing, yet they say my supplier's wares are outrageously expensive. Those I referred bought none, they told me the cost of one dress could

buy tens of what they were used to.” Lucy raised her shoulders. “What could I have done about that?”

Dina got the message. She was in no league of hers. “Wow. I suppose it’s settled people like you the vendor wants as customers.”

Lucy shrugged. “Well, someone has to patronize to keep the business running. Aside from that, the outlet sells only imported clothes, the best quality of all.”

Dina nodded. “Of course.”

Hauwa, a professor of medicine, joined the conversation. “I love your hat the most. It’s quite attractive and complementary to your dress.”

“Thank you. It is called a fascinator for a reason, you see.” Lucy smiled. “How are the kids doing?”

“I heard the baby of the house secured university admission to study medicine. Congratulations,” Taiwo—a widow and the immediate younger sister to the senior pastor—said to Hauwa.

Hauwa nodded. “We thank God. I’m glad he made it. Thank you.”

“That’s good news. I’m so happy for you,” Dina said.

“Congratulations. What a joy to see our young ones grow and excel. Junior got admission to study law. He wants to be an outstanding lawyer like his aunt,” Lucy said. Junior was her third child and only son.

“Wow. That’s nice. I thought he wasn’t due for tertiary education until next year.” The voice was Dina’s. Her firstborn was in the same SS2 class as Junior, so she had presumed they would be due for the next level at the same time.

“Well, I also for once thought it would be next year, but Junior passed all the qualifying exams with flying colours. We made him write the exams only as a test, in preparation for the coming year, but he made it. There’s no point wasting his time, don’t you think?” Lucy said.

Lucy’s statement did not seem to sit well with Dina. “That’s good but is he not too young? Is he not just fourteen? I remember he is two months younger than my son, his classmate.”

“I wouldn’t say that. My firstborn, Dorothy, was just fifteen when she gained admission. And she is doing fine. She’s in her third year, making us proud. A fantastic girl any woman would like to mother. My second child followed in her footsteps. I don’t see any reason why Junior should be stuck in secondary school.” Lucy faced Taiwo. “Do you not agree with me?”

Taiwo knew Lucy too well to disagree. In times past, Lucy had often stylishly dismissed every conversation that had Taiwo on the table as a contributor. Taiwo did not want to conclude that Lucy believed she had no place in her caucus although her behaviour often indicated that, especially since she became a widow.

Taiwo had known Lucy for many years as ever maintaining a high class. Being a sister to the lead pastor was perhaps her only leverage to securing friendship with Lucy. So if Lucy was publicly asking for her opinion now, she had probably accepted her.

Taiwo nodded. “Junior is a wonderful boy. I’m confident he will fare well and excel in the university.”

“I know he’s brilliant, I’m just thinking of maturity. You know, university is quite different from high school,” Dina said.

Hauwa spoke next. “My daughter is sixteen. We made her do a pre-degree course when she finished high school at fifteen. Her father didn’t want her to start too early. But the truth is that the course is no different from being a university undergraduate. Moreover, becoming a doctor takes seven years and she wants to be a professor like her mother. The sooner, the better for her.”

“Exactly. All they need is support. And my children have that in abundance. Their father is amazing with them. And they know me too well to mess with me or do anything contrary to what I have taught them. All I receive about them is good news. I’m glad I raised them well,” Lucy said with a high-level aplomb.

Taiwo gestured. “That’s great! Thank God for His grace.”

Lucy gifted her a smile. “Thank you.”

Wunmi, one of the women executives, spoke for the first time as they stepped into the car park. “Will you be joining us?” she said, facing Lucy. “We want to say a quick hello to Felicia in the hospital and pray with her. We learnt she lost the baby.”

Lucy shook her head. “May we not go on a walk of shame? Should she be in the hospital, having a baby, in the first place? No! She should be in the university, studying. Irresponsible girls give themselves up to be deceived by the wiles of the devil and smear shame on everyone.”

“She lost the baby,” Dina said for emphasis, perhaps Lucy would speak with more compassion.

“She had better be glad that our Lord chose to minimize her humiliation by taking back the baby. She’d have wasted another year or two nursing the poor thing,” Lucy said in an irritation-tainted tone.

“It’s a sorry case, but these our children need prayers. I can’t stress that enough. Only God can help us raise them,” Wunmi replied.

“I understand God needs to help but the bulk is on us. Sincerely, mothers need to wake up,” Taiwo said.

Lucy nodded. “You have said my mind. I fast and pray for my children. Not only that, I take responsibility for them. I paint the right pictures and train them the right way. Tell me how they would turn out bad. Even when I am not there, they see me constantly in their heads and do the right thing. I do everything that needs to be done. The children have no excuse.”

“You have a valid point but it’s good to balance views. There’s a lot at stake when it comes to raising Godly children, especially now that negative influence abounds in the world we live in. One has to be fully dependent on God as much as one takes responsibility. I think it is best to lead them to the Lord early and pray the Holy Spirit continue to nudge them to do the right thing,” Hauwa said.

“The Bible says, “Not by might nor by power, but by My Spirit,” says the Lord of hosts.’ Child-raising is not by strength,” Dina said.

“That’s the Scripture lazy people quote. I bet Felicia’s mother had the same on her lips. During the midweek service on Wednesday, I saw how she was laughing and acting like all was well with her. Shameless woman. I’m not surprised her children turned

out the way they did. Someone that should be on a two-year personal retreat, asking the Lord for forgiveness for her recklessness,” Lucy said.

“Ah! Ah! Mrs Olakanmi!” Dina could not stay silent. “Let’s not trample an already fallen man. If she needs anything now, it’s our prayers and support, not judgment. Especially, knowing her daughter had a stillbirth on Friday.”

“I’m not judging her at all. This is just holy anger against irresponsibility. Women should be spiritual giants as well as conquering spaces as women of substance in the secular world. I hate nonsense.” Lucy hissed.

Wunmi could tell the conversation would scale out of hands if it kept the same momentum. “We all need the grace of God. Let him that thinks he stand take heed, lest he fall. The Lord is our help,” she said calmly.

Dina gestured. “Amen!”

“We had better be on the way quickly before the pastors’ meeting ends and our families have to wait an extended period for us,” Wunmi added.

Dina nodded. “We can use my car, I fuelled it this morning.”

“I have a couple of patients to review today. I should follow you in my car so that I can head to the Teaching Hospital once we are done praying,” Hauwa said.

“I wish I could come with you but I must speak with a few sisters who have been longing for a chat with me. They need some sort of support. The Lord has called us to do good. I can’t evade this assignment, you see,” Lucy said. She turned to Taiwo. “Would you mind joining me to attend to the ladies?”

Taiwo shook her head. “I don’t mind. It’s the Lord’s work. Moreover, I visited Felicia yesterday evening along with the pastor and his family.”

“Alright. See you later,” Wunmi said and followed Dina to her car.

Lucy faked a smile. “The Lord goes with you,” she said and turned in the direction of her Toyota Venza.

4

“What are we going to do now?” Tito paced in the room she shared with her husband. “For how long would we run from the reality? We can no longer keep rejecting this. It is here already.” She sucked in her lower lip and drew a long breath that filled her lungs. “And please, don’t say I’m faithless.”

Tito perched on the bedside locker. She looked as if she had the world on her shoulders. Weary, depressed, angry, and other emotions in between. “We can’t let things get out of control. We have prayed. I’m sure even God knows we have prayed. I am-” She broke into tears.

Fear mixed with vexation washed over her. Her husband’s diagnosis had remained the same over the six weeks they had hoped it was a mistake. If the two specialists in Nigeria were erroneous in their consultation, could it be the same for Dr Jack, a senior consultant and medical expert in England? Aside from the many abbreviations of qualifications that followed his name on the nameplate on his table, he had many years of continuous experience in the field. Moreover, the consultant they saw in Abuja who referred them to Dr Jack told them he was one of the best in the world. He could not be wrong.

Tito raised her gaze to meet her husband’s. “Will you please say something? I’m not ranting. Am I?” she said.

Yemi smiled.

Tito could instantly tell that his smile lacked depth. His eyes were dark, empty.

Yemi tilted backwards, arching his back, in an attempt to achieve temporary relief from the pain in his back.

Tito was moved with compassion. She thought Yemi did not deserve pain. He was the kind of man she would willingly marry again and again. He was humble, faithful, kind, loving, and spiritual enough to be a watchful priest over their home. She still remembered how ladies thronged him in the university. Many tried to steal his heart. How he managed to stay focused in the midst of all that still surprised her. Yemi was a whole lot of goodies in one bag. How could he be the one in so much pain now? How? Now she knew that bad things sometimes happen to good people.

“Sweetheart, all will be well. We will not stop praying.” Yemi’s voice was lower than usual.

“We have not stopped praying, dear. If Jack is standing with the others on the same subject, then it is high time we took action. We can’t let time fly by with the solution.”

“I understand. I plan to update Pastor Tim and the senior pastor later today. We will trust God for direction.”

Tito adjusted her dress. “Pastor Tim does not seem to want you to have surgery or any medical intervention. He keeps saying you should have faith. I believe faith and work go hand in hand. We need to heed Dr Jack’s advice. We cannot waste any more time.”

“I appreciate your deep concern but we must tread carefully. I don’t want you to speak like that. We are not wasting our time by praying.”

“That’s not what I mean. I’m sure you understand. I’m just saying that we should put into consideration what the doctor said about time being of the essence.”

“Whose report do you believe?”

“God’s! Sweetheart, you should know better. God allowed science for a reason. All the discoveries and improvements in health care are for a purpose. You know I’m a woman of radical faith. I’m just telling you to allow us to make use of the system He has created for such challenges while we pray for healing. Is that too much to ask?”

Yemi drew a breath. His wife was right. “I absolutely agree with you. I am not against seeking medical intervention. If I were against it, I would not have gone to all the hospitals we’ve been to and would have declined the rigorous tests I have had to go through. Moreover, I’m the one experiencing the symptoms. I have no reason to take things lightly. We are on the same page, okay?” He searched her eyes for affirmation. “I just want to let the pastors know so they can pray along with us.”

“I just don’t want you changing your mind if Pastor Tim says no. You have your life to live my dear. You can’t be reckless.”

“Enough has been said about that. Vain babbling leads to more ungodliness. Let the matter rest.” Yemi unfastened the buttons on his shirt. “You will know what our final decision is.”

What did he mean by that? Was doing the surgery no longer their final decision? She wondered. “I will go boil some rice,” she said, not wanting to flog the matter any longer. She already knew in her mind that her husband was having the surgery as planned except the tumour disappeared before the day, which was her desire anyway. All she wanted was for him to be in good health.

Yemi watched Tito walk out of the room without a second look at him. He knew she was concerned about him. He was worried too. He wanted divine healing. He had been meditating on the Scriptures. But what if his healing was embedded in the surgery? He could only hope and trust.

5

Fikemi mopped the drops of tears on her cheek with her hanky. She fluttered her eyelids in an attempt to keep the tears at bay.

Her friend, Moyo, watched in surprise. Moyo had rarely seen her friend weep as such. “Why are you crying like a baby? You don’t need it. Stop it,” she said.

Fikemi raised her head and looked into her friend’s eyes. “You don’t understand, Moyo. You don’t know how it feels. I’m the one wearing the shoes, not you.”

“Yes, you know where the shoe pinches but crying and being like this does not solve the problem. If a pair of shoes is not comfortable, you buy another pair or walk barefoot at worst, anything that makes you comfortable. You have to prioritize yourself, your mental health, and your well-being.”

“It’s not as simple as you think. You needed to see how expectant I was, especially when Gori started by asking if I knew how important I was to him. He said he valued me so much that he wouldn’t have any important event in his life without me. I was more than flattered.” Fikemi shook her head. “I presumed he was eventually ready to pop the question. Ready to face our mutual feelings or so I thought.”

“So what did he say?”

Fikemi hissed as she replayed the event in her head. “He said he wanted me to assist him in organizing a surprise proposal for his girlfriend.”

“Ah!”

“I was so mad. Arrange a proposal for someone else when I was expecting one myself.”

Moyo restrained herself from full-blown laughter and beamed instead.

Fikemi continued. “It took all the composure left in the world to keep a fake smile on my face. You know the kind of smile you do despite gritting your teeth.”

Moyo nodded.

“To be candid, at that point, I felt like piercing his tongue with a pen. I can’t even tell how I managed to stay composed at that moment.

Moyo giggled. Her friend had just narrated to her how the man she had hoped to marry was getting wedded to another person. They both knew the man in question, Gori. Moyo could remember a few times she had asked Fikemi about the relationship. A relationship with no title where Fikemi dreamed of settling down and having children and the guy thought otherwise.

Fikemi frowned. “What’s funny about this? Do you think that was a joke?”

“I’m so sorry, dear.” Moyo patted Fikemi’s shoulder. “I can imagine how you felt. It must have been dreadful. Oh, poor you!” She made dramatic faces.

Fikemi grimaced, wondering what her friend was up to.

“I bet you loathe Gori now. Oh, poor you. How he led you on, wasted your time, or was it you who wasted your own time?”

“What’s wrong with you, Moyo? Are you hearing yourself at all? Gori wasted my time.”

“I don’t agree with that in totality because I told you multiple times to ask the guy what exactly he wanted with you, but you said I was jumping the rope. Have you forgotten already?”

Moyo believed having an undefined relationship of several months often had one end, a bitter one. She thought if a man wanted to be a friend, he should make it clear and be a friend. Yes, friendship could upgrade into a deeper relationship. But association without purpose could lead to a sad end ultimately.

“Are you saying I deserve that treatment? When he knew he didn’t intend to marry me, why was he spending so much time with me? Why was he being so kind, supportive, and at my beck and call? He would take me out, buy me things, and listen to my stories about work and everything. Help me with stuff and lots more.”

“The giving is mutual. Remember you gave him the latest iPhone as a birthday gift in January. And you missed my sister’s wedding because his mum was sick and you had offered to stick around the hospital.”

“Stop it, Mo.” Fikemi held her nasal bridge for a minute. “I know you were not in full support of my relationship with Gori but stop blaming me for his mistakes.”

“Sorry, this is me getting things mixed up now. Gori messed up big time. I wish I could beat him up and make him feel sorry for what you helped him put you through.”

Fikemi rolled her eyes. “Not again. Sincerely, you’re hurting my feelings. Never mind, it’s time for me to leave anyway.” She rose to her feet.

“Fikky, wait.” Moyo pulled Fikemi’s hand backwards. “Calm down.”

“Don’t tell me to calm down.”

“Okay, I am sorry. I don’t mean it that way. I know I shouldn’t be rubbing it in. I just couldn’t hide how I truly felt about it. I’m sincerely sorry.”

Fikemi resumed her seat. “My head is muddled right now. I just wanted you to listen to me not judge me.”

“I said I’m sorry. It’s okay.”

“Apology accepted.”

“Now we have to think of a way forward. You have to dust yourself and look forward to starting a new relationship.”

“With whom?”

“Is that a question?”

“Yes, of course. You kept blaming me that I permitted Gori to waste my time. Did you think I didn’t want someone to settle down with? Did you think I wasn’t open to communication with other men all through that period?”

“Were you? All I saw was you latching onto the friendship you had with Gori, thinking it would metamorphose into marriage.”

“I latched on because he was the only man who asked me to be his friend. I thought he was being modest and wanted to start from the right place—friendship. During that period, I didn’t assume a stance that I was engaged but no other man ever asked me if I was in any relationship or if I minded a relationship with him.”

Moyo stared at Fikemi. She wondered how her confession could be true. No man asked her for a relationship! How could this be? One glance at Fikemi made even a lady smile.

Fikemi had an oval face with overarching long, densely packed black hair, and a pair of angled eyes that sat with pride above fleshy cheekbones, giving her face a model-like lift. She owned a set of full lips that flattened out with every smile to expose a one-sided dimple and a lower view of a diastema in between her brilliant white upper incisors. Her skin was brown, firm, and fresh like the first fruit of a blossoming tree. For the rest of her body, every detail was in proportion. She lacked nothing and had nothing in excess. Of a truth, Fikemi was beautiful to behold. Absolutely.

Moyo thought if beauty were the ultimate qualification for marriage, Fikemi would be in her shoes—married with two children—while she would be on the other end of the divide—roaming the world of singles despite her desire for marriage.

“Was that a joke or what? You don’t mean it.”

“I’m serious, Mo. Despite the number of men I have come across at work and other gatherings, both formal and social, not even one made an attempt that I noticed to ask me for a relationship for about four or five years now.”

Moyo resisted the urge to drop her lower jaw and nodded instead.

Fikemi continued. “So, in my mind, I concluded that if no one else came, Gori who had managed to ask for friendship would one day ask for marriage.”

“Hmm. You probably should have asked him about his intention.”

I didn't want to pressure him or sell myself cheaply. I just made my standpoint open."

"I am so sorry I misunderstood you. Why have you not told me this?"

"Because it's either you wouldn't believe me or think I am jinxed and stop relating with me."

"Why would I stop relating with you? Don't even go there."

"I've experienced different kinds of things in this life. The way some people treat me and disrespect me because I am single is enough reason to consider suicide."

"My dear, I will do no such thing. By the way, people who disrespect you when you are single will not honour you when married. Respect should not be tied to marital status but the entirety of the individual in question."

"Apparently, not everyone knows that. One of my brothers' wives never cautions her tongue. She is always asking when am I getting married and saying some half-hearted fake prayers sincerely meant to torment me rather than bless me or help me find a spouse. I cannot bear it anymore."

Gazing at Fikemi's now cloudy eyes, Moyo could guess how hurt she was. But what could she do? She would have made her laugh instantly if she were the distributor of spouses.

"If the men are blind to find you, find one that suits you," Lara said as she stepped into the sitting room where the two friends were seated. "I am sorry to barge into your conversation. I couldn't help it. I am sorry." She walked towards Fikemi.

A feeling of embarrassment washed over Fikemi. Lara was Moyo's youngest sister. If Fikemi had known that she was eavesdropping, she would have restrained herself perhaps.

"Sister Fikky, I know I am younger than you are and not as wise as you are. I shouldn't be meddling in your affairs but sincerely, I am engulfed with rage. I am not claiming to be wiser but you need to change your style. People say we cannot do something the same way and expect a different result. If the men around you could not appreciate the blessing of a woman that you are, others elsewhere will."

Fikemi felt some ease. Lara was for her not against her. She could read lines of concern drawn on her face.

“So what is she supposed to do, Sister *Gbeborun*? Who asked for your input?” Moyo said.

Lara ignored her sister and sat beside Fikemi. “Attend more events. I don’t need to say dress well because you are always gorgeous. Just attend more gatherings. Laugh. Draw attention subtly. If you have to change your church, please do. And a good move is to attend a church that has different people of your calibre and higher. On your first attendance, don’t identify as first timer. Attend for five to six weeks. Then share a testimony of God’s goodness, this could be about anything. Then sit for another three weeks. Testify about something again. After all, there are numerous things on a daily basis to thank God for. On the day you testify, don’t rush home. Wait for a probable meet and greet. I personally know one person who found her partner this way. Stay on the stage, Sister Fikky. *No one go see better thing wey no go carry am.*”

Fikemi chuckled at Lara’s dramatic gestures. Her words seemed to soothe her wound and sounded like a good idea. “I don’t think I have your number.”

Lara smiled. “I am more than happy to give you. We are in this boat together. I will ginger you up until the right person shows up.” She collected Fikemi’s phone and punched her number on the screen.

“Your flippant tongue will not land you in trouble someday,” Moyo said, eying her sister. “Don’t mind her, Fikemi. You are not taking her seriously, are you? What does she know?”

“What do I know? Am I a child at twenty-four? Are you jealous that I am taking Sister Fikky’s attention?” Lara countered.

Fikemi turned to Lara. “Don’t mind your sister. I have heard you. We will continue our chat on the phone. I should be on my way now. I need to pick a few things from the supermarket before heading home.” She turned the other way. “Mo, extend my greetings to your sweetheart when he returns from work.” She rose to her feet and slung her bag over her shoulder.

Moyo sluggishly stood from the chair, her right hand on her waist. She was heavily pregnant with her third child. "Alright. Thank you for coming over. It was really nice to see you today. I hope you put me in mind to visit again soon."

"You are always on my mind. Put your mind at rest, I will visit again soon. Lara will walk me to the gate, don't trouble yourself."

"I have been on my seat since you came. Let me do some exercise."

"I insist. Lara, please walk with me to the car."

"Of course, I will," Lara said and stuck out her tongue at her sister.

Fikemi led the way to the door and Lara tagged along. Fikemi had found herself a new friend.

6

Lucy lay in bed in the mansion she shared with her family at Kotik Estate. She glanced at the wall clock above the door. It was almost ten in the morning. But for her and the security man at his duty post, the house would have been empty.

It was Thursday. Muyiwa was at work and his three children were in school. The maid had gone with the driver to a neighbouring town to get fresh farm produce for the food store, after which they would visit the abattoir to replenish meat stock. The gardener always had Thursdays and weekends off.

Lucy was meant to be at her store where she sold fabrics today. She planned to go at noon and catch her sales representatives unaware, her way of finding out what her employees were up to in her absence. She did the same for her other stores. Visiting when unexpected to analyse accounts and stock and see if any staff was being lazy. Those found wanting on such days were usually relieved of their job. The only place Lucy was often stationary at was the plastic distribution enterprise she and her husband owned. It was a budding business that needed more attention, she believed.

Lucy rose to her feet and sauntered to the bathroom. She filled the tub with warm water and her favourite liquid bath soap before stepping into the tub. She stared at the opposite wall-length mirror. She was more beautiful than anyone she could think of. Prominent lashes and cheekbones, small thin lips, sleek and fair skin and a slim body that hid her biological age. She filled her lungs with air of satisfaction. She had everything she wanted. Her life was

better than perfect. Thinking about all she had achieved in her forty-four years of life made her feel amazing. Her children were highfliers just as she was. She had done everything so well and her life had turned out the way she had imagined. Beautiful. She focused on her body and washed it delicately.

“Madam. Madam! Madam!”

Lucy knew the voice of Baba Alamu, the oldest of the three security men who worked for her family.

Lucy quickly finished up her bath and walked into her bedroom. The bedroom was a no-go area for any of the staff so Lucy was rest assured that no one would come in while she was dressing up. She dropped her towel and slipped into the first dress she could find.

“What is the problem, Baba Alamu? What do you want?” she said as she opened the door and walked to the gallery railing.

Baba Alamu was in the large living room downstairs, talking at the top of his voice. “No vex, madam. Somebody dey find you. He dey outside. I no know if you want make I open the door for am. He say you tell am make he come.”

“Who is the person? Where is he?” Lucy raised a questioning brow.

“He don come here before with Oga. I no remember asking his name. Is it okay if he will came inside?”

Everyone was accustomed to Baba Alamu’s version of English. He spoke it as he knew it, and with confidence.

Lucy nodded. “Let him in.”

Baba Alamu sped outside and Lucy returned to her room to dress up properly.

A few minutes later, Lucy emerged from the room and walked towards the closest of the double staircase that led to the ground floor.

“Oh, Mr Anthony. It’s you. How’re you?”

Anthony rose from the sofa. “I’m fine, ma’am. Good morning.”

“To what do I owe this pleasure? A whole CEO in my house.”

Anthony had a large fashion house in the heart of Lagos. He was a top designer with a signature label—Tony J’s. The wears he

made were mostly custom-made and flawless. Expensive but exquisite. For some particular styles, he took different measurements. Since Lucy began to patronize him, she had not seen any reason to amend any of the clothes he had made, not even once. They—including the formal dresses and local attires—were always perfect. He was the reason everyone always had a second look at her clothes whenever she went out.

Anthony smiled. “The last time you came by the workshop, you requested we pick up the fabrics today, and measure you for the new plump-up style.”

“Oh, I’m sorry. I forgot. When I said that, I was expecting you to send one of your girls or guys. You’ve got too many of them to run such errand yourself.” Lucy perceived the fragrance emanating from the young man.

Anthony shook his head. “I’m not too big to run errands. Business is business. Especially when it comes to handling top customers such as you, I’d go to the ends of the earth.”

Lucy grinned. She felt like a horse rider winning a race. “You flatter so well.”

“Not at all, ma’am.”

“I hope you won’t charge me double since you are taking the measurements yourself.”

“Not at all. Actually, on my way from home, I branched at some stores to get some materials. So I decided to come here to pick up your fabrics, measure you, and be on my way to the office.”

Lucy nodded. “By the way, you smell nice. What’s the name of the perfume?”

“Thank you. It’s one of the ‘iRock’ supermen series.”

“Really? That expensive series. I got one in the female series last year but never bought it again.” She laughed. “I have not exhausted the one I bought.”

Anthony smiled. “The bottle is quite small.”

“I only use it when I have an important occasion. And you know ‘iRock’, a single drop lasts more than twenty-four hours. The producer is a genius.”

“I agree with you, ma’am.”

“The fabrics are upstairs. No one is inside to help with them. I will have to walk to the gate to get Baba Alamu to carry them for you. It’s a heavy bunch.”

“I don’t mind. I can carry them. What’s the point of paying a gym instructor if I can’t carry a few fabrics?”

Lucy glanced at his chest. His six packs were noticeable despite being under a three-piece suit. She felt attracted.

Anthony was an educated high-class designer. He was from the eastern part of the country just like her. He was cute, always shaven and well-dressed. And he looked healthy and full of life.

“You are so kind. Come with me please,” she said.

If she were younger, she would probably not think twice before jumping into the hands of a man like that. But that time was long gone. Lucy wondered what it would feel like to be with a man as fine and strong as Anthony. He was soft on the eyes and knew how to make a woman feel honoured. For a moment, she imagined herself in his arms, being cuddled, and loved.

Carried away in her thoughts as she walked up the stairs, she missed her steps.

Impulsively, Anthony held her waist to prevent her from falling.

Electric waves ran through her body. They were almost at the first floor so he held her up to the last step. His chest brushed her back.

Anthony quickly stepped aside. “I’m sorry, ma.”

“I should be the one saying sorry. Thanks for saving me a fall.” Lucy managed a smile and walked briskly into her bedroom.

Anthony stood at the door.

“Are you coming in to take the measurements?”

“Okay, ma.”

Anthony stepped into the room and shut the door. The sound of the door closing fired up emotions in Lucy’s mind.

This is where you run, Lucy!

She was stronger than her emotions, she thought. It was flimsy and would pass.

She pointed to a pile of fabric in a corner. “Those are the fabrics. Carefully selected.”

Anthony walked to the corner and lifted the fabrics. “Not as heavy as I thought.” He smiled.

“A strong man like you won’t find that heavy, I suppose.”

“I think you’re the flatterer, madam.”

They both laughed.

“Now to the measurement. Since you mentioned that you’ve added a bit of weight, I just need two or three numbers to get a perfect fit. The other numbers, we already have. I can’t see any change though. You’re just as beautiful as I have always known you to be.”

Another wave of emotion ran down Lucy’s spine. It sounded as if no man had ever complimented her.

He took out a tape and moved closer. His fragrance filled her nostrils.

She impulsively threw out her arms and held him closer in a warm embrace.

Anthony received the implied invitation and curled one of his hands around her waist. The beginning of the end.

7

Bimbo sat across her mother, staring at her brown eyes. Words tugged at her lips but she kept them at bay, carefully sifting through them in her brain to know which were right to utter.

“Why do you speak like a child? What’s the big deal about having another child? Do you intend to have only one child?” Nana said. Her questions were as much rhetorical as she wanted answers to them.

“Nana.” Bimbo opened her mouth and shut it again, unsure how to answer.

“Yes, tell me. What’s on your mind?”

“There’s nothing bad about having one child. Is there?” Bimbo found herself saying. “I mean, having one child is as good as having two or more.”

Nana shook her head, her lips flattened. “If I had made that choice, you certainly wouldn’t be seated here having this conversation with me.”

“Mummy, it was your choice to have five children. God could have sent me to another family if you had stopped at one or two.”

“Talking of choices, I would say I had you in a very awkward moment of my life. It wasn’t my will, but I counted every child God gave to me as a blessing. Saying God would have sent you somewhere else is a big fat lie. This look of yours is definitely an enhanced feminine version of your father’s. You were destined to come to me and through me to the world.”

Bimbo smiled. “Why are you attempting to make light of this matter?”

“It’s already light, my dear. Have you told Wale? Is he complaining?”

“Why would he complain? He was laughing all over the place when I shared the news with him. He couldn’t care less. It’s his prayers that I have reasons to be behind him. I’m not surprised he was overjoyed.” Disgust lined her eyes.

Nana stared intently at her daughter. “What is this about, Abimbola? I sense something here. What’s going on?”

Bimbo knew that whenever her mother called her Abimbola, she was either upset or disappointed. It always meant something serious was at hand.

“Nana, this is an important time of my life. I just finished a project for the firm, for which I was well recognized. It’s not a coincidence that when one of the leading international institutions our firm works for created an advocacy managerial position, the senior partner of our firm wrote to me to advise me to apply. You and I know that I shouldn’t even stand the chance to be nominated until I’ve been with the firm for a minimum of 10 years. And I firmly believe I have already gotten the job. Just imagine I was given every material and support I needed to pitch my application. I didn’t stop at that, I prayed about it so much that it did not come as a surprise that I topped the list of those shortlisted for the interview. And two of my interviewers told me I was exceptional and thanked me for attending the interview. I was just preparing myself for a congratulatory shopping experience only for pregnancy to show up.”

“It’s a double congratulation then. Rejoice!”

“Nana! Do you know the implication of this? A pause in my career.”

“The Lord will make a way.”

“This is a new role. It’s a rewarding but serious position. I can’t handle pregnancy hormones or rigour at this time.”

“Ask the Lord to make it easy for you.”

“You still don’t get my point. Do you know this might mean that I lose the position since I am just joining the organization? I have been intimated about the expectations and target goals of the

role. I can't afford to lose the opportunity at this time. Not with Wale pacing about the place gloating about the nothing he tagged success."

Nana's jaw dropped. "Really?"

"Yes. I cannot halt my career for him. He must constantly see me ahead of him. To ensure that, pregnancy is a no-no. We are both lucky we already have a son. That's all we need. More than enough."

"Hmm."

"As soon as I settle at my new job, I will explore some international business opportunities. I have been doing some research. Hopefully, when I get my leg through the door of that, I will be able to start my legal consultancy firm. I have only just started. My dream is massive and I am committed to working at it. I promise I will make you proud always, Nana."

"Abimbola!" Nana searched her daughter's eyes. "Are you competing with your husband?"

"Compete? No, ma. That's no competition. Is it a bad thing for women to be high fliers?"

"Don't generalize. I'm not talking about women. I'm talking about you, Bimbo. Are you competing with your husband?"

"Mum, how could you call that competition? Wale is the one seeking to outrun me. I'm just chasing my ambitions. I'm in no way in any contest."

Nana sighed. She allowed a minute of silence.

"Won't you say anything?"

"Hmm."

"We have even digressed off the main topic—how to get rid of this hindrance to my destiny."

"So how do you plan to go about that?"

"I'm having an abortion. It's better than birthing and abandoning the child."

Nana gazed at Bimbo, bewildered. "Really?"

"The Bible says, 'train up a child the way he should go'. When I am aware that I cannot commit to training the child, it's better for me to end it now."

Nana was shocked to the marrow. She could not believe her daughter was spewing such words and even quoting the Scripture. Where had she gone wrong in raising Bimbo in the way of the Lord?

Bimbo had been outstanding as a child, always topping her class. This continued through secondary school and when her parents changed her school twice due to the thought of probable irregularity or low-quality education, she still outperformed her classmates in the new schools. Bimbo graduated from the university summa cum laude and Law school was no different. She was ever outstanding. Excelling in her career did not come as a complete surprise.

Nana wondered. She had been ever grateful for God's grace upon Bimbo's life. The family had always praised Bimbo for her success and blessed God on her behalf. What had the pattern done to her? Did Nana not teach Bimbo to be her best, without a competitive mindset? Had Bimbo got it all wrong and thought the world had to be on her tail? Seeing everyone in her life as a co-contestant she must outrun, forgetting all the virtues she had been taught to imbibe and radiate. She had been so blinded by being celebrated that she would kill, squash life, destroy her marriage and uproot anything in her way to her endless goalpost.

Tears formed in Nana's eyes. Had she raised her daughter a monster? A goal freak? Had she not put enough checks and balances in place? Had she supposedly loved her too much to ignore the rod as the Scripture advised? Her daughter had probably misunderstood all the platforms and support given to help her be her best as affirmation that she had to beat everyone for self-glorification. Oh no! What had she done?

"Nana, what's wrong? Why are you crying?"

Nana lost her composure and wailed. "I have failed!"

"God forbid. You will not fail. What's wrong, Nana? Did I say something that hurt you?"

She sobbed and sniffled.

Bimbo's heart sank. She loved her mum. Nana was the best mum she believed anyone could have. Bimbo had seldom seen her

mother so teary. “Tell me. What’s wrong?” She shuffled to the edge of the chair and placed her hand on Nana’s knee.

“Bimbo, what happened to you? How did you become this? You were a soft-hearted, wonderful girl who loved the Lord. You wouldn’t even hurt a fly. You-” She broke into fresh sobs.

“Nana, please. What’s going on?” Bimbo felt as if she was thrown in a maze, confused, and unsure of what her mother was getting at. Her eyes were beginning to get wet.

“Abimbola. What error have I made that has hardened your heart?” Nana wiped her eyes. “Yes, we clapped for you. We got you gifts. We gave our support. But all that was to encourage you and reiterate our statement of love. Your performance was never the basis of our love for you. If you had not topped your classes or got any awards in your career, you would still have been our daughter with whom we are well pleased. You would still have been the apple of my eye.”

“I know you love me. What’s wrong?”

“Where is your first love, daughter? How have you become so consumed with ambition that you have lost sight of God?”

“No, ma. I still love the Lord.”

“A statement you tell yourself to get rid of the guilt that nudges your heart. I see the way you look at your husband with disdain. How you speak with pride and overzealous drive to get it all. You loved him until he made a giant stride that pushed him forward. A little attention on him and you feel threatened already. You are used to being in the spotlight. You must think no one else has the right to be showered attention. You have forgotten that the two of you are one before the Lord. His success is yours and vice versa. You have allowed vain goals to consume you such that you could consider abortion without any guilty conscience. You could talk about murder with such ease like one who does not know the Lord. Oh my! Have I not failed in raising you to consistently pursue being in the will of God for your life?”

“Nana.”

“Don’t Nana me. Take a minute and reflect. What’s this endless pursuit of vanity for? Where will the millions in your

account take you? How has it satisfied the longing in your soul? How did you end up with a void that you thought all the medals in the world could fill up? The more you seek to fill it, the bigger it becomes. Rejecting the knowledge of God and seeking what leaves you empty.”

“Nana!”

“No, tell me. This overzealousness and wanting to be everywhere. What is it all about?”

“It is not overzealousness, Mum. I am just trying to achieve my set objectives. Are you tagging being successful as sinful? Is being outstanding against God’s will?”

“No. You know I don’t support mediocrity. I am not against you aiming to get to the peak of your career. Am I not an emeritus professor to the glory of God? That is not the point, my dear.”

“I’m wondering what the point is then.”

“Ask yourself, what is your motive? Why are you doing all that you are doing? You want to conquer the world. Good but why? Is it to glorify God, to boast and get more applause, or to show that no one matches you? Search your heart. Is your intention right? You submit to no one. You see your husband as another athlete against you rather than with you.”

A strange feeling washed over Bimbo. In that instance, memories flashed in her head. She was an achiever. Success made her happy. Doing what others said was difficult.

“Forgive me, daughter, if I have not raised you well enough. Your life does not consist in the abundance of the things you have,” Nana said.

“Did the Bible not support us being diligent in our work? Did you not teach us not to be slothful?”

Nana leaned forward and reached for the leather-covered Bible on the footstool. She flipped the pages. “Yes. Romans 12:11 says, ‘not lagging in diligence, fervent in spirit, serving the Lord.’ As I always say, the word of God is complete and able to save, deliver, and bless. The Lord wants us to excel in all things. In fact, lazy people are warned in many verses of the Scripture that poverty

will swallow them up, and they do not deserve bread if they would not work.”

“Exactly.”

“In the verse I read earlier, you agreed that being diligent is profitable. Setting goals, pursuing dreams, and meeting targets are all good. However, the primary focus must not be lost. Matthew 6:33 says, ‘But seek first the kingdom of God and His righteousness, and all these things shall be added to you.’ Did you hear that?”

“Nana, why are you talking as if I am a sinner? I’m a born-again Christian. And I am merely not being slothful in my career. My goal is to please God.”

“If your goal is seeking Jesus and His will, your motive will be right for all you do. Even when you are excelling in your endeavours, you will not be consumed by the thrill. You will be fully submitted to God’s will in every area of life. In your marriage you will submit to your husband, and together with him, you will seek to fulfil God’s purpose for your lives.”

Nana flipped the pages of the Bible again.

“There is a word of wisdom for you in Luke 12: 15-21. Verse 15 says, ‘And He said to them, “Take heed and beware of covetousness, for one’s life does not consist in the abundance of the things he possesses.”’ Then Jesus went ahead to tell the story of a rich man gloating about his riches and making expansion plans and so on. Let’s see the fellow’s comment and what God told him in verses 19 -21 ‘And I will say to my soul, “Soul, you have many goods laid up for many years; take your ease; eat, drink, and be merry.” But God said to him, ‘Fool! This night your soul will be required of you; then whose will those things be which you have provided?’ “So is he who lays up treasure for himself, and is not rich toward God.”’

Bimbo drew a breath.

“The truth is, if you abort this pregnancy, pursue this position, get to the peak, do all the businesses, you will still keep seeking that and those. The emptiness of nothingness.” Nana shook her head. “My dear daughter, there is a thin line between

greed and ambition. Greed leads to the grave. But godliness with contentment, the Bible says is a great gain.”

“Hmm.”

“Pleasing God does not mean you will be a failure in your career, rather you will succeed and still maintain an acceptable heart in God’s sight. Some have no time for God, running after things that do not fill the void in their soul, leading to more chasing and chasing. Heaps of riches built by people who see God as a hindrance or as not important enough, lie around with new owners feasting on them while the souls of the original owners languish in hell. What is my point? Let your heart be inclined to obey God. He has already blessed you with wealth. I trust Him to keep giving you wisdom and favour to soar in your career. But you need to repent. This ungodly affection for applause, recognition, and money has to die. Let God-glorifying desires erupt in you. Allow the Holy Spirit to help you guard your heart.”

Bimbo sobbed. Her heart felt like a bag of yam tubers. She remembered she felt resentment for her husband when it appeared his achievements drowned hers. She despised any colleague who vied for the same position as her. The same emotion that overwhelmed her against the living being growing in her womb when she thought of how it could disrupt her plans. It dawned on her that she had left the boundary of fulfilling purpose and was only running after a portion she believed would satisfy her greed, a portion called more!

Nana adjusted on the couch and moved closer to her daughter. She patted her back. “It’s okay. The Lord loves you, much more than I do. And He wants you to repent and retrace your steps to Him. To a place of fellowship, seeking Him, and loving others. Being selfless.”

“Nana, I am s-o-r-r-y. I didn’t see it this way. Oh, God forgive me.”

“The Lord is willing to forgive. Remember, God is the one who gives us the power to make wealth. He blesses us with the good things of life for our comfort, for others’ needs, and ultimately for the glory of His name. When His knowledge and love fill our hearts,

we seek Him in our daily pursuit and inordinate affection has no place in our hearts.”

“Jesus, I am sorry. Oh, how I have become bitter and engulfed with accomplishment. Oh, Jesus!” Bimbo sobbed. “How I have idolized riches and the continuous quest for vanity. Have mercy upon me, Jesus. I have drifted away. Have mercy.”

The two women prayed together for a while.

“Hebrews 12:13 says, ‘and make straight paths for your feet, so that what is lame may not be dislocated, but rather be healed.’ It is time to refresh yourself in the Lord that you may yet again be the tree planted by the riverside, bearing its fruit in its season. I want you to change how you treat your husband. He is with you, not against you,” Nana said.

“But Wale does not acknowledge my contribution to his success. He shoves it in my face.”

“You thought your husband was gloating, but that was his response to years of you brandishing your achievements in his face and treating him like a conquered villain. I can assure you that if you genuinely submit to God and allow the Holy Spirit to aid you, you will stop trying to make the world revolve around you and will see the resultant positive impact.”

“God, please help me.”

“He will surely help you. Contrite hearts, God never despise. Come to me, dear.”

Bimbo leaned forward into a warm embrace with her mother. “I will pray more about this.”

“What are you going to do about the pregnancy now?” It was a whisper from Nana.

“It’s a wonderful gift of God to me, Nana. I can only pray and prepare to nurture him or her.” Bimbo ran her hand over her belly. The anger was gone, replaced with genuine concern for the unborn.

Nana smiled, her heart lifted in praise. “Thank you, Jesus!” she mouthed as she exhaled with relief.

8

Muyiwa dropped his cutleries and wiped his mouth with a tissue. "Thank You, Lord, for the food," he said as he straightened and walked away from the dining table.

He took the stairs and headed for the room.

"Sweetheart, you didn't come downstairs to have your meal? Are you okay? Are you upset?" he said as he approached the bed. Lucy lay in bed, a blanket drawn up her shoulders.

"Is there something I've done wrong that you're not telling me?" he said.

Lucy shut her eyes in pretence.

"I know you're not asleep. I need you to talk to me." Muyiwa went to her side of the bed and sat. He patted her shoulders. "Dear, are you okay?"

"Can't you just let me be? Can someone not sleep in peace in this home?" Lucy turned the other way.

"You have been moody for days. What's going on?"

"Sincerely, I am fine. How else do you want me to say that?"

"Well, until you cheer up and be the woman I married, I won't believe you."

Lucy knew she would not be able to put her husband off tonight, not after days of silence. But how could she explain what she had done? How would she tell her husband that she had defiled their matrimonial bed? If it had been on one occasion only, probably it would have been easier to say. How would she describe the repeated craving or was it compulsion she felt for her fashion designer?

Why weep and pray for forgiveness, filled with regret after each act of infidelity, only to replay the moment in her head and crave for more? Why did she find reasons to welcome Anthony back again and again to re-create the moment? If a single occurrence were accepted as a mistake, would four be viewed in the same light?

She thought for a minute. Could this be the golden opportunity to confess her sins, cry, and show remorse? Perhaps, her husband would understand and let it slide.

“Baby, talk to me. Did I do something wrong?” Muyiwa said.

Confession was unnecessary, she thought. After all, she had no intention to see Anthony anymore. She remembered telling him on the last day they met never to contact her again. She had plans to get a new designer, stay out of Anthony’s path, and put the past behind her. That was enough.

“Sincerely, my mood has nothing to do with anything you have done. I’m simply not happy with sales at my fabric store. I think the girls are up to something. I have not laid my hands on it exactly, but I know something is not adding up,” Lucy said.

“You should have told me. Do you want me to contact Mr Abiona? He can help audit the account and expose any loopholes. Has it not been more than six months since he came? He’s due to return.”

“Thank you, dear. It’s been distressing me so much.”

“Don’t worry about it. It’s not something that should make you sad.”

“I know. I just felt weighed down.”

“All will be sorted hopefully soon.”

“Thank you.”

“Lest I forget, our fast starts tomorrow. We need to take prayers more seriously. I’ve been sensing some dark cloud in my spirit of late.”

“The Lord will answer our prayers.”

“Amen.” Muyiwa tickled her. “Pretty woman.”

Lucy smacked his hands. She frowned and turned away. “Not tonight please.”

Muyiwa rolled his eyes. “Again?” he said, his lips flattened like a disgruntled toddler. He straightened and went to the other side of the bed. “Can we at least pray?”

“That’s fine.”

Muyiwa shut his eyes and began praying.

9

Yemi lay on his bed, his eyes half open, striving to divert his mind from his pain as he prayed quietly. No posture he assumed in bed seemed comfortable recently. Pain shot through his nerves. His attention oscillated between the prayer, his pain, and his family. His wife was in a bad shape. He was the one with the cancer, who experienced the pain and horror, but his wife seemed to be the one manifesting the effects. She hardly ate or rested. If it was not a headache, it was something else. She wept every other day, prayed every day and hoped for a miracle for her husband.

Yemi needed no one to tell him that his wife loved him dearly. Tito had portrayed this in unimaginable ways since they got married ten years before. He loved her too and was always grateful he married her.

Tito had been one of the junior students he mentored in the university Christian fellowship, where he had been an executive member. In school, Yemi was a quiet, disciplined, and focused brother whom many sisters wanted to marry. Far from the thoughts of others was that he would end up marrying early and Tito of all people would be his spouse. Yes, Tito was pretty and was committed to the fellowship, but there were seemingly better sisters in the fellowship vying for Yemi's attention. No one imagined his generic relationship with Tito would end up in marriage.

"I do not walk by sight but by the Spirit," Yemi had said to one of his friends who asked him what he saw in Tito to propose to her.

Yemi filled his lungs slowly, careful not to aggravate the pain in his flank radiating to his back and now his chest. He had taken some prescribed medication for the pain, but it persisted.

“God, please do something,” he muttered. Tears escaped his eyes. “I’m becoming weary, Lord. Let Your strength be made perfect in my weakness. Please, p-l-e-a-s-e.” He sobbed.

He needed all the strength he could gather at this point. He had prayed with a few pastors on this case. Why was the issue persisting? Why could the tumour not just disappear? Why is he not getting a miracle? Why did cancer have to locate him in the first place? Dark thoughts crept into his mind.

“Romans 8:28.”

Yemi turned his head to find the source of the voice. No one was there. It was probably in his mind. He pulled his phone from under the pillow. He clicked the Bible app and looked up the verse.

“And we know that all things work together for good to those who love God, to those who are the called according to His purpose.”

He dropped the phone and wept. “Lord, I believe! I believe! Increase my faith oh Lord! Take away this mountain. Let this pain be gone.” Tears flowed freely as his body cringed in pain.

His phone buzzed. He cast a glance at the screen and saw a message from a colleague reminding him of the party the board of directors was throwing to appreciate the joint contribution of the staff to the company’s growth for the previous year. Yemi was one of the managers and had worked hard enough to be a chief at the party, but he knew he could not attend.

He had a planned admission to the hospital this weekend as his surgery was booked for the following Wednesday. The surgeon had prepared his mind and informed him he would stay a couple of days in the hospital for monitoring before he could be discharged. There was no way he could attend any function now.

Another message popped in. It was from his mother. “My brethren, count it all joy when you fall into various trials, knowing that the testing of your faith produces patience. But let patience

have its perfect work, that you may be perfect and complete, lacking nothing. James 1:2-4. The Lord is with you, Son.”

Yemi filled his lungs. He read the text repeatedly. Tears moistened his eyes as he dropped the phone. He shut his eyes and gave thanks to God for being with him still. He progressed to praying about the surgery and for those who would be involved. All he wanted was freedom from the monster called cancer.

10

The sun shone unwaveringly, increasing the temperature enough for many market women to complain. Some pedestrians held umbrellas above their heads to shield them from what they thought was the rage of the sun. Some had other people's loads or luggage piled on their heads as they trekked from one part of the market to another, a means of protection as well as a meal ticket. Those who had nothing to hold above their head walked hurriedly, with a few squeezing life out of the sachets of cold water they bought from excited hawkers who were glad it was hotter today than yesterday—more bags of water sold meant more money in their pockets.

Like a swarm of bees in an active season, Balogun Market bustled with activities. Everyone was going somewhere. People trooped in every corner, with vehicle drivers sometimes yelling with their heads out of the side window to keep people out of their paths.

The rustling bustling outside Lucy's shop seemed oblivious to her. She was seated behind a small table at the demarcated inner end of the large shop. Dressed in a blue sequined dress, with an exalted air conditioner blasting cold air over her head, Lucy chatted with her friend Vikki who had come visiting.

Vikki had been Lucy's friend for many years. She was one of the persons who could speak to her freely.

"The moment I walked away from my car, he approached me. I didn't know he had sized me up, excited that he had found a rich woman to dupe, not knowing I was a street girl. He told me I didn't

park well and my car would be towed away and then offered to help me move to a safe corner,” Vikki said.

Lucy laughed. Her friend was narrating to her how one of the market wanderers had tried to scam her while she was coming to her shop.

Vicki continued. “In this time and age? I know that gimmick. I just asked him politely if he had eaten today. And without waiting for his answer, I took out three thousand naira out of my purse and handed it to him.”

“That’s so generous of you.”

“The Lord blesses generous people you see. I told him to get something to eat and then watch the car and ensure nothing happened to it. ‘I would be back in a jiffy,’ I said.”

Lucy smiled. “I guess the guy was just hungry.”

“Not only hungry, thirsty for crime. If I gave him my car key, I would be in trouble. If I ignored him, my car would be in danger. The best thing was to buy him as the security.”

The two friends laughed.

“Your car and stature betray your status. Anyone can easily spot you in the crowd,” Lucy said.

“I can say the same of you. My car is old now. You are the one driving the latest model. Your looks tell the tale of wealth.”

“How? Without my car, no one would have an inkling.”

“You deceive yourself. See how you’re dressed to the market as if you’re going to the governor’s wedding anniversary.”

Lucy laughed. “You can never change, big mouth.”

“I got that from you. If friends stay together for a long time, they rub off on each other. Don’t you agree?”

“Not really. I don’t come here regularly, you know that. But whenever I come, I attract some buyers into the shop.”

“So you are now an advertisement?”

The two women burst into another round of laughter.

“If it increases sales, why not?”

“You no longer have the physique of a model. Thank the Lord for the sales, dear.”

Lucy raised her brow. “What do you mean? I’ve only added some flesh.”

“I disagree. I was going to ask you what you were eating of late. You have added so much weight.”

Lucy had noticed a slight change, especially because some previously loose clothes were now a perfect fit. “Not as much as you exclaim. Just a little. I was sick last month. I guess this is the result you get for staying at home for six weeks without much activity.”

“Sickly people lose weight.”

“Vikki!”

“Sorry. I am just wondering why you have suddenly doubled up. The last time you doubled up, you were nursing Junior. Have you started hormone replacement therapy? Someone told me it makes people fat.”

“What hormone replacement?”

“Treatment for menopausal women. Our family doctor suggested it to me but I declined. She said it makes you feel younger and all, but I don’t care.”

“I’m only forty-five, I don’t want that now. I can’t say I’m menopausal yet.”

“So you are still regular? Congratulations.”

“Not exactly. Even when I was younger, I had an unstable cycle. You see, I had to undergo some medical treatment to have Dorcas and Junior. My cycle has always been haphazard and it has gotten worse with age. I don’t bother about it. I welcome the flow whenever I see it. That reminds me.” Lucy picked up her phone and checked the calendar. “I think the last time I saw a flow was about three months ago.”

“Three months? And you don’t think that’s menopause?”

“No. I have gone four months at one point. Our family doctor had to give me some pills then.”

“Are you not concerned?”

“I’m lazy with that kind of thing, my dear. It’s not as if I am looking for a baby or need the cycle for anything. To be crystal

clear, I pushed my husband to do a vasectomy when Junior was two years old. So, it doesn't bother me."

Vikki laughed. "Is that not the procedure for men who wanted no more children?"

"Yes."

"If you had treatment before you conceived, why did you ask your husband to go through that?"

"My dear, at that time, we were hearing news of girls forcing pregnancy on married men, destroying their marriages and all sorts. I had to insist my darling. And you know my husband is a soft man, he had no choice but to agree. He did it during our summer trip to London that year. It was not something massive, sincerely. He even came back to our lodge that same day. Now our minds are at rest."

"I am sure my husband would never do such a thing. He would only nag that I didn't trust him."

"Well, it was not a trust issue. My husband travelled a lot then. It was just to safeguard our marriage in case he made a mistake or something. At least we wouldn't have someone knock on our door with a bastard. I didn't want to have anyone's blood on my hands."

The two women burst into laughter.

"Sometimes I wonder if you submitted your whole life to Jesus or if there's a part you reserved to make trouble," Vikki said.

Lucy sniggered. "Look at you. The Bible says, 'Suffer not a witch to live.' Any lady that wishes to destroy my marriage is a witch. So if I kill her, I have not sinned."

Vikki shook her head. "Naughty you."

"To be candid, I trust my husband. But you see, even though he can no longer father a child, I still keep tabs on him. I don't want him to take it as liberty to misbehave. He has to keep his body holy. Becoming an ordained minister was the last nail in his cross. He carries his Jesus dearly, and I remind him always that the church is watching him."

"Nice one. But back to the matter at hand, don't joke with your wellbeing, dear. One of my employees who died of cancer could have made it if it was detected early."

“God forbid. No disease will come near me.”

“Amen. I’m just telling you to be more concerned.”

“Now that you mentioned it, I think it is menopause knocking. The way I have been feeling these last two months, I don’t understand. I kept casting and binding lazy spirit and tiredness. It’s as though something is in that house weighing me down.”

“As I earlier said, go for a check-up. A minister once said in my church that having regular check-ups is a very good habit to imbibe, especially when you’re above forty. And especially for people like us who can afford it. We have no excuse.”

“I should have gone. But I keep procrastinating. Since my husband travelled to America, I have not stepped out of the house until today. I have not been to church in the past three weeks. I’ve just always felt limp, sleepy.”

“Go for some blood tests and get some multivitamins.”

“Thank you, my friend.”

“When is your husband returning?”

“Today. It’s a two-week program. One of the drivers is picking him up from the airport in the evening.”

“Maybe that’s why you are energetic today.”

Lucy smiled. “Not really. But yes, thank you, I’m happy he’s coming back.”

“Good for you. I hope he brings some dollars for us when he arrives.”

“Don’t be greedy. You can’t even spend all you have in your lifetime.”

They continued chatting.

Lucy’s phone rang. A strange number. She thought for a second before she swiped the answer button and lifted the phone to her ear.

“Hello,” she said.

“Hello.”

“Yes, who am I speaking with?”

“I’m the secretary at the university clinic. Am I speaking to Mrs Olakanmi?”

“Yes, what’s going on?”

“I am calling to inform you that Dorothy Olakanmi has been transferred to Yellow Light Hospital at...”

Lucy ignored the address and jumped to her feet. “What’s wrong with my daughter? What’s going on?”

“She presented to the clinic some minutes ago and has now been transferred-”

“Transferred for what reason? Was she sick?”

“I’m the secretary and do not have the details. I was told to inform her parents and yours is the only contact on file that went through.”

“Okay, thank you. Please send me the address of the hospital as a text message.”

“Alright, ma’am.”

Lucy dropped the phone and explained to her friend what she had been told over the phone. She grabbed her bag and went out of the store, her friend following.

Lucy and Vikki arrived at Yellow Light Hospital, a large building along a major road.

They spoke to one of the nurses at the reception who directed them to the first floor.

Lucy rushed towards the staircase.

“Calm down. Take it easy,” Vikki said. The same caution she had given through the one-and-a-half-hour drive down to the hospital.

Lucy had driven roughly, slamming the accelerator as though she were in a race. She would not have stopped to take a breath if possible.

As Lucy hurried up the stairs, her vision blurred and her head felt as if it had lost its content. She held the railing and continued to climb. She felt her intestines churn and her legs quiver. The feeling got worse. By the time she made it to the first floor, her strength had waned. She staggered and collapsed.

11

Tito paced in the waiting room, praying, an earpiece plugged in her right ear. Pastor Folarin was on the phone, praying with her.

She muttered words of prayer, not wanting to raise her voice.

“Amen!” she said as they rounded off the prayer.

“Praise the Lord!” Pastor Folarin said on the other end.

Tito raised one hand and waved. “Hallelujah.”

“When is he expected to be out of the theatre?”

“I hope not too long from now. I’m just waiting for one of the doctors to address me and tell me how my husband is doing.”

“We believe God for the best. All will be well.”

“Thanks so much, Pastor. I sincerely appreciate your support.”

“You’re welcome. Take care. And please, keep me updated.”

“I will, sir. Thanks again.”

The call ended.

Tito took her seat, her neck extended, and her head against the wall.

Her phone buzzed. She looked at her phone. Her mother-in-law was calling.

“Hello, Nana,” Tito said as soon as she pressed the answer button on the earpiece.

“My daughter.” Nana’s voice was calm and soothing. “How are you holding up? I’ve been fasting and praying along. How’s your husband now?”

“Thank you, ma. He’s still in the theatre. I spoke to a nurse about an hour ago and she told me he would be out soon. I’m

waiting for someone to talk to me.” Tito sniffled and tears dripped from her eyes.

“Everything will be fine. I don’t want you to cry, is that okay? We have victory in Jesus’ name.”

“Amen.” Tito’s tummy stirred. The last thing that had entered her stomach was a cup of tea the previous morning. She had been in the hospital all day yesterday. She went back to her host’s house in the evening to rest. She remembered declining to eat last night when offered some food. Today, she arrived at the hospital around nine in the morning. She tapped her phone screen. It was half past three.

“Everyone is praying for him,” Nana said.

“Thank you, ma.”

“I hope you are taking care of yourself as well. I won’t have two sick children please.”

“Nana, this is too much for me to handle.” Tito broke into fresh sobs.

“I understand, my dear. I sincerely appreciate how you have supported your husband. God will not put you to shame. The Lord will surely-”

“Mrs Olakanmi?” A tall man dressed in scrubs said as he stepped into the waiting room.

Tito’s heart lurched forward. “Yes, that’s me.” She quickly wiped her face with the back of her hand.

“I am Edmund, one of the surgeons. Could you please come with me so we could have a chat?”

“Mummy, I will call you back.” Tito ended the call and jumped to her feet to follow the doctor.

“I am happy to inform you that the surgery was successful although the tumour was quite bigger than we expected,” Edmund said as soon as they were in the doctor’s office.

“Thank you, Jesus!” That was all Tito wanted to hear. “How is my husband doing now? Can I see him?”

Edmund continued. “Soon, I think. I just need to let you know that we found a small growth on Yemi’s other kidney.”

Tito's heart sank. The funny pronunciation of her husband's name by the white man did not sound funny. Not when he was giving her another negative news.

"Another growth?"

"Nothing to worry about at the minute. We have excised the growth and sent it for histology. I mean a test that will ascertain what kind of tissue it is. If benign or malignant. We will keep you in the loop as his care progresses."

"How is my husband doing now?" was all Tito could mutter.

"He has been moved to the intensive care unit. He lost some blood and is not stable enough for a ward-based care. We believe he requires a high level of monitoring at this time. We will step his care down to the ward when he improves. In a couple of days, I suppose."

"Can I see him at least?"

"You should be able to see him briefly. You'll have to speak to the nurses. They'll guide you in respect to that."

"Alright, thanks very much for your help. This is very much appreciated." Tito rose to her feet.

"You are most welcome."

When Tito was finally led to where her husband lay, with several monitoring medical devices attached, she could not hold back her tears.

She held his hands and muttered words of prayer. "You will come back home to me. You will rise and shine. You will not die but live..."

Tito kept on praying until one of the nurses signalled to her that it was time to leave.

12

Seated on the bedside chair, Muyiwa stared at his daughter, muttering words under his breath.

His daughter, Dorothy, named after her late maternal grandmother, was still, unconscious.

Muyiwa sighed, his mind clouded with thoughts. How did things turn this way? What went wrong?

“The doctor would like to speak with you. He is heading to your wife’s room,” one of the nurses said.

Muyiwa nodded. “Thank you.” He held his daughter’s hand quickly and said a short prayer before stepping out of the room.

He walked briskly to the room on the ground floor where his wife was.

Lucy was awake, her face drawn, looking tired.

The doctor had just finished examining her when Muyiwa walked into the room. He exchanged greetings with the doctor and said hello to his wife.

“How’s Dorothy?” Lucy managed.

The doctor spoke next. “I have good news and bad news. Which would you like first?”

“Tell us the difficult one first,” Muyiwa said.

“From history and investigation, your daughter ingested a poisonous substance—pesticide.”

“Pesticide?” The couple chorused.

“I don’t believe Dorothy would consume pesticide. For what reasons? What does she lack? Why? How?” Lucy said.

The doctor ignored her questions. “Unfortunately, she did. If not, she would not be in the hospital,” he said as calmly as he could.

Light left Muyiwa’s eyes. His mind wandered. Why on earth would his daughter want to end her own life?

Lucy appeared to muster some strength after the news. “I’m sure the devil has a hand in this. He’s a bastard. My daughter would never do such a thing without an influence. I will get to the root of this matter. The culprit will surely rot in jail,” she said, livid.

“I can’t say if it was coerced or done willingly, but it seemed deliberate to end her life, given the quantity she swallowed. The reasons for that, I don’t know. It was quite serious but thankfully, we have been able to prevent further harm,” the doctor said.

“Glory be to God. I was so scared,” Lucy said.

“Dorothy will be on admission until stable for discharge. Just in case you plan to ask how long that will be, I am not certain at the moment. I just hope she continues to respond to treatment.”

“Thank you, doctor. God will take control. Can I go home today? I can’t spend another night here please.”

The doctor smiled. “That takes me to the good news.”

What good news could the doctor have for them? Muyiwa wondered. Perhaps, news that his wife could go home today. He was expecting that. He did not like the welcome he got on arrival from the United States. Despite being tired, he could not even get a good night’s sleep, knowing his wife and daughter were hospitalized.

“Go on, doctor,” Lucy said, her eyes probing.

“You are pregnant, madam. Fourteen weeks. Congratulations.”

Lucy froze as though thunder had struck her.

Muyiwa raised his eyebrows. The shock in his eyes was obvious. “Is this some sort of a joke?”

“Not at all. Why would I joke with something like that? Your wife is pregnant.”

Muyiwa glanced at his wife who was staring back, motionless.

The doctor read their countenances. “I guess you aren’t expecting this kind of news at this time, but things like this happen

occasionally. Considering your age, I will recommend close monitoring. Good antenatal care is important for this pregnancy journey. And you need to limit stressful activities because your blood pressure is...”

Neither Muiwa nor Lucy took note of the rest of the doctor’s advice. They were in absolute shock.

13

Yemi sat behind a table, working on some files. He ruminated on how he would finish the work on his table so he could proceed to another project file in his bag.

His phone buzzed. As he turned his head sideways, his eyes rested on the multiple cracks in the wall. He blinked. Had he not just mended some cracks the week before? Why were there multiple damages in the wall again? He raised his head and traced one of the cracks with his eyes; it ran the length of the wall and seemingly into the foundation of the house. Like a plant, it had multiple offshoots that ran the breadth of the house. Yemi's jaw dropped. It was glaring that the house would not hold for a long time before falling apart. The damage was more extensive than he thought any mending could save.

Yemi wondered what he could do. Was he supposed to watch the house collapse on him or was he supposed to run to the street and become homeless? It did not seem there were many choices. He had to try to patch the cracks regardless. He just had to try.

He picked up his phone and called a professional builder he knew. He quickly ran through the state of the house and sent pictures to corroborate his description.

"There's not much we can do at this point, I'm sorry. If we have enough time to get to it, we can attempt to patch up the cracks to ease your worries, but that only has a short-term benefit," the builder said.

"Anything is better than nothing. I don't mind, please," Yemi said with urgency in his tone.

A loud noise from outside the house interrupted him. Yemi straightened and saw a large caterpillar in front of his house, poised to tear apart the house.

“What are you doing?” he screamed at the driver of the machine.

“I have an order to remove this dilapidated building from this street,” the driver shouted back.

Overwhelming fear washed over Yemi. “What can I do? Where do I go? God, please save me!”

The driver turned on the ignition and drove towards the house to begin demolition.

Yemi opened his eyes, his heart racing and his forehead covered with sweat. It was a dream. He had dozed off on the hospital bed where he was receiving a dose of chemotherapy.

One of the doctors had informed him after his surgery that the cancer had unfortunately spread, as there were significant changes and the presence of cancer cells in other organs. Following the development, Yemi was offered chemotherapy as a treatment option.

What kind of dream was that? He knew it was certainly a bad omen. It could only mean doom was looming. He shut his eyes and said a quick prayer.

Yemi’s phone beeped. He took up the phone and swiped the screen. A Bible text from his mother. She usually sent him a verse every now and then.

“Romans 10:8 ‘But what does it say? “The word is near you, in your mouth and in your heart” (that is, the word of faith which we preach)’ Confess and believe His words, son. It is well.”

Yemi exhaled.

It’s a preparatory dream. You will die.

Yemi shook his head. That thought could not be from God. That could not be the will of God for him.

He soliloquized. “Not me. It is written, ‘I shall not die, but live, and declare the works of the Lord.’”

Don't be a fool. You already saw it. Your body has been eaten up. You have days to weeks left. Put your house in order. Your time is up. Death calls.

“My Bible tells me that my body is the temple of the Holy Spirit who is in me, whom I have from God, and I am not my own?”

Are you daft or something? This is God's will.

“It is written, ‘For I know the thoughts that I think toward you, says the Lord, thoughts of peace and not of evil, to give you a future and a hope.’”

Be quiet. Stop wasting your time.

“3 John 1:2 says, ‘Beloved, I pray that you may prosper in all things and be in health, just as your soul prospers.’ It is my Father’s will that I am in health. I claim sound health in Jesus’ name.”

Be in health, my foot! Why are you here taking chemotherapy? You left Nigeria and flew to England in search of the best medical treatment available. You didn't even wince to pay the exorbitant medical costs. Shouldn't you be in your house sleeping or at work perhaps?

“The Lord has provided us with all resources including medical knowledge and practice. Where medicine stops, the Lord begins. This sickness is not unto death but to give glory to God. I will walk out of this hospital alive and healthy.”

Have you not been confessing these empty words since your problem started? Have you gotten any better?

“I will continue speaking the word of life and I will carry my evidence of wholesomeness.”

Absolute waste of time and energy. You, loser.

“It is written, ‘knowing that you were not redeemed with corruptible things, like silver or gold, from your aimless conduct received by tradition from your fathers, but with the precious blood of Christ, as of a lamb without blemish and without spot.’ I have been redeemed by the blood of Jesus from sin and death. I fight from the place of victory.”

Your stupidity soars to the heavens. Pastor Sheila died of cancer, as well as Minister Toni. Do you remember that church boy in your office who died in an accident? Are they redeemed by the

blood of a goat? Were they not like you? Are you holier than they were?

“It is written concerning me, ‘No evil shall befall you, nor shall any plague come near your dwelling.’ Micah 7:7 says, ‘Therefore I will look to the Lord; I will wait for the God of my salvation; My God will hear me.’ The Lord is my portion.”

You are delusional, completely delusional.

“Cancer is my fact, not my reality. I walk by faith. I am getting medical treatment because I do not tempt the Lord. My victory was assured before the battle started. I am not scared of death, because it is a different form of sleep for believers. For I know that even if I die, I will be resurrected to be with the Lord Jesus.”

It is good that you are now coming to terms with reality.

“Life is my reality. Sound health is my reality. This sickness is not unto death. I shall stand on the Word until my last breath. It is written, ‘In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God. He was in the beginning with God. All things were made through Him, and without Him nothing was made that was made. In Him was life, and the life was the light of men. And the light shines in the darkness, and the darkness did not comprehend it.’”

It is written, this. It is written, that. This act will only prolong your suffering. The earlier you accept the end the better for you.

“Isaiah 55:11 says, ‘So shall My word be that goes forth from My mouth; It shall not return to Me void, But it shall accomplish what I please, And it shall prosper in the thing for which I sent it.’ Hebrews 4:12 further buttresses it, ‘For the word of God is living and powerful, and sharper than any two-edged sword, piercing even to the division of soul and spirit, and of joints and marrow, and is a discerner of the thoughts and intents of the heart.’ I win by the Word, thanksgiving, and supplication.”

You fool!

Yemi burst into tongues. He spoke in tongues and worshipped.

“Yemi, are you alright? Are you okay?” one of the nurses said as she walked into the side room where Yemi was.

Yemi lowered his voice and nodded.

“Why are you talking to yourself?” The nurse stared at him. He was drenched in sweat. “Oh! I think the heating is excessive in this room. Are you happy for me to open the window?” She walked to the opposite wall and turned down the knob that controlled the radiator built into the wall. She pulled down the upper halves of the windows. A cold draught swept across the room. “It’s freezing out there.” She adjusted the windows and slanted the vertical blinds across to minimise the gush of wind into the room.

“Thank you, I’m fine,” Yemi said.

The nurse walked away from the window. She cast a glance at the urine bag connected to Yemi’s catheter. The calibrated drainage bag was nearly empty. The little urine present in the bag was grossly bloody.

“Has someone drained your catheter bag in the last few hours?”

Yemi shook his head. “Not that I know of. I’ve been sleeping so it might have been done.”

“Alright. I will have a look at your records.” She raised her eyes to the intravenous medication bag hung on the drip-stand. “The medication is almost finished. I will notify the specialist nurse and return to check your vital signs. Is that alright?”

Yemi nodded and wiped his forehead with tissues as the nurse stepped out.

About an hour later, a team of medical professionals came to Yemi’s room. The lead doctor walked into the room, leaving the door half-open to allow the others a view of the patient.

“Hello, I’m Merry Winkle, one of the consultants. How are you feeling today?”

“I feel better. Looking forward to going home,” Yemi said.

“Following the recent changes, we ordered more investigations including blood work. The results are all back and we’ve had a multidisciplinary team review of them.” She lifted the catheter bag. “This is the amount of urine you produced in eight hours. Given normal circumstances, your kidney should make this amount or more in thirty minutes, and on dry days in one hour.

Unfortunately, your only kidney is packing up despite all interventions. That is what is responsible for the swelling in your face, arms, and legs. The body generally.”

“Hmm. All things work together for good,” Yemi said.

Merry managed a smile, unsure if her patient understood how grave his situation was. “That’s what we all hope for. With your consent, we believe you will benefit from dialysis. Having a renal transplant would have been an ideal long-term option, but your liver is in a critical state and there’s multiple lymph node involvement. The other organs affected are the...”

Yemi tuned out. The dream he had earlier flashed in his mind. Now he understood it clearly. His body was the house with so many irreparable cracks. He needed no further explanation of how he would supposedly die sooner than he expected. He already had the premonition. However, that would not change his strange belief. He would not stop speaking life, and establishing his victory in Christ Jesus.

“Are you with me, Yemi?” Merry said. She had just finished explaining how extensive and sad his case was and there he was, lying on the bed and staring blankly as though it had nothing to do with him.

“Yes, I am. Thank you for your help.”

“So, I was asking if you consent to begin dialysis to avoid the build-up of waste products in your body that could further worsen the situation.”

Yemi sighed. “When am I getting discharged? I’ve stayed here longer than I anticipated.”

“I understand and appreciate your optimism. However, your vitals are currently far from what we’d like them to be. The subject of discharge is not likely to come up until things settle a bit, except if you want to be discharged against medical advice. Your system is overwhelmed at this moment.”

Yemi felt the pain, the weakness, and all the symptoms associated with his condition. But his heart was made up. Until he lost consciousness and his breath, he would not accept defeat. Even now that the fact was saying that recovery was impossible, Luke

1:37 kept ringing in his head, “For with God nothing will be impossible.”

Yemi smiled. “I understand you too, doctor, but I’m leaving this hospital hale and hearty, sooner than everyone expects,” he said and winced in pain.

Merry and her team members exchanged glances.

“We hope that happens soon. I will leave you to think about what we have discussed with you so far. One of the doctors will come back to see you and tell you more about dialysis. The earlier you start the better. Do you have questions for me?”

Yemi responded with a gesture. No question.

“Alright, thank you for your time. I will see you on the round tomorrow.”

Yemi burst into tears as soon as the doctors left. His heart suddenly felt heavy.

“For with God, nothing shall be impossible,” he said again and again until he mustered enough strength to begin to sing praises. He waved his hands and nodded his head to the tune. He continued until he felt the nudging in his spirit to get off the bed and dance.

At first, his legs felt heavy but he managed until his body obeyed. He sang and danced. He lifted his pocket Bible from the bed and flipped the pages.

“Jehovah God, the Almighty. I have come in the name of Your Son Jesus, my saviour. Jeremiah 32:17 says, ‘Ah, Lord God! Behold, You have made the heavens and the earth by Your great power and outstretched arm. There is nothing too hard for You.’”

He sang another chorus.

“Great are Your works, Lord. You specialize in doing the impossible. You parted the Red Sea, caused Jordan to flee backwards before your beloveds, brought water out of the rock, and caused Jericho walls to fall without a bulldozer. The same You who won a war against great armies with few men, decided to win a greater battle for Jehoshaphat and Your people without even a fight. What can You not do?”

He spoke in tongues for a minute.

“You saved the three Hebrew men from the fiery furnace. Daniel escaped being a meal to the hungry lions by Your power. You raised the dead, healed the sick, and saved the trodden. Uncountable are Your works.”

He paused for a second.

“Even if You do not reverse my situation. You are still God who can do all things. The Psalmist wrote, ‘The heavens declare the glory of God; and the firmament shows His handiwork.’ Great is Your faithfulness, Oh Lord...”

14

Muyiwa paced the room, holding a paper, upset. The more he tried to do the math, the more it was not adding up.

He remembered clearly that he had had a vasectomy. He could not impregnate any woman. The repeated tests he had done following the procedure had shown it was a complete success. How did his wife become pregnant?

After the news, Muyiwa and Lucy had gone to another hospital for investigations, thinking the first doctor had misinterpreted the result or made an error somewhere. But the new physician said the same thing. Lucy was pregnant.

During the ultrasound scan Lucy had some days ago, Muyiwa remembered hearing the baby's heartbeat himself. The attending doctor had shown both of them the outline of the foetus on the screen as he scanned her. What other proof did he need to remove all doubt that his wife was indeed carrying a child?

After the confirmatory scan, Muyiwa googled about vasectomy, wondering if the procedure had failed. When he read on the internet that there was a small chance of reversal, he headed to a renowned diagnostic centre to carry out fertility tests. Lucy's silence fuelled his suspicion. Wanting to be double sure, he went to another laboratory for the same cause and awaited the results.

Resentment dripped into Muyiwa's veins as he stared at the papers in his hands. The second result came in today, clearly stating that he had zero probability of impregnating a woman. The same thing the first result from a different laboratory revealed yesterday.

Muyiwa shook his head and paced some more. The facts were not as unbearable as the silence since the confirmatory test. Lucy knew he had a vasectomy done so she should be the one giving an explanation not the other way round.

“She wouldn’t even say a word, staying indoors all day like a do-not-name-it,” he soliloquized.

A jumble of anger and frustration filled his marrow. He felt like an athlete disqualified for winning.

Muyiwa sat on the nearest sofa and lowered his head onto his palm. The pain he felt from his daughter’s case was sufficient. He did not need it to be rubbed in by his wife’s infidelity, or what other word could explain what had happened?

“God, this is too much. I don’t know what to do.” He stood and paced again, his heart double the weight of a millstone.

He deserved an explanation. If she were not ready to give it, he would demand it.

Muyiwa exhaled and headed for the room.

Lucy rolled in bed, crying. She wished someone could tap her and tell her it was all a bad dream.

The memory of the senior pastor visiting Dorothy at the hospital still haunted her. It would have been better if he had gone alone, but no, his wife, Funke, and one of the ministers tagged along. Lucy was not in the same friendship clique with the pastor’s wife. She could already imagine Funke telling others how her ‘precious’ daughter tried to commit suicide.

“The Lord have mercy on our sister, Mrs Olakanmi, her daughter attempted suicide. Praise our good God who turned her back on her way to hell,” Funke would probably have said to her friends. Questions Lucy believed people would raise, plagued her mind.

“Does Lucy not boast about that daughter of hers? Was Dorothy trying to hide a horrible truth about her parents? Guess nothing was perfect about their lives after all! All shambles.”

The voices in Lucy’s head rang high. She could see the faces of people she had mocked and rated low grinning, pouting, and making demeaning gestures at her as she walked into the church.

She could imagine her belly growing enough for people to notice she was pregnant, and the people calling her shameless, foolish perhaps. How about when they finally knew the child was a product of adultery? They would hastily dig a grave and ask her to lie in it without objection.

Lucy's lips shivered as she sobbed. Even though the thoughts were not real, at least not yet, the pain was. The anguish was.

Lucy cursed the devil. How could she be pregnant so easily? All the odds were against her—advanced age, unstable cycle, history of difficulty achieving conception, and zero desire for additional child if that counted as a factor. She already had three children, with her youngest in his first year of university.

How could she be pregnant after she had shown remorse and secretly asked God for forgiveness of her sins? It was a mere trailing away. Why magnify her sins? Not with her age and status. Not with how she believed many wished they could be in her shoes. Her life was wonderful. Perfect, she believed. Different thoughts filled her mind.

Lucy's anger changed direction with every passing hour. It was first against Anthony, for being his designer, coming to her house, being handsome and irresistible. And for being so fertile that he defied all the odds. He was the devil himself. Or was she the one not discerning and unguarded?

Then her anger migrated against God for not considering her status and circumstances thereby averting the pregnancy. For bringing her shame and the pain she now felt.

Her husband was the next in line, for having been silly to agree with her to have a vasectomy. At least, they would have both accepted the pregnancy as a surprise gift if the square peg were in the square hole.

Muyiwa walked into the room and sat on the bedside chair. He saw Lucy quickly wipe her face and lay still.

"Don't attempt to pretend to be asleep. We both know we have issues. I want to know what happened," he said.

Lucy knew she would not be able to open her mouth to utter a word. Not anytime soon.

“Another result came in for me today. I purposely left yesterday’s result open on that table beside you, believing you would certainly see it at some point. Maybe that can nudge you to start talking. Today’s result discloses the same thing. Zero count. Non-existent ability to naturally father a child.” He paused and watched for a reaction. “How did you come by the pregnancy? What have you been doing behind me?”

Silence.

“Can’t you speak? Have you suddenly lost your voice?” Muyiwa’s voice shot through the roof, rage dancing in his widened pupil.

Lucy jerked to a sitting position. “Please don’t scream at me. Yes, I know you cannot father a child so please stop reminding me non-stop. I can’t remember saying the child was yours!”

Muyiwa boiled. What audacity! “Are you in your right senses? What are you saying in essence?”

“Why asking me questions with visible answers? It’s evident you are not the one responsible for the pregnancy. Why worry so much about it?” she said.

“Have you gone nuts? Have you not got any sobriety? Still flippant at this point?” He clenched his teeth and paced the room. “Oh God! What kind of woman is this?”

“The kind that has been with you for almost two decades and supported you all your life.”

Muyiwa turned and dashed towards her, his hand raised. He stood still in her face and slowly exhaled. He could tell he would do more damage than foreseen if he stayed. He lowered his hands and walked toward the door.

“Do you want to hit me? Go ahead, hit me, minister of God!”

Muyiwa cast a glance at her. “A woman who has lost her place in God is not difficult to identify. Their emptiness is constantly portrayed, and their rottenness stinks. Please be gone before I return. I’m done with this marriage.” He walked out of the room and slammed the door.

In all their years of marriage, Lucy had never for once seen that kind of look in her husband's eyes. It seemed he was no longer the gentle, malleable, peace-loving man she married.

Lucy sobbed. Had she pushed it too far? She had thought making a face and being defensive would erode her husband's objection. She did not know it would turn out this way. Leaving her marriage was the last thing she could think of. How would she face the world she had been against?

An immeasurable weight of regret washed over her. She probably should be the one attempting suicide, not Dorothy.

"Oh, God! What have I done?" She wailed.

15

Fikemi lay on her bed, scrolling through a social media application. The first picture that stared her in the face was that of her school daughter, Abbey, in a beautiful wedding dress, held at the waist by the groom. She clicked on the post and it loaded fifteen more pictures—the couple in different attires and postures, smiling sheepishly at the camera.

“Abbey too is married?” Fikemi shook her head. It had been a few months since she last heard from Abbey. Fikemi still remembered sending her a gift for her twenty-second birthday the previous year.

“So fast? And she couldn’t even reach out to invite me. So bad.”

She scrolled up. After two random posts, she saw pictures of another lavish wedding. The couple did not look familiar but one of the guests in the picture was, a friend.

Fikemi swiped the screen. From one picture to the other. She wondered. Why was her timeline flooded today with pictures from different weddings and proposals? She scrolled on and on before irritation took over and she closed the app.

She opened a messaging app and clicked the status icon, wanting something different to feed her eyes on. Her contacts had posted different things—from Bible verse of the day to comic relief, angry outbursts against a particular subject, and of course wedding events and well wishes for the new couples. Fikemi remembered it was Saturday evening. Saturday was known for flamboyant parties of all sorts, mostly weddings, so it should not be a surprise.

She filled her lungs. She would have probably been on someone's status if today were her wedding too, she thought. But what else could she do? She had tried everything and followed every advice. How else was she supposed to find a spouse?

Since she broke up with her fiancé four years ago for cheating on her, she has not been in any committed relationship. The friendship she had with Gori was something she had hoped would turn out to be the final walk to the aisle. Unfortunately, it turned sour instead.

Fikemi knew how much she had visited several malls at varying times, window shopping mostly, occasionally buying one or two things to cover up her real intention of being there—to explore the possibility of meeting a suitor. Attempts that always turned out to be wasted effort. Rather than find a suitor, she found irritation when she met lovebirds who ostentatiously flaunt their relationship in the shopping centres.

Fikemi had attended numerous parties, formal and informal meetings, and conferences, having the same thought—that her knight in shining armour would find her. She had even gotten over the 'shining armour' part and made up her mind to consider any knight that turned up on her doorstep but it seemed a mere fantasy that had no place in reality. Everywhere she went, even places filled with successful young bachelors, it appeared only casual friendship was advertised on her forehead. She could not think of any other reason why no one was interested in expressing willingness to commit to a relationship with her.

At one point, an elderly colleague advised that her obvious economic status and buoyancy could be a threat to her getting married as eligible suitors might not feel confident to ask for her hand in marriage due to misconceptions about what to expect. Heeding the advice, Fikemi stopped riding in her parents' exotic vehicles and abandoned her jeep for an old small car she bought from a friend who wanted to upgrade. After about a year of subjecting herself to a poor lifestyle without any success—abandoning comfort, jumping buses, begging people to push her car mid-journeys often, and more—the proposed humility her

colleague said would guarantee her a life partner, Fikemi changed her mind and resolved to live her life as it was.

Determined to do everything possible, Fikemi had taken Lara's suggestions to attend churches and sometimes share basic testimonies just to take the stage, perhaps someone would notice her. But none of her gimmicks yielded any fruit.

Tears welled up in her eyes. Did it mean she would grow old lonely, feeling unwanted? Could she not experience the warmth and fellowship of marriage and having a family? Was she jinxed or something?

She sobbed. If tears were the ticket she needed for a family of her own, she would have long had one. What else could she do?

Nana knocked lightly and turned the doorknob. She peered through the small opening in the door. "Can I come in?"

Without getting a response, Nana stepped into the room and shut the door behind her.

Fikemi quickly wiped her face and tried to maintain a straight face.

"What is the matter? Why were you crying?" Nana sat on the bed, one of her palms placed on her daughter's back.

Fikemi gestured in denial.

"I heard you crying. What's the matter?"

"I was n- n- not crying," Fikemi said amidst tears.

"You know you can always express yourself around me. I will get a box of tissues." Nana straightened, went into the toilet, and returned with a box of tissues. She pulled out a couple and wiped her daughter's free-flowing tears.

"Now let's talk. What's going on?"

"Nothing. I am just reflecting on a few things."

Nana shot her a knowing look.

"Nana," Fikemi hesitated, "I'm tired of being single. Why exactly am I not getting any suitor? What have I done wrong?" She burst into tears.

Nana patted her back. "Hmm. I'm sorry, dear. I understand how you feel."

“I’m so ashamed of myself, living in my parents’ residence at this age. I’m so ashamed,” Fikemi said, forgetting that she had relocated to a flat in another part of Lagos two years ago. Seven months down the line, she moved back in with her parents for reasons she resonated with. Her workplace was closer to her parents’ home. The house offered her more comfort without affecting her freedom in whatever way. She had everything she needed and was happier being around others compared to the lonely life she lived in her rented apartment.

“Hmm.” Nana nodded, urging her to continue speaking.

“I ought to be running after one toddler at least by now if all things were equal. But no, my life is in shambles. Just one thing I asked God, and He would not even answer. It’s not as though I have ever been wayward. I’d have understood it was a well-deserved consequence. What did I do to deserve this?”

Fikemi mopped her face, her bottled emotion burst through. “Everybody looks at me like I’m abnormal or bewitched. Married friends dissociate from me as if I would infect their marriages with my ill luck. Younger singles run away from me so they don’t turn out to be like me. What exactly is good about my life? Nothing!”

Nana cleared her throat. “Your desires are valid, my dear. Everyone is free to desire and hope. Wanting to be married with your own kids is not a bad thing.”

“Exactly.”

“I want you to ask yourself a question. Is this just about your want or what you think should be?”

“I don’t understand.”

“I mean, are your thoughts based on the fact that your desires are yet to become reality, or are they related to societal expectations?”

Nana’s words sounded complicated. “Well, I don’t really understand where you are headed. All I know is that at my age, I should be married with children. Now that this is not happening, I have enough reason to think I am jinxed. I am ashamed of myself. Nana, you should be ashamed of me.”

“Have you ever perceived from my words or actions that I am not proud to have you as a daughter?”

“No. But, I sometimes think you don’t care about me, about my status.”

“Hmm. Is this because I never pressure you to go bring me a man and give me more grandchildren?”

“Yes, you never pressure me. That is not what an average mother does. I have seen movies and live examples. Maybe if you had been more concerned and on it, you would have detected what my problem was and helped me to solve it.”

Nana smiled. She could feel her daughter’s pain. She understood her grievance. “That was why I asked the first question. Now I see what the main problem is.”

“And what is that?”

“You are putting yourself under undue societal pressure. Tell me the verse in the Scripture that stated the exact age God commands women to get married.”

Fikemi looked at her mother with lopsided eyes. What was this woman saying? Did her mum mean she should not bother to be married?

Nana continued. “Is there a particular set age at which a person could be tagged as failed if they remained unmarried?”

Fikemi thought for a second. “I would say twenty-eight for females and thirty-five for males.”

“Really. Who set that limit?”

“I don’t know, but that is the norm.”

“That’s what I am saying. People in a certain clime say if you are not married by a certain age, you have failed. If you do not graduate from university at a particular age, you cannot make it in life. If you do not start having children at so so age, forget it. If you are not rich at this age, you will remain poor. If you do not sell yourself, no one will reach out to you. All sorts of beliefs.”

“But.” Fikemi changed her mind and hushed.

“When these ideologies run for a while, people buy them and run by them, stabbing themselves with sorrow when they do not meet the set standard. Funny enough, when you get to another

clime where such ideologies are not perpetuated, people still achieve their desires without undue pressure that it is too late or too early.”

“So for instance, a woman my age in America does not want a husband? Is that what you’re saying?”

“No. An American woman at your age may be married with kids and another might be single without feeling guilty about it. That’s my point. For instance, when I went to Scotland for one of the professorial conferences, one of the key speakers met with me after the conference. You needed to see how confident and happy she was as she spoke. During the course of our conversation, I asked about her family only to realise she had never been married. She was around forty at the time. She said she hoped to have a family once she met the man the Lord would send her way for that purpose. I was shocked by the glee in her voice as she talked about such a sensitive subject. Do you know why? Because where I came from, someone in that same situation would be tagged a failure and given names and you will see them age quickly for the sorrow they have been pierced with.”

Fikemi sighed. She agreed with her mum.

“Whose words do you believe? The Lord’s or the society’s? Things will happen to different people at different times, and this does not mean they are bewitched or unfortunate. I married your father at twenty-three. He had just got a job after his university education while I was still in school. People said I was too young at that time. They said all sorts. The same people who would blame a thirty-year-old woman for being single. My point is that when you reflect on your goals and dreams, let them be based on your conviction and the word of God. Not some sort of societal pressure. Don’t bind yourself to misery.”

“Nana.”

“It’s okay to desire, dream, and hope. Pray about your desires, ask the Lord, and trust Him to do it for you in His time without running a rat race and sabotaging processes just to get what you want. Those who live their lives by the dictate of the world would

by the world meet their doom. But those who trust in the Lord will not be ashamed.”

“Look at Toun, we share the same birthday, she has three daughters.”

“The Bible says in II Corinthians 10:12b, “But they, measuring themselves by themselves, and comparing themselves among themselves, are not wise.”

“I understand, but-”

“Those were not my words, daughter, but the Scripture. The right age for doing anything in this world is not cast in stone anywhere. Our timings are different. The same God who gifted Abraham and Sarah a child in their old age did it for Mary at a younger age. Mind you, this is not to support being lackadaisical about life but to emphasize that you have to walk with your head up, fully confident that the Lord who has promised you a thing will bring it to pass. Being under pressure only makes you desperate. Desperation never walks alone. It brings other troubles along. Many are those suffering bitterly in marriage because they rushed into marriage with any available spouse in order to avoid the label of being late.”

Nana hushed and kneaded Fikemi’s shoulder.

“I understand how you feel. I am praying along with you. However, until your desires become reality, you don’t have to live in frustration. Enjoy each day God brings you, focus on being thankful for the wonderful things in your life, and keep working with the help of the Holy Spirit to fulfil your purpose.”

“I am just wondering what to be thankful for.”

Nana smiled. “Countless—life, sound health, shelter, success, comfort, the gift of a family who loves you, and most importantly, the gift of salvation through the blood of Jesus. All will be well, dear. Rejoice with those who are celebrating and mourn with those who mourn. In due time, all you ask will be yours. Is that okay?”

“Thank you, Nana. I’m sorry for talking like that. I was just-”

Nana pulled her into a warm embrace. “Don’t worry my dear. I understand. Let’s have a word of prayer.”

“Okay, Mum.” Fikemi exhaled slowly. A fresh wave ran over her mind. She no longer cared about whatever anyone had to say about her. She was done moaning and crying over being single. Just as her mother had said, she would enjoy each day, full of thanks and hope, busy fulfilling purpose. Someday, she would be called married.

16

Emotion made the atmosphere heavy, intermittent sniffles interrupted the stillness in the room.

Pastor Oyewale and his wife, Funke, sat on one side of the large circle made up of other attendees of the meeting—Elder Jide and his wife; Pa Oluor, Lucy's father; Elder Adelabu, a senior member of the marriage committee in Muiyiwa's church; Muiyiwa; Lucy, and Dorothy.

Pastor Oyewale signalled to Elder Jide. "Daddy, please pray for us as we begin."

Elder Jide said a heartfelt prayer. He asked God to give them the wisdom to handle the issues at hand.

"Amen," everyone chorused

Pastor Oyewale read a verse from the Bible and pleaded with his audience to control their emotions as matters were addressed.

Muiyiwa nodded. It had been weeks since he separated from his wife. Weeks that saw him struggling to pray or do anything meaningful. If pain had another name, it was his. He could not deny he was deeply hurt.

"Thank you, Pastor, for inviting me. I don't have much to say right now. I just want you to listen to Dorothy," Muiyiwa said and turned to his daughter. "Dee, explain everything you told me and Grandpa. Tell everyone the reason behind what you did."

Dorothy had been discharged from the hospital the previous week. She shuffled forward in her chair. She registered the faces present again. One glance at her mother and she quickly lowered her gaze, afraid. "Aw, uh," she hesitated, "I am sorry." She sobbed.

Funke relocated to the empty chair beside Dorothy and patted her back. “It is okay, my dear. We are family and we all love you. Speak,” she said calmly.

Dorothy exhaled. “I’m so sorry. I failed multiple courses in school, including core courses and had to carry them over.” Tears glazed her vision. She mopped her eyes with the hem of her dress. “I tried my best to pass them, but I failed three of them again. I was really struggling. I mentioned it to Mummy once before, but she asked if I wanted to be an inadequate child and tarnish her image. She said my brother was the ideal child, and if I didn’t wake up and take the lead, I would have her to contend with.”

“I didn’t mean it that way,” Lucy cut in.

“I understand how you feel but would appreciate it if you don’t keep interrupting. We will allow room for each person to speak without interference,” Elder Jide said.

Lucy hushed, her face morose. She knew where her daughter’s story was heading. Dorothy was not lying. But why was her story seemingly showcasing her as a bad mother? She was only trying to ensure her children were the best version of themselves. Was she too hard on them?

Funke nudged Dorothy gently. “Go on, darling.”

“I knew I couldn’t cope with my course of study. I didn’t choose it, but that was what Mummy wanted. I kept striving to keep up, but when I was summoned to the dean’s office and told that an invite would be sent to my parents because my performance was dropping, I became scared. I couldn’t imagine what my mum would say to me. I am sorry I overthought. I presumed I could cover my shame by dying.”

Lucy’s heart sank. She heard her daughter’s confession but could not believe her own daughter saw her that way—a monster. Dorothy was scared enough to let go of life rather than face her. Whereas many children would run into the loving arms of their parents when faced with challenges, hers would go into the fire first before considering her embrace.

Muyiwa shook his head. “What a pity!”

“I am sorry, daddy. I’m sorry, Grandpa, Nana. I’m sorry, everyone.” Dorothy sobbed.

“We thank God for the gift of life. Your life is not for you to end. You have a purpose and will fulfil that purpose if you keep believing,” Funke said, stroking Dorothy’s back affectionately.

Pastor Oyewale spoke next. He apologized to Dorothy for how the family environment had come across to her. Then he cautiously reprimanded her for taking an extreme measure in an attempt to solve a problem. “If you sense you could not speak to your mum, you could inform your dad. If that was difficult, you could speak to your grandparents, you have a lovely set. Or you could come to talk to me or my wife, or any elder in the church,” he said. He continued by encouraging her to look inward and identify her passion and strength, affirming that she did not have to study aeronautic engineering compulsorily.

Others contributed positively. They showed support and advised her to apply for a course of her choice. Her father promised he would support her choice and visit the university to see how they could go about it.

“I am ashamed. I’m sorry I made you feel that way. I guess I was blinded by my own ego and would have lost a dear daughter to foolishness.” Lucy rose to her feet and walked towards her daughter. “I am so sorry.” She sobbed as she pulled her daughter into an embrace.

Dorothy wept.

The pastor allowed some minutes for bonding before speaking. “Dorothy, I would like you to see me in church tomorrow. My wife and I would like to have a couple of sessions with you. Nothing to be worried about. It’s just a talk session to support you further. Is that okay?”

“Yes, sir. Thank you, sir.”

“You are welcome. You can leave for now. Thanks for joining us,” the pastor said.

Dorothy took her bag and exited the room.

“Please have your seat, Mrs Olakanmi.” Pastor Oyewale pointed to the chair between Nana and Pa Oluor.

With a lowered gaze, Lucy took her seat.

“We thank God for making this meeting possible. This situation is an eye-opener. We need to do better as parents. This is not a gathering to criticize or point accusing fingers at anyone in particular. Rather, it is to remind ourselves of our duties to the younger ones God has blessed us with. The world is fast changing. We must realize that these children of ours are the adults of tomorrow who should be properly equipped to face whatever the world would hurl at them,” Pastor Oyewale said.

The audience bobbed their heads in agreement.

Pastor Oyewale spoke on. “It’s disappointing when children loathe their so-called religious parents because of forceful and or excessive correction. I have seen believers’ children become unbelievers. During one of our teenage ministry outreaches, a boy said to me, ‘If it is the same Jesus that my father serves and yet treats my siblings and me like trash you are trying to preach to me, no, thanks’. You can imagine that! The same parents who should minister love and guidance to their children so much that their children fall deeply in love with God are the very ones creating enmity between the children and God by their wickedness or lackadaisical attitude. May the Lord help us all.”

Pa Oluor spoke for the first time. “It is well. I want to believe my daughter has realized her wrong and will turn a new leaf. It’s not too late to change.”

“The Lord will help her,” Muyiwa said, irritation in his throat.

“Psalms 103:13 says, ‘As a father pities his children, so the Lord pities those who fear Him.’ I believe God wants us to be compassionate with not just our kids, but also the younger generation as a whole. We can show them love and understanding, recognize their feelings and respect their choices within the right boundaries. This does not mean we leave them to live careless lives, but with love, we guide and allow God to mould them into vessels of gold. I pray the Lord give us understanding,” Elder Adelabu said.

“Thank you for all your contributions. Since we are all learners at the feet of Jesus until we see Him in glory, permit me

to read a few Scriptures and share what the Lord has laid on my heart.” Pastor Oyewale lifted his tablet and opened the Bible app.

“You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, with all your soul, and with all your strength. And these words which I command you today shall be in your heart. You shall teach them diligently to your children, and shall talk of them when you sit in your house, when you walk by the way, when you lie down, and when you rise up.’ Deuteronomy 6: 5 - 6.”

Funke nodded. “Hmm.”

“Hebrews 12:7-8 corroborates that. It says, ‘If you endure chastening, God deals with you as with sons; for what son is there whom a father does not chasten? But if you are without chastening, of which all have become partakers, then you are illegitimate and not sons.’ We can’t ignore discipline in the name of love either. As we obey the Lord, we train our children to do the same. If everyone honours the word of God, the world will be a better place to live in and there will be a drastic reduction or total extinction of wickedness and all associated vices in the land.”

“True,” Funke said.

“Lastly, Ephesians 6:1-4 and Colossians 3:20-21 address the same matter. I will quote the latter. ‘Children, obey your parents in all things, for this is well pleasing to the Lord. Fathers, do not provoke your children, lest they become discouraged.’ When we are too severe, unloving, and irrational in discipline, we harden the hearts of children. We set them up for discouragement and deception of the devil. They begin to seek validation in the wrong places and put their hands on the wrong things, after all, their parents have said they aren’t good enough. I am not ignorant that some set of teenagers can be very difficult, but with love, persistent prayers, and guidance, they will come around. Moderation is important in all we do, avoiding the two extremes and allowing God to work in us and through us to bring up a holy and glorious generation of men and women that please the Father,” Pastor Oyewale said.

“At this point, can we please pray for ourselves and our children? Thank You, Father, for the wonderful gift of life and

children. We ask the Lord to give us grace to love and obey Him completely. Lord, help us to direct the young ones the right way. Give our children obedient hearts. Silence the voice of the devil and the distractions of this present world. Help us, Lord. Amen,” Funke prayed.

“Amen,” everyone chorused.

17

Yemi sat on a recliner, reading a book. A cracking sound distracted him. He raised his head to locate the source of the sound and realized it was from the wall.

Pull it down and pulverize the detritus. Let there be no remembrance of this building in the earth. Now!

Yemi heard the order but was oblivious of who gave it. An excavator hummed as it approached the house to execute the command.

Yemi rose from his chair. His usual fear was gone.

“Be still, and know that I am God; I will be exalted among the nations, I will be exalted in the earth! Psalms 46:10”

The opposite wall came apart as the machine dug into it. Yemi took his eyes off the machine and slowly shut them. He felt peace fill his heart in the midst of the chaos.

A popular chorus rang in his head.

“Jesus is a mighty God,
He is a mighty God,
Heaven and earth bow before Him,
He’s a mighty God.”

“Yemi. Come. Follow me.”

Yemi opened his eyes and searched for the speaker. He saw a man standing at the adjacent door, beckoning to him. His voice was distinct above the frenzy of activity going on around the building—

a driver pulling down the house, another levelling the debris into the ground.

Yemi followed the stranger and in a split second found himself in a magnificent modern building.

He turned his head. "What's going on? Where are we?" he questioned the stranger.

"This is your new house. It's yours."

"Did you say this is mine?" Yemi marvelled as he whirled around, absorbing the features of the new house.

"Yes, it is."

Yemi smiled. A smile that sprung from his innermost. "This is amazing. How could this be mine? This is more than I can ever afford."

"That is true. You cannot afford it but Jesus paid for it. It's a gift."

Yemi fell on His knees. "Thank You, Jesus." He walked around, everything was perfect and in the right place. On getting to the window, he looked outside and realized the previous building had vanished into thin air.

"Thank You, Lord, for this great gift. Thank you, Jesus." He wept.

The stranger tapped his shoulder. "Rejoice!"

With teary eyes, Yemi lifted his hands. "Oh, magnify the Lord with me and let us exalt His name together. I sought the Lord, and He heard me and delivered me from all my fears. They looked to Him and were radiant and their faces were not ashamed," he said, quoting Psalms 45:3-5.

"Sweetheart!" Tito tapped her husband's shoulder.

Yemi opened his eyes.

"How are you? You were sleeping when I arrived, so I decided to give you one more hour. It's been over an hour since I came in. How are you feeling?"

He nodded. "I'm fine. How're you?"

"I'm alright. The manager called me today to check up on us. I'm glad I hired him. Imagine if it was one careless person we

employed to oversee the business, with months away from home, we probably would be in great debt by now.”

“We thank God for His provision.”

“One of the nurses told me yesterday that you were not scheduled for dialysis until later in the evening today. Were you rescheduled for a morning slot?”

Yemi shook his head. “Not at all. The plan is for me to go in the evening. Why did you ask if it has been rescheduled?”

“Well, when I came in, you were sleeping peacefully so I was just staring at you. That’s when it occurred to me that you look different, given that I am aware that the doctors said your remaining kidney has failed which was why you were swollen. I remember how I left you yesterday afternoon and looking at you today, I realized that your face wasn’t puffy as much, so I thought you had gone for dialysis early in the morning before I came.”

“Really? Not yet. I was told four o’clock. The specialist nurse told me this morning that she would have one of the nurses remove my catheter as it posed a risk of infection and was pointless since I was no longer making urine.” He glanced at the tubing. “They are probably busy and haven’t been able to do that?”

“Perhaps you were asleep when the nurse came and she preferred not to disturb you. The way you sleep these days, I suppose it’s the side effect of one of the medications they give you.” Tito straightened and walked to the window. “It’s chilly today.” She shut one of the windows and turned to return to her seat. Her eyes caught the drainage bag hanging on the side of the bed.

“Jesus! Sweetheart!”

“What?” Yemi said.

“Look at the bag!” Tito unhooked the urine bag and lifted it.

Yemi tilted, staring at the bag with surprise. It was half filled with blood-tinged urine.

“Thank You, Jesus.”

“This is wonderful. It’s an improvement.” She dropped the bag and took her seat. “Nana will be so glad to hear this. I think

you should decline to have dialysis today, hopefully, you will keep passing urine.”

Yemi nodded in agreement. “God has done it. I had a vision just before you woke me up. I saw...” He narrated the dream to his wife who listened with rapt attention.

Tito had previously given up but maintained a façade to keep her husband going. She had thought it was her fate to be a widow. She had lost hope. It had not been easy. The stress she had been through was unquantifiable.

Tito sobbed. “Thank You, Lord. You are indeed faithful. Even when I am faithless, You remain faithful.”

The following two weeks brought to light the significant changes in Yemi’s well-being. He requested to run all the tests again and was obliged. After all, he was paying for them.

“After a thorough review of your results, I am glad to inform you that you are cancer-free. Your blood is back to normal and no tumour or lesion was found on both the CT scan and MRI,” one of the consultants said, staring at Yemi.

Yemi grinned. “For with God, nothing shall be impossible.”

“Congratulations. We are discharging you tomorrow. You will be able to leave once the discharge process and paperwork are completed. Your follow-up visit will be in six weeks. You will have investigations done so we can keep tabs on your health.”

The work of God is perfect, Yemi wanted to say before changing his mind. The doctor would either not understand or choose to disagree based on his medical knowledge. “Thank you, doctor. I appreciate your support and care through this period.”

The doctor nodded. “You’re welcome. See you in the clinic.”

“Alright, thanks.”

The following six weeks flew by faster than Yemi thought. Yemi attended the clinic and submitted himself to all required medical assessments and investigations.

“I am happy to inform you that your results show you are cancer-free. And your kidney has surprisingly regained a hundred per cent functionality, the same with every other organ assessed. Congratulations,” Dr Jack said.

Yemi and his wife exchanged glances. “Thank you, Jesus,” they said in unison.

“They looked to Him and were radiant, and their faces were not ashamed,” Tito said.

Yemi grinned. “John 8:36, ‘Therefore if the Son makes you free, you shall be free indeed.’”

“Thank you, doctor,” the couple said before leaving the doctor’s office.

Yemi and Tito left the hospital, songs of praise in their mouths.

18

Muyiwa stared at his wife from a corner of his eyes. It had been five weeks since they separated. Having had a slim figure, the changes in Lucy's body were evident now.

Staring at Lucy's protruded stomach, Muyiwa shook his head, wondering if he could ever get past the hurt he felt.

"I am sorry," Lucy said, sobbing. She had just narrated what happened to those present.

The past five weeks Lucy had spent away from her husband had humbled her. Five weeks away from flashy cars, soft bedding, and being constantly waited upon by staff. Comfort turned out to be the least of her worries, as fear gripped her nonstop that news about why she had left her marriage would spread like wildfire. She had no reprieve from the burden of guilt she now felt. How would she even face her children if they knew the truth about why she left the house? If the school had not been in session, the children would have probably found out.

Travelling to her father's house in the east did not minimize the shame. The first few days had been filled with greetings from family and friends, expressing their pleasure at seeing her in town again. But after a week, people began to ask questions.

"Ada, it's nice you are still around. I'm sure your father is delighted to have you around. I want to get a gift for your children. When are you going back to the city?" A neighbour had asked, and Lucy had to fake a smile, saying 'Very soon.' Lucy could see through the question, it was a way of asking if all was well. She had never stayed a week in town without her children at least.

By the time Lucy had spent three weeks, the village elders had started talking and probing her father. As the first girl of her father, she was Ada, and according to their customs, she was not expected to leave her matrimonial home for too long, except for acceptable reasons, which excluded intentional separation from her husband.

Pa Oluor, Lucy's father, was unhappy either. Even though his daughter could not bring herself to say the truth about why she was home for that long, he knew something was wrong. When he contacted Muiyiwa and found out what had happened, he was utterly mortified. "You have humiliated me, Ada," he had told Lucy with misty eyes.

Lucy now realized how a single action could affect many people. She had thought she was perfect, the golden woman who made everyone proud and was fulfilled in herself. Alas, that was far from the truth.

Lucy hoped today's meeting would resolve her problems. Perhaps she would obtain mercy in the sight of her husband and everyone seated.

"Chai. How do we address this? This is an abomination," Pa Oluor said, his attempt to establish he was not in support of Lucy.

Pastor Oyewale sighed. He had listened with rapt attention to what Lucy had to say. "The Lord will have mercy," he said and looked in Muiyiwa's direction. "I want to believe you are the one we should all beseech to forgive. I know this is a hard thing, but the Lord requires us to forgive others as He forgave us."

Muiyiwa sneered. He believed in forgiveness. He had practised it always. But how could he forgive this kind of sin when the product would stare at him in the face all his days? Looking at Lucy alone rekindled anger in him. Seeing her carry the result of her carelessness or what could he tag this?

"I have forgiven her," he said. "Long ago in fact. But I apologize, I am insisting on a divorce. You would agree with me that adultery is an acceptable ground for divorce. I don't think I can bear to live under the same roof with her."

Funke stroked her chest. "Please, calm down sir. We all know how you feel."

"No, ma'am. This woman here," Muyiwa pointed to Lucy, "is not deserving of any forgiveness. If this had happened to any other woman, I know the kind of judgment she would have passed. We were all here a few weeks ago when our own daughter was recounting how she almost lost her life just because of this woman. She's holier than everyone. Extremely puffed up." Muyiwa hissed.

Everyone could see the anguish in his soul, pain bounced off every word he said.

"Hmm. May the Lord give us wisdom to handle this matter. Minister Muiyiwa, you have the right to be upset, to feel betrayed and to express anger. And yes, adultery can be a reason for permanent separation. But I would like you to consider a few things. Your wife appreciates the gravity of what she has done. She is remorseful and asking for your forgiveness," Pastor Oyewale said.

"Remorseful? What does her remorse have to do with me? Was she not swift to carry her bag and leave the house many days ago? Just because she wears a sad look, you think she is remorseful?" Muiyiwa laughed hysterically. "I bet not."

"Muyiwa, don't fall into the same error you are against. I know this is extremely painful for you. It is for us all. I want to believe Lucy knows better now. You should not say someone is not deserving of forgiveness. If it were by works, no one would qualify for salvation. Glory to God who shows us mercy," Elder Jide said.

"I beg you, Bro Muiyiwa. Please sheath the sword and put the devil to shame. You will not experience the true washing away of this pain if you don't truly forgive. Consider your children. Think of how this decision will affect them, their education, and even their future. How it will affect your own heart and your walk with the Saviour," Pastor Oyewale said.

Muyiwa clenched his teeth and sobbed.

Funke fell on her knees, her hands clasped. "When we minister forgiveness, we receive healing and peace. You cannot deny yourself of that. Please, let it go. The Holy book says in I Peter

5:8, “Be sober, be vigilant; because your adversary the devil walks about like a roaring lion, seeking whom he may devour. Chase the devil and his works from your tent and enjoy the ministry of the Holy Spirit,” she said.

Lucy could not believe her eyes. Funke was the woman she had thought would mock and disgrace her. But here she was, begging on her behalf, with so much sincerity in her eyes. Lucy realized she had viewed Funke through the lens of her own attitude. Tears streamed down her face. She knew she did not deserve to have anyone on her side, but here she was surrounded by people who wanted the same thing, restoration of her home. Even her parents-in-law who should have been the least persons to be imagined agreed that she deserved forgiveness.

“As my wife has rightly said, forgiveness frees the giver and opens a pathway for healing. In addition, many times it brings the recipient back to the fold. Let me read James 5:19-20 quickly.” Pastor Oyewale opened his Bible. “Brethren, if anyone among you wanders from the truth, and someone turns him back, let him know that he who turns a sinner from the error of his way will save a soul from death and cover a multitude of sins.”

Muyiwa shut his eyes and filled his lungs. It felt difficult, almost impossible to forgive such a sin. He definitely could not ask her to terminate the pregnancy. Welcoming her back into his life would mean accepting the unborn as well, and raising it as his own if need be. He had to be sure he was indeed willing.

It dawned on him that God could see the battle in his mind when Matthew chapter eighteen swept across his mind. The story of the wicked servant who was declared debt-free by his master yet would not forgive another servant owing him a far lesser amount. Muyiwa had taught this lesson on a midweek service in his church a few months ago.

In a flash, he saw himself on the altar teaching so passionately and emphasizing emulating God’s kind of love. Now he knew that practice was not often as sweet as words. But it was his turn. His turn to open his heart and allow love to flow through.

Tears glazed his reddened eyes. He straightened and approached his wife.

“I- I- I.” He took another deep breath. “I forgive you.”

Lucy was in tears. She fell on her knees and held his legs. She doubted she was worthy to embrace him.

Muyiwa pulled her up and hugged her. “I love you.”

Huge relief washed over the audience. They clapped.

“Thank You, Jesus,” Funke said repeatedly.

The couple held each other for a while, sobbing, before resuming their seats.

“Thank you, Pastor, Mummy Oyewale, Elder, Daddy, Nana, and Grandpa Oluor. Thank you so much,” Muyiwa said.

“We give glory to God who has bruised the devil’s head for your sake. Thank you for your patience. The good Lord will keep your home,” Pastor Oyewale said.

“Thank you, my son. I sincerely appreciate you. I never even thought you would attend the meeting or listen to anyone. Indeed, you are a child of God. May God honour you and uphold you all your days. Once again, I apologize on behalf of my daughter. Thank you,” Pa Oluor said.

“Thank God. Thank you, sir,” Muyiwa responded.

Pa Oluor turned to Lucy. “To you, Ada. I believe you have learnt your lesson. Turn a new leaf, please.”

“There is no reason to pummel a fallen person. He has already fallen. Daughter, as you have received grace, mercy, and love, administer these to others. Treat others with mercy. And humble your heart always. Which Christian is the holiest or above temptation? A wise man once said ‘It can never be you until it is you.’ I Corinthians 10:12 says, ‘Therefore let him who thinks he stands take heed lest he fall.’ We are all learners at Jesus’ feet. We should work out our salvation with fear and trembling. For as long as we are in this world, different things will pop in our faces, but those who trust in the Lord, obey his words and flee from evil will overcome,” Nana said.

Pastor Oyewale smiled. “Thank you, ma. To corroborate that, I must say we need to tread carefully as Christians and flee from

all appearances of evil. We should never think we are strong and can withstand all things, fleeing sometimes is the right way to overcome temptation. May God continue to help us.”

Everyone chorused, “Amen.”

“Shall we pray?” Pastor Oyewale said. He bowed his head and started praying.

19

Elder Jide lifted his hands and gave thanks. It was his family's annual Thanksgiving meeting. His joy was palpable. He was not only surrounded by his large family but also could observe changes and expressions of love in them. He had a lot to say, but it had to begin with thanks and end with praises to God.

"Amen," everyone said as soon as he finished praying.

"We are grateful to God for the joy we have today. Imagine what this gathering would have been about if not for the Lord's mercy," Elder Jide said.

"We have God to thank for all He has done. It's a blessed day!" Nana said and ran her eyes through the room, grateful for the happy faces of her children, in-laws, and grandchildren.

It was routine for each branch of the family to take turns to share testimony for the year and give thanks to God.

"The Lord has been faithful. There's nothing impossible for Him to do." The voice belonged to Yemi. He knew he was a miracle embodied. From the doorstep of death to perfect health. All the tests he had done since his discharge from the hospital had been clear. His body felt like nothing had ever hit it. To whom else could he attribute this impossibility made reality? "As the Scriptures say, I am convinced that the thoughts of God for me are of good and not of evil to give me hope and a future. There is power in the word of God. There is power in the blood of Jesus. The Lord healed me of cancer, turned the table around, and walked me into divine health."

"Hallelujah!" many said.

Tito stroked Yemi's arm. "I'm glad we're all able to attend this event. More grateful that I am not a widow at this moment." Tears welled up in her eyes. "Indeed, the Lord sees. The Lord hears!"

"Amen! Hallelujah." Nana nodded.

They clapped, their way of rejoicing as a family.

"I am grateful to you, Nana. Thank you for yielding to the Lord. I was walking the path of destruction, but the Lord used you to open my eyes and bring me back. I'm thankful for the love and joy in my family," Bimbo said and cast a glance at her husband who was holding their two-month-old baby and smiling. She could tell how things had changed for the better in her home when she and her husband gave up selfishness and stopped seeing each other as competitors. They were both progressive as opposed to what she had feared.

Her husband threw his free arm around her shoulder. "We thank God for the addition of this beautiful girl to our home. We are grateful for God's blessings on all our endeavours. Our joy is full."

"Glory be to God! We rejoice with you." Elder Jide said.

When it was Muyiwa's turn, he took a deep breath. "We are grateful for restoration. The children are doing very well and we are expecting a new addition soonest." He glanced at his wife's protruded belly. He had gotten over the hurt and accepted his wife and the incoming as his. His wife had changed so much that he wondered how a person could become so positively different. It was a good change that everyone loved.

"I don't deserve God's mercy or forgiveness but He gave me anyway. For a husband so true and kind, children reflecting grace, and restoration I didn't deserve, I say thank You, Jesus," Lucy said.

Everyone clapped. "God is good."

Fikemi cleared her throat. "I don't even know where to start."

"Start somewhere," Bimbo said, smiling. Everyone could see her testimony before she said a word—the handsome, young man seated beside her.

"First, I want to say I'm sorry to God once again for every second I doubted him and focused on a lack in my life despite His

showers of blessings. I struggled, tried all sorts of gimmicks, and ran around in circles. I want to thank Daddy and Nana who supported me all through. The moment I truly submitted it to the Lord and took my mind off it, He decided to surprise me with this gentleman without me doing anything to warrant it.” She smiled at Raymond, to whom she was getting married in six weeks. “Not just that, I thank God for expansion on all sides and His blessings more than I can count. Praise the Lord!”

“Hallelujah.”

Raymond bowed. “It’s a privilege to be in this beautiful gathering. I’m most grateful for salvation and the beautiful gift of Fikemi. Just as her name indicates, the Lord has indeed pampered me by giving her to me. May God’s name be forever praised.”

The audience giggled and gestured.

“Love is a beautiful thing,” Bimbo teased.

Fikemi nodded. “It is indeed!”

“Since we are in the mood for Thanksgiving, can I use this opportunity to announce that I am pregnant,” Stephanie said.

Nana jumped to her feet. “Wow. This is good news. Glory to Jesus!”

“Congratulations,” some said.

Nana dashed across the room and pulled Stephanie into an embrace. She wept on her shoulder. “God never fails. I’m so happy for you.”

Stephanie settled on her chair and continued speaking. “I was on the verge of leaving my husband. I was bitter and angry, thinking he didn’t care about our family. Yes, I was told that I had a couple of issues, but I blamed his nonchalant attitude. I thought he was not supporting my search for a solution, I didn’t know he was trying to avoid upsetting me or making me feel like I was the problem. I thank God for Nana’s support. She told me to let my husband know exactly how I feel and advised we fight our battle as a unit, as division would only make things worse. Here we are today, carrying evidence of God’s goodness. Praise the Lord!”

The sound of hallelujah rang through the room.

Elder Jide led them to pray for a while.

“Praise be to God. The past few years have been eventful. We have learnt many lessons. In all, God has shown He can do all things. There is nothing difficult for Him to do. While we are in this tent, meaning in this human body, we will face diverse challenges, even as believers. However, we must believe that we fight from a place of victory in Christ Jesus. We must believe and be steadfast. Never thinking we have obtained until we end it at the Lord’s feet,” he said.

Nana nodded her agreement. “To buttress your point, permit me to quickly read the Scriptures. 2 Corinthians 5:4-9 (NLT), ‘While we live in these earthly bodies, we groan and sigh, but it’s not that we want to die and get rid of these bodies that clothe us. Rather, we want to put on our new bodies so that these dying bodies will be swallowed up by life. God himself has prepared us for this, and as a guarantee he has given us his Holy Spirit. So we are always confident, even though we know that as long as we live in these bodies we are not at home with the Lord. For we live by believing and not by seeing. Yes, we are fully confident, and we would rather be away from these earthly bodies, for then we will be at home with the Lord. So whether we are here in this body or away from this body, our goal is to please him. We live by faith, not by sight, and we all know heaven is our home, but while we are on earth, we will seek to please our Lord.’”

Yemi nodded. “Hmm, the Lord will increase our understanding. I will definitely hold on to that last part, ‘We live by faith, not by sight, and we all know heaven is our home, but while we are on earth, we will seek to please our Lord.’”

“Shall we pray?” Nana said and they all bowed their heads as she led them in a short prayer.

THE END

From the author's desk.

Dear Readers,

I appreciate you for coming along with me on a journey through the pages of 'In This Tent.'

I hope this story has blessed you just as it has blessed me.

In this world, we face diverse challenges but we can be sure of victory once Jesus is in our boat. God can bring out beauty in that situation you are in currently. All you need to do is to submit to God and allow Him to order your steps.

The divine access to God is made available in Christ Jesus. You can surrender all to Jesus today or rededicate your life to Him. Whether for the first time or not, prepare your heart and talk to God wherever you are. He hears.

You can pray this prayer,

Almighty God, I thank You for Your love for me. Thank You for sending Your Son, Jesus, to die for my sins. I confess that I have sinned and fallen short of Your glory. I repent and forsake my sins. Please forgive me and cleanse me by the blood of Jesus. I believe in the death and resurrection of Jesus Christ. I surrender my body, spirit, and soul to You today. I accept Jesus Christ as my Lord and Saviour. Please, come reign and rule in my heart. Fill me with the Holy Spirit and help me live a life that brings You glory. Thank You, Jehovah Father, amen.

I congratulate and welcome you into God's family. You will not only experience God's love and have Him guide you always but will also have your name written in the Book of Life. Find and join a Bible-believing church around you. Study the word of God, the Holy Bible, and cultivate a personal relationship with God.

Many readers have written to me and I have read every word of every mail. It is a tremendous delight to hear from you. Your prayers are a huge encouragement. Thank you so much. God bless you.

Feel free to contact or connect with me. God bless you now and always.

In Christ's steadfast love,

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ABOUT THE AUTHOR

If you are reading this page, I guess you are interested in getting to know me as a person. Okay, that's fantastic. It's something to be thankful for. Laughs. Let me start like this.

My name is Elizabeth Olugbenga, formerly Elizabeth Kazeem. I am God's princess. Hallelujah! I am a writer — I wrote this page you are currently reading at least. Smiles. God through me has authored a few inspiring stories. What an amazing God we serve! More will come by God's grace if Jesus tarries.

I love spending time with my loved ones, and I can twirl my body to good gospel music.

If you are satisfied with this write-up, cool. You want to know more about me? No problem. Just visit my website <https://elizabetholugbenga.com>

Thanks for reading this book.

You can connect with me on social media platforms.

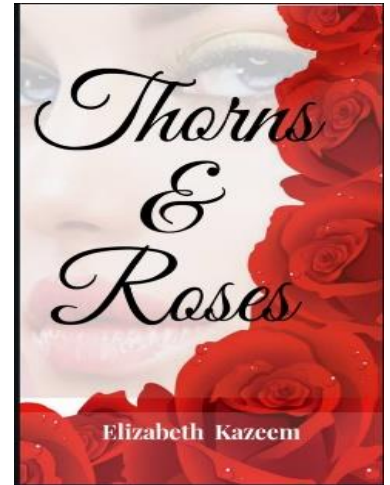
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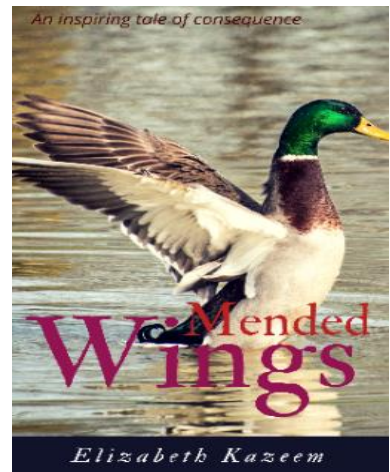
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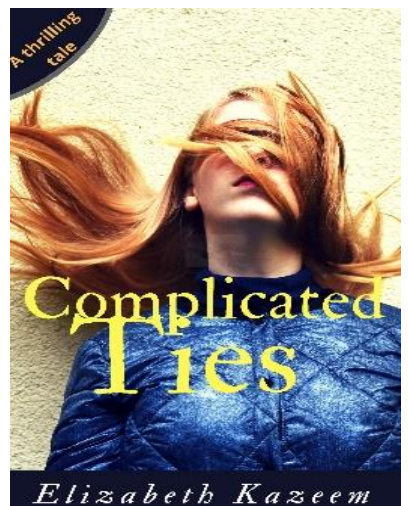
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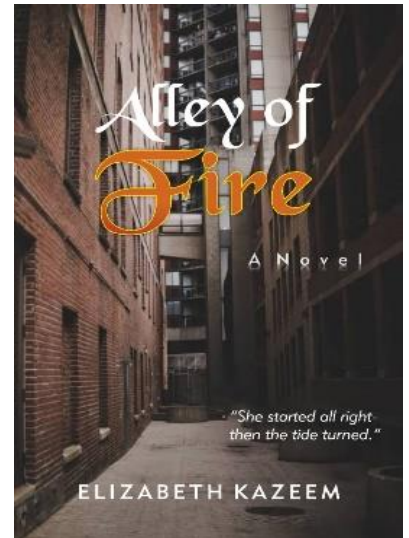
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COMPLICATED LIES



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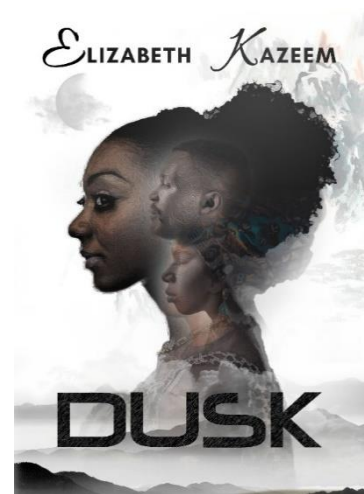
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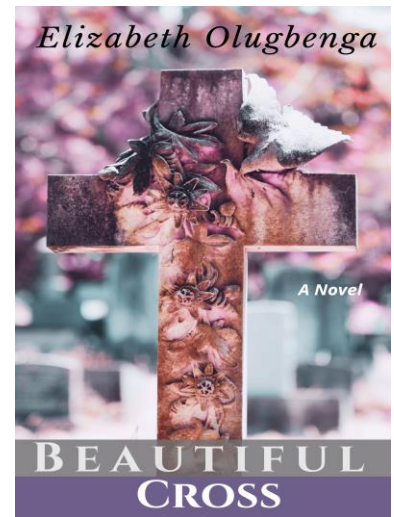
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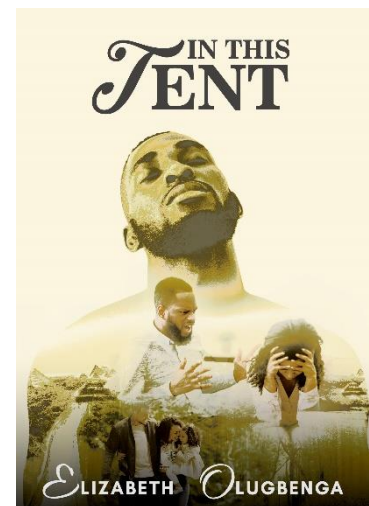
ONE CHANCE



BEAUTIFUL CROSS



IN THIS TENT



THANKS
For
READING.