



Alley of Fire

A N O V E L

*"She started all right-
then the tide turned."*

ELIZABETH KAZEEM

ALLEY
OF
FIRE

Elizabeth Kazeem

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DEDICATION

This book is dedicated to the Almighty God, the source of all good and perfect gifts.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

I want to express my profound gratitude to the Almighty God for the gift of life. I thank Him for making me a vessel of honour in His vineyard. It's a huge privilege. May His 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 was through His death and resurrection that I am saved. Now I can boldly call Jehovah 'Abba Father.' Thank You, Jesus, for submitting Your life so that I and innumerable others may be saved.

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I appreciate my biological and spiritual parents, my siblings, and everyone God has placed in my life for one or more purposes. I love you all.

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To my readers, I say a big thank you. Thanks for reading my books and gleaning from God in them all. I appreciate your prayers and encouragement. May God keep us standing in His will till we meet Him in Glory, Amen.

CHAPTER ONE

Funto Peters stared at the appointment letter in her hands. Joy bustled through her. She hadn't been able to still the tremendous excitement pulsating in her brain since she received the letter.

She was to resume work the following week. Who would be in her shoes and be sad? She had barely finished her mandatory national youth service. And was already offered a job in a multinational company as an account officer. She didn't need to worry about writing and posting a thousand application letters to various organisations, with little hope of being offered a job.

She dropped on her knees and began to sing. Songs of worship and praise. She believed only God could have done this for her. It wasn't simply because she had graduated summa cum laude. It was grace that found her. Grace of the living God. Tears streaked down her face as she lifted the letter above her head.

She began to pray after she had sung to her fill. God deserved her praise. He was her rock of support and the helper of her destiny. If there was anyone who enjoyed undiluted God's grace, it was Funto. Thoughts of her childhood, school days, and up till the present flooded her mind. She could say confidently without mincing words that God had been good to her.

Funto rose to her feet about an hour after. She walked to the kitchen and fixed herself a light meal. She nibbled at her meal as she watched a program on television.

Her phone rang. It was Mary, her best friend. They had been friends since her second year in the university. If there was anybody she trusted and loved so much apart from her mum, it was Mary. She pressed the answer button on the phone and lifted it to her ear.

"Hello," Funto said as soon as the phone touched her ear.

"Hi. How're you?" Mary's voice was calm.

"I'm fine. How about you?"

"I'm good. Funto, I'm coming over. Are you home?"

"Yes, I am."

Mary hung up. Funto dropped the phone and continued eating her meal.

Someone knocked. Funto straightened and walked to the door. She opened the door and held it open. Mary walked through the doorway and embraced Funto. "I missed you so much," Mary said. Sincerity twirled in her voice.

Funto threw her arms around Mary's shoulders. "Me, too. What's up with you? I thought you would drop by last week but you didn't."

They walked to the living room and sat on the nearest sofa.

"I'm sorry. I was preparing for an interview."

"Hmm. Tell me more about it. How did it go?"

"Well, it went well. I did my best. I'm yet to receive a feedback from them though."

"Don't worry. They don't have a choice than to give you the job. You're God's princess. You know that right?"

"Yes. Thank you. How have you been?"

"I'm fine. God has been faithful."

"How about applying for jobs? Won't you start? The earlier the better. If I had started the month I finished service, maybe I'd have gotten a placement now. Don't waste any more time."

Funto smiled. "Hmm. That reminds me. I have a surprise for you."

"Really?"

"Yes. Wait for me." Funto went into her room and returned with a document in her grip. "Here you go." She dropped it on Mary's lap.

Mary unfolded the document and read. She jumped up and rushed at Funto. "Wow! Congratulations. I'm so proud of you."

"Thank you."

"You're so lucky."

"You know I don't like the word lucky. I'm not lucky, I'm favoured." She raised a finger above her head. "God did it."

"I'm so happy for you. This is good news. The type one needs to hear often."

"Thanks, my darling."

"But you didn't tell me."

"I was going to tell you actually. But when you said you were coming over, I decided to wait till you arrive."

"Congratulations, dear."

"Thank you. God will answer you too. You'll get a lucrative job soon."

"I hope. I don't see that happening soon though." Mary shrugged. She had finished national youth service three months before Funto. They had belonged to different batches although they finished school together. Mary hadn't been able to secure any good job. The offers she had were nothing to write home about. Offers in places that aimed to treat her as though she never had tertiary education. And here was her friend who had just finished service and already got a job. A lucrative one for that matter.

“You will get a job soon, Mary. I’ve always told you not to entertain doubt. Pray and confess God’s promises for you. You’ll be surprised.”

“Thank you.”

Funto was probably right. She had been a prayer champion in school. Apart from studying, church activities took most of her time. She was always in one group or the other in church. Mary sighed. “I’ll pray more.”

It wasn’t that Mary didn’t pray. She did as much as she could. That shouldn’t even deter her from getting a job. Except the angel in charge of processing prayers was partial, Mary thought.

“How about your business? My smart entrepreneur.”

“Don’t let us talk about it. It’s so annoying. People buy goods and refuse to pay. And that wouldn’t stop them from using what you sold to them. I remember a lady I sold a pair of sandals to. Each time I asked her to pay up, she told me to be patient and threatened to return the sandals as she hadn’t started using them.”

“Really?”

“Yes. One day, I bumped into her and saw the sandals on her feet. They had been stitched in a few places and the sole had almost disappeared. Overuse syndrome.”

Funto laughed. “Seriously? So what did she say? Or didn’t you ask her for the payment?”

“That’s the funniest part.” Mary smiled. “She wanted to hurry away but I disallowed her. I asked her for my money after exchanging pleasantries with her. She told me she didn’t like the sandals. I was like, ‘Are you kidding me? You don’t like the sandals and you wore them out?’”

Funto giggled. “I think you should stop selling on credit. Only sell to serious-minded people who will pay.”

“Easy for you to say. It’s not a child’s play to get customers. Majority of the ones I get express profound interest, deposit an amount for the goods, and make promises to pay up. Some do, many don’t. I wouldn’t know who would keep the promises and those who wouldn’t. They all have genuine looks and right words.”

“You need to watch it all the same. You can’t become indebted in the name of trying to sell stuffs. If you’re not careful, to accumulate gain in business will be difficult. Take your stance and maintain it. Those who will buy surely will. And ensure you pray as much as possible about your business. May God enlarge your coast.”

“Amen. Thanks, dear.”

“You’re welcome.”

“Won’t you entertain me? I’m famished.”

A hearty smile lifted Funto's lips. "You must be kidding me. You'd better go into the kitchen and cook yourself something. I had just finished eating noodles when you came in."

Mary grimaced. "Lazy bones. Is this how you'll treat your in-laws when they come around?" She straightened. "Be more hospitable, Funto."

Funto chuckled. "Naughty you. You know my brother is not around to take sides. Don't make me pounce on you. It won't be funny."

"You risk being woefully defeated." Mary laughed. She was right. Mary was almost twice Funto's size.

"Says who?" Funto sneered. "Strength isn't always determined by size."

Mary walked to the kitchen. "When last have you heard from Dave?" She turned her head and glanced at her friend.

"Well, it's been a while. Last two weeks, I think."

"He called me yesterday. Told me to extend his greetings to you."

"All right. Say my hello to him whenever he calls again."

"Why can't you call him as well? After all, he's our best friend. He complained you don't reach out to him at all. That's not so good. You should add checking on him to your to-do list."

Funto cocked an eyebrow. "So he called to report me to you?"

"Not exactly. He only mentioned it in passing."

"All right. I'll give it a thought."

"Funto, you express nonchalance sometimes. Dave was the best friend we had in common in school. He never stopped communicating with us even afterwards. And you couldn't even return his call for once. That's not so good. You don't even call me as much as I call you. You just climb a mountain and expect your friends to drag along. That's not fair."

"Are you angry at such a trivial matter?"

"Hear yourself. Trivial my foot." Mary walked back and resumed her seat.

"Okay, my mistake. I'm sorry. I'll do more. Forgive me. I'm apologising to you and Dave. I'll turn a new leaf."

Mary scrunched her nose. "I hope so. Now that you have a job. Being busy will be the excuse."

"Mary! It's okay. I promise I'll do my best."

"You had better."

Funto smiled. "Let me cook you something to eat."

"Now you're talking. Good girl. I can see the new leaf springing from the matrix..."

"Thank you," Funto cut in and pulled Mary's hand. "Let's go together. That will be more fun." She dragged her along, both laughing hysterically.

CHAPTER TWO

Funto walked into the company's reception. She wore a flower-patterned jacket on a pink camisole and a fitting knee-length skirt. Her black shoes with kitten heels showed they were recently polished. Her face, deprived of the garb of makeup, radiated her natural beauty. Her hair was cornrowed and packed in a bun.

Funto stopped at the receptionist desk and bowed her head slightly. "Good morning."

The receptionist stared at Funto. Where on earth did this ravishing beauty emerge from? "Good morning." Perhaps she was the director's girlfriend tongues wiggled about. "Ma," she quickly added.

"I'm here to see the director," Funto said, her voice calm and controlled.

The receptionist smiled. She was right after all. Director's girlfriend. "He's not on seat. He's yet to arrive. Can I take a message?"

"Uh. Not really. I'll have to wait for him. I'm Funto Peters, a newly employed staff. I'm to assume duty today."

"Oh! Okay. Congratulations. You're welcome. I'm Theresa Okafor, the receptionist here."

"It's a pleasure meeting you."

"The offices open by 8:00 am." Theresa glanced at the wall clock. "This is ten minutes to. Sit over there." She pointed to the waiting chairs. "Members of staff will start coming in soon. The director may not be here until noon or be absent altogether. But he's quite unpredictable. He could show up at any time."

"All right. Thank you so much, Mrs..." Funto looked into the receptionist's eyes.

"It's Miss."

"Pardon me, Miss Okafor."

"No offence taken. Please have your seat."

Funto walked to the nearest chair. She opened her bag, brought out a roll of tissue, and cleaned the chair before sitting. She sat and crossed her legs. Her eyes wandered from one thing to another. She had to familiarise herself with the environment.

Theresa couldn't stop stealing glances at Funto. She was enthralled.

Members of staff walked in one after the other. By quarter past, everyone was set for the day's work.

The receptionist informed the personnel manager about Funto and made her fill some forms. After some procedural processes were completed. She was allowed to see the manager, a lanky young man.

“Have your seat. You’re welcome.”

“Thank you, sir.” Funto smiled, exposing her dimples.

“This is Zeisel Corporation, a multinational company with predefined goals, mission, and vision with clients at the centre of it. Here we...” The personnel manager spoke on. He told Funto a brief history of the organisation, the goals, vision, and mission. He explained what her position as an account officer meant. What she was expected to do, whom she would be working with, as well as her local and public obligations to the organisation.

Funto took notes as he talked. After the initiation address, she was taken on a tour of the organisation by Theresa and introduced to other members of staff.

Funto was shown her office, a small office she was to share with two other members of staff.

She settled in her chair and set to commence her first task. The door to the office opened and Theresa stepped in. “Miss Peters, the director is around.”

Funto looked up from the file. “Okay. What am I supposed to do?”

“Go see him of course.”

“I hope it’s not against the rules to see him without invitation?”

“Come on. Let’s go. He has to meet you. It’s the norm here.”

Funto stood and followed Theresa. They bypassed some offices and headed for a posh one at the rear end of the floor.

The office displayed such opulence that screamed the holder had to be a director. Funto walked in and stood behind the receptionist, her fingers intertwined behind her.

Theresa curtseyed. “Good afternoon, sir,” she said with a smile.

“Hello. What do you want?” A dark sturdy man seated behind the executive table said.

“A new account officer resumed today. I brought her here for formal introduction, sir.”

The man glanced sideways. “So where’s the person?”

Theresa stepped aside to allow a full view of the lady behind her. “Introduce yourself,” she said to Funto.

“Good afternoon, sir. I’m Funto Peters, the new account officer.”

The director smiled. “Why were you standing behind her? Needed a prod or what? Anyways, you’re welcome. I want to believe you know my name, don’t you?” He stared at Funto.

“Yes, sir. I do.”

“Tell me.”

“Mr E.I. Amadi.”

“Good. I want to believe the personnel manager has met with you and done the needful.”

“Yes, he has.”

“That’s good.” Mr Amadi’s eyes traced Funto’s body outline. “Uh. Diligence, loyalty, and transparency are key in this organisation. I can confidently tell you that it will cost us nothing to retrench half the number of the staff we currently have. If we detect trace of any unwanted trait in a worker, believe me, that’s the end of our relationship. I want you to maximise this excellent opportunity to prove us right for employing you. Don’t conspire with anyone or try to indulge in any degrading activity. I hope I’m making myself clear.”

“Yes, sir.” Funto bobbed her head. She was jaded. She’d had enough. The personnel manager had overemphasised that before. She wished he could stop the vain repetition and allow her start her work in earnest.

“And we have code of conduct as well.”

Nothing was novel about his counsel. No need for the repetition. “I’ve been apprised, sir.”

“Good.” His eyes drifted to Funto’s legs. They were long, straight, and as fair as her other body parts, with enough flesh. No speckle nor scar. Mr Amadi blinked and turned to Theresa. “You can return to your duty post.”

Theresa nodded and turned to leave. Funto said a word of thanks and followed.

“You, wait.” Mr Amadi said. Theresa turned her head, Funto didn’t. “Not you. The new staff.”

Theresa rolled her eyeballs towards one direction and cleared her throat in a mischievous way. “Okay, sir. Thanks.” She opened the door and stepped out.

Funto halted and stared at Mr Amadi.

“Come sit here.” He pointed to the opposite chair. Funto hearkened. She perched on the chair, her hands folded and resting on her thighs.

“Uh. What’s that your name again?”

“Funto Peters, sir.”

“Miss or Mrs?”

Funto shook her head.

“That doesn’t depict an answer. Which of the two?”

“Miss, sir,” she said and puckered her lips.

“Okay. I just want to welcome you and as well make you feel at ease here. Do you have an accommodation around here?”

Funto shot him a weird look.

“I’m asking because I want to know if it’s nearby. We don’t condone coming late to work here.”

“My place is not too far from here. I’ll try not to come late.”

He tilted forward. “Do you live alone? There may be reasons to call you for one or more official assignments during your free time. I need to have all these information.”

“I live with my brother. That won’t impede my work in any way, however.” She shifted in her chair in a way that sent him a message she wasn’t comfortable.

“All right. You can get to work. I’ll send for you when the need arise. Have a wonderful day.”

She shot from her seat. “Thank you, sir.” She hastened out before he could change his mind and ask her to wait again.

Mr Amadi stared at Funto as she walked out, his focus more on her hips, which wiggled with every step. He blinked and exhaled loudly.

Funto sat behind her desk. Her previous experience with the director played in her head. She wasn’t a child not to know what Mr Amadi’s final stare was pregnant with.

It was too early to have such an issue on her hands. She would face squarely the job that brought her to the organisation. Nothing more.

CHAPTER THREE

Funto lay on the couch, her head propped up on a throw pillow. Mary sat on the opposite chair, her knees drawn up unto her chest, filing her toenails.

Funto glanced in her friend's direction and smiled. "Don't be nosy," she said. Glee encapsulated her voice.

Mary laughed. "That wasn't being nosy. Remember we're best friends."

"No, remind me. Naughty you."

Mary chuckled. "Please tell me more." She winked at Funto.

"The man wouldn't stop. He cares about me to a fault." Funto frowned.

"And that makes you uncomfortable," Mary said, her utterance between a statement and a question.

"Yes, Mary. It's going to become a problem for me if I don't caution him."

"How is your boss's concern going to be a problem? Didn't you say he's the director? And the heir for that matter." Mary drew quotation marks in the air with her fingers.

"My colleagues are beginning to wag their tongues. One lady, a customer care personnel, just started acting weirdly towards me. I guess she had something for the man. She is always frowning at me and trying to get on my nerves. I'm sure if I maintain my stance and keep him at arm's length, the piqued ones will get over their jealousy. I don't want anyone thinking I'm in a relationship with my boss. And I don't want to send him the wrong message either. He could think I'm interested."

Mary laughed. "Probably he is not even looking forward to having an affair with you."

"I'm not a baby. I know what all the care is geared towards. I just want to do my job and leave there. I don't want to bite more than I can chew. And more so, I don't want anything standing in the way of my spirituality."

"Funto! Seriously? Holiness will soon bring an end to you. This is not even holiness, it is obsession."

"What do you mean? Are you saying I should get carried away and honour his invitations and gestures?"

"What's wrong about that? Seriously, you need to be careful with this your extremism. He asked you out severally, you refused. He bought you stuffs, you rejected. That's pride. This is pure rejection of God's favour upon your life."

According to you, this man had never told you he wanted an affair with you, nor had he ever disrespected you. He's just being nice."

"He's not just being nice, Mary. And I'm not an extremist nor a refusal of God's favour. That's not God's favour. I can identify a cunning spirit when I see one. That man is only laying a gold mat over a pit for me. I know his types. I'm not interested in his gifts or so-called kindness. I just want to do my job and leave."

"Funto, sometimes I wonder what kind of a person you are. If you had a hostile boss, you'd be busy fasting and praying for God to intervene. Now you have a good one. You're complaining there's an undertone to his goodness. What will ever satisfy you people?"

"Stop it. God bless your heart. You really don't understand me, do you? You know how much advances I got from men during school days. I know diverse ways through which they ask for an affair. I'm not going to let my guards down. God didn't bless me with that job just to mess around."

"Don't misquote me. I'm not saying you should mess around or do the wrong things. I'm saying you should accept genuine kindness of people. Don't become paranoid in the name of holiness."

Funto glowered, displeased. "Mary. Watch it. I'm not paranoid."

"Keep your hair on. I was just making an observation."

"Please let's quit this conversation and discuss something else. I didn't come visiting just to talk about my work."

Mary dropped her legs and moved to the edge of the chair. "Funto, I've been begging you for weeks. Please have mercy on me. Talk to your director on my behalf. Don't let me grow white hair, jobless."

Funto sighed. "Be patient, Mary. God has a different timing for everyone. Your job will come. You only need to keep trying, keep praying, and keep your hopes up. God will do it."

"Spare me. Not everyone is as lucky as you are. I've spent over eight months here, doing close to nothing. And here you are, with a golden opportunity to help me at your fingertip, telling me to be patient. See, in this world, some things don't work out if not influenced."

"I disagree. What will be will be. What matters is God's favour."

"No, I insist. Take for instance, the Jews at the time of King Ahasuerus and Queen Esther. At least that's a story in the Scripture. If Esther hadn't influenced the king to frustrate the plot of Haman, the Jews would have been annihilated. Influence is key."

"May God forgive everyone who quotes the Scripture out of context to suit their own wants. When did you become this? You were a Firebrand Christian in school. What went wrong?"

“I’m still a Firebrand my dear. I’m only wise enough to know the difference between faith and reality. Don’t forget that wisdom is profitable to direct, so the Scripture says.”

“Hmm. Wise indeed. The devil was once a choirmaster in heaven.”

“Funto, please leave the church talk. Talk to your director on my behalf. He would do anything for you. Let him give me a job. I’m your best friend for crying out loud.”

“That’s nepotism. Aside that, what would I tell him. I can’t force him to take a staff he doesn’t need.”

“Don’t be selfish. Are you happy that I’m jobless? After all, I’m not asking you to share your salary with me. Why should it be hard to ask your boss for a favour for your friend? I’d do same for you if I were in your shoes.” Mary sniffed and shed crocodile tears. “If you’re happy seeing me in this state, well, don’t bother. But I want you to know that what goes around comes around. Even the Bible admonishes us to help others.” She stood and walked towards her room.

“Mary! I’m sorry. Wait. I didn’t mean it that way.”

Mary halted and turned her head briefly before she continued her walk.

“Please don’t walk out on me. I need to explain to you what I meant.”

“Never mind. Do as you please. Thank you.” She sobbed.

Emotional blackmail! Funto knew one when she encountered it. Funto shook her head. Her friend was trying to force her hands to action. She straightened and followed her.

Funto entered Mary’s room and sat beside her on the bed. “I’m sorry. I didn’t mean to upset you. And of course, I want you to be gainfully employed as well. It’s just that I don’t want to give this man a leverage to use against me. I’m only trying to be vigilant and careful.”

“I wasn’t asking you to. I only needed you to tell him about my situation. If nothing came out of it, at least I’d know you did your best. That was all I was requesting.”

“All right, I’ll think about it.”

“Thank you.”

“Now smile.”

Mary shrugged. Funto leaned forward and tickled her. Mary pulled Funto closer and returned the tickles. Both of them giggled.

CHAPTER FOUR

Funto sat behind her desk in her office, fiddling with a pen on an open file, her phone held against her ear. “Dave. Stop it.” She laughed.

“Do you think I should have allowed him to slap me? I don’t have the gut to turn the right side of my face. I’d rather run,” Dave answered with a smile.

Funto laughed again. “Please don’t make my abdomen burst open with laughter. You’re such a chicken. How could you even say such a thing as a man? You ran away from an aggressive student?” She chuckled. “I can’t believe my ears. Aren’t you supposed to allow him beat you first before determining what to do?”

“You are a joker, Funto. Is that how much you like me? You want a naughty brat to injure me before I flee.” He paused. “You don’t want to know what this guy is capable of. He’s been suspended from school, four times. There was a time he stabbed another student on the thigh with a fork. His parents surfaced. The excuse was that he had anger issues. But that didn’t change the fact that the injured suffered the pain. The parents begged the principal and that was the end. Although he was dealt with. I can’t take chances with that boy. The moment he charged at me, I fled.”

Funto giggled. “Dave, the school teacher.”

“It wasn’t funny. I saw him holding something. I didn’t even bother to verify what it was. You know my personality, don’t you? If anything happened, I’d bear the consequence.”

“On a serious note, that boy needs to be expelled. His parents should take him to church for deliverance and then institute reform. Some parents destroy their children’s lives all in the name of permissiveness. What kind of anger would make a boy of his age destructively aggressive?”

“The funny thing is that his mum is the school’s matron. In this country, riches and influence skew judgement without any hitch. It’s better to be safe than sorry.”

“Hmm. I understand. If it were to be a government-owned school, he’d have been expelled a long time ago.”

“How many prosperous people send their children to State schools? Majority of them send their children to where they can exercise a level of control.”

“Hmm. So what was eventually done to him?”

“One of the male teachers seized him from behind and trapped his hands until he was calm. Virtually all the teachers suggested expulsion of the boy to the principal during our last meeting. But he said he couldn’t expel him because of his parents. He insisted we should be more careful in our approach. No teacher beats or reprimands him. Even his classmates keep their distance from him. A few parents even withdrew their children.”

“I would do same if I learnt of such a boy in my child’s class.”

“His parents would do anything to keep him in the school. Anyways, he has only a year left. He’ll soon leave.”

“That boy needs prayer. Whole lot of prayers.”

“Remember him in your prayers. His name is Jide Aluko.”

“I will. I surely will.”

“Hmm. I trust you. Prayer champion.”

“Look at you. Please don’t pull my legs.”

“That reminds me, Funto, we need to meet and talk.”

“Really? Can’t we discuss it over the phone?”

“We can. But I’d rather wait till we meet.”

“All right. When next are you coming to Lagos?”

“I’ll be coming next weekend. Should we see then?”

“Okay. I’ll put it in mind.”

“Thank you.”

“You’re welcome. Dave, let me go. I have to get back to work. You don’t want me to spend the whole day on the phone and face my boss’s wrath.”

“All right. I’ll call you later. Take care of yourself.”

“You too.” She hung up and dropped the phone.

Funto smiled at the thought of Dave. He had been her friend since she was in the university. But recently, their communication had grown stronger than ever. He liked her. She did as well. They had a strong friendship that kept both of them happy. To Funto, friendship meant Dave Ayodele and Mary. Nothing else.

Funto’s phone chimed, forcing her mind off Dave. A new text message. Funto pressed a button, opening the message.

‘Hi darling. I just want to remind you of what you promised to do for me. Code JOB. I know you want the best for me and won’t disappoint me. Love you in multiple folds. Your sweet Mary.’

It was the umpteenth time Mary was reminding her to speak to Mr Amadi. Funto didn’t want to disappoint her friend but she wanted nothing unofficial to do with her boss. If Funto asked Mr Amadi for a favour, he could do the same. She

didn't want any ground for excessive familiarity. She wanted to keep things formal as much as possible.

But would her friend not tag her wicked? It had been over two months she'd been disturbing her over the job issue.

The door opened. Theresa walked in, her face thrown into tight folds. "Hi."

Funto glanced at her. "Hello."

"Your director wants to see you in the office."

"All right. Thank you." Funto smiled.

Theresa looked at her askance and left the office, slamming the door behind.

Funto shook her head. She couldn't fathom the reason for the unnecessary hostility shown her by some members of staff. It had peaked at gossips and degrading looks. But now, it was graduating into ostentatious display of wrath. Or was it jealousy?

Funto sighed. It'd been only a little over six months since she started working with Zeisel Corporation. And she'd made more enemies than she'd done all her life—an account officer she shared an office with, the receptionist, and a field agent.

They couldn't hide their embitterment. They weren't her fans and didn't pretend to like her. Funto had stolen the director and many of the male staff's hearts and became the model of morality and diligence. What more crime did she have to commit to deserve their hatred?

Funto had met with the three women individually in time past. She had wanted to unravel the cause of the enmity and apologise. But each of them denied having anything against her.

Funto was getting tired of always smiling and acting nice towards them while they disregarded her with sheer impunity and increased their animosity towards her instead.

Funto had prayed for a change of heart for them. But it seemed their hearts were made of the strongest stone ever.

Funto discarded her thoughts. She had more to do than worry about someone's feeling.

She straightened and walked towards the director's office. Mary's message crossed her mind. She could seize this opportunity to talk to her boss about Mary. That could lessen the pressure Mary mounted on her.

She knocked once, turned the doorknob, and pushed the door open. She stepped in, wearing a straight face. "Good afternoon, sir."

"How're you, Funto? Please have your seat."

"I'm fine." She pulled the chair and sat. "Thank you, sir."

“Uh. I was briefed about the new developments. I won’t enumerate them. But I want you to know I’m aware of everything you are doing. And I’m impressed. You’re doing well.”

“Thank you, sir. But...” Funto shot him a puzzled look. She wasn’t sure what developments he was referring to.

“I have ears all over. I hear it all, the good, the bad, and the unusual. I’m happy with the way you’re doing your work. I read the report of the analyst.”

Funto smiled. “Okay.”

“The organisation has gained more and spent less over the past five months. That’s impressive. We have a better and stronger accounting system, no kobo disappears without record. That’s great. It’s your kind of person I love working with. Just as I told you that everything has reward.” He pushed a white envelope towards her. “Thanks for being faithful to this organisation. Take this as a token of my appreciation. I want you to do better.”

A generous smile broke out on her lips. She gently pushed back the envelope. “I appreciate your kind gesture, sir. And I promise to give my best in service to this organisation. However, I wouldn’t want you to bother about the gifts. Without them, I’ll still do my job, to the best level possible. I believe in doing well whatever I lay my hands on. With all due respect, sir, I won’t collect this. Thank you, sir.”

Mr Amadi laughed. “Look at you. It’s not a bribe or something. This is an incentive and every good worker deserves it. No string attached. Please, take it.” He pushed the envelope forward.

Funto shook her head. “I’m okay with the verbal appreciation, sir. Don’t bother.”

“Don’t be stubborn, Funto. I insist you take it.”

On a second thought, Funto took the envelope. “Thank you, sir. I’m grateful.”

“You’re welcome.” He winked. “Always welcome.”

Funto straightened.

“Wait. Sit down.”

She obeyed.

“I was invited to a dinner party organised by a friend, a CEO of a company. I was wondering if you could accompany me.”

Funto smiled. “When is that, sir?”

“Tomorrow evening.”

“I’ll be going to church, sir. I’m sorry I won’t be able to attend.”

“Funto! Always having an excuse. What joy do you derive in turning me down? What have I done to you? Why do you hate me so much?”

“You’ve done nothing, sir. And I don’t hate you. It’s just that there’s a program slated for tomorrow in church. I can’t afford to miss it. I’ll consider your request next time.”

“I’ll take you by your word. Next time it is then.” He stretched his hand towards hers. Funto noticed. She rose to her feet. “Thank you, sir. I have to return to work.”

He withdrew his hand and sighed. “I’m hopeful. I never lose hope. I’ll wait until... Never mind. You can leave.”

What was he saying? What was that supposed to mean? She was right about his intentions after all.

Funto looked away from him and left the office.

CHAPTER FIVE

Today was the third Saturday in March. The sun shone enough to tell it was afternoon, although the sky still had thick cloud dispersed over it. It had rained in the morning and cool breeze still found its way to all.

Funto stepped into an eatery, dressed in a long-sleeved blue top—flared below the bust—and a straight black skirt that accentuated her curve. She complemented her wear with a black wedge heel and a black bag.

Her eyes drifted. Two empty chairs surrounding a table at the left corner fell into her field of vision. She walked towards the direction and took her seat.

“Hello, damsel, can I sit with you?” A tall, fair man said, looking intently at Funto.

Funto glanced at the empty chair opposite her before looking at the man. “No, sir.” She smiled, aiming to ease the effect of her words. “The chair is reserved for someone. I’m sorry. I am sure you understand.”

“What if I ask for a few minutes to talk to you? Please don’t say no this time around.”

“There’s no alternative to no. I’m sorry.”

“But why not?”

Funto shook her head and exhaled. “The chair is reserved.”

“Can you give me your number then? I could call you up some other time.”

“I’m sorry I can’t.”

Dave entered. His eyes ran a quick search and found Funto talking to a stranger. He approached them. “Hello, good afternoon.” He grinned.

“Dave!”

“I’m sorry I kept you waiting.” He turned to the stranger. “Hello, gentleman.”

“Hi.” He looked at Dave askance and walked away.

Dave pulled the chair, sat, and moved closer to the table, leaning forward. “What’s wrong? Who is he? And why did he give me that look?”

Funto smiled. “You got in the way of his business. He was trying out his luck with a lady and you cut him short. What kind of look would you expect?”

Dave grinned. “He had better go look elsewhere.”

Funto gave him a lopsided stare. “Why? Don’t you want me to get married?”

“Of course, you will.”

“Not if you keep getting in people’s way like this.” She laughed.

“God has a plan for your life. He has the best in mind for you. Those kind of men are mere distraction.”

“Mr Preacher.” She slapped his hand lightly. “How was your journey?”

“Fine. Traffic jam kept me late. I’m sorry.”

“It’s okay. I’m happy you arrived safely.”

“Glory to God. Let me get us something to munch. What would you like?”

“Their best. Can you afford it?”

“Don’t worry, my shoes are new, they can take them. I could drop my phone with them as well, only that it wouldn’t sell for much.”

Funto laughed. “So you would return to Ibadan with no shoes on.”

“What are friends for?” He burst into laughter.

“I was just joking. Anything is fine,” she said, her laugh reduced to a smile.

She knew Dave enough. He wasn’t from a rich family. And he didn’t have a lucrative job like many, but he wasn’t a miser. He gave as much as possible from the little he had.

Dave stood up and approached the counter. He returned few minutes later with a tray containing a bottle of soft drink, a bottle of water, and a plate of pie. He set the tray on the table and took his seat. He said a brief prayer. He took the bottle of water, opened it, and sipped.

“Did you inform Mary about your trip?”

“I didn’t. Do you think I should have?”

“Well, she’s the bean in our joint pod. It wouldn’t be strange if you told her.”

“It’s not necessary. I came to see you today. Not both of you.”

“All right then. Here I am.” She stared into his eyes.

“Eat first. Please.”

“Let’s talk about why you came.”

“I need to gather my thoughts together. Just proceed with your meal.”

Funto smiled. “You have a funny way of making someone do your bidding.” She took a serviette and wrapped it around a pie before lifting it to her mouth.

Dave gawked at her. “You are so pretty, Funto.”

Funto squeezed her forehead. “Where’s that coming from? From you?”

“Yes. Anything wrong with that?”

“Well, not really. But I remember you had always teased me in school saying I looked like a bean cake. I’m excited that I now look pretty to you.” She munched the pie.

Dave smiled. “Do you still want to look like a bean cake?”

“No. I think I prefer pretty.” She giggled.

“Do you know why I had always said that?”

“You wouldn’t tell me. I even begged you to stop it but you wouldn’t. I had no choice than to jibe with the fact.”

He gave an immature smile. “I didn’t know how you would react if I told you the reason.”

“I’m used to it. It doesn’t put me off anymore. You can go ahead and tell me.”

“I used to love bean cake so much that I could give up a meal of chicken for it. It was my favourite. And still is anyways, I’m yet to get a replacement for it. So when I said you looked like a bean cake. Well I meant...” He sighed and kept quiet.

Funto swallowed. She opened the bottle of soft drink and sipped. “You meant what? Tell me.”

Dave hesitated. Funto nodded him to speak.

“Funto,” he searched her light-brown eyes, “my heart sings only two songs. One is of praise to God Almighty. The other is of you. I love you immensely. And I have a strong conviction you’re the one. Funto, I love you. With every fibre of my being.”

Funto’s jaw dropped. She blinked. Words stuck to her throat.

Dave pushed the chair backward and fell on a knee. He removed a black case from his pocket and opened it, displaying a silver engagement ring. He lifted it to her. “The air I breathe isn’t sufficient to keep me alive. God is love and love is God. The love stemming from God’s nature is shed abroad in my heart outpouring towards you. You’re the perfect gift I’ll thank God for every day. Funto, I love you and I want to spend the rest of my life with you. Please be my wife.”

Funto scrutinised him. Her gaze drifted slowly from the hair on his head to his feet—covered in brown sports shoes.

Dave seemed to read her mind. “I may not be the perfect picture of the man you wanted or prayed for. But I promise to love you as Christ loved the church. I’ll work hard to provide for you and our children. And I will love and nurture you all my days. Funto, I love you immeasurably.”

Tears glazed her vision. She opened her mouth to talk but words wouldn’t escape. Her heart swelled with a strong emotion. It was nothing but God’s nature. Love.

Funto’s flesh warned her. Her eyes declined, Dave was no much of a handsome man. He was cute in his own way, with a good dress sense. But he couldn’t be compared to the least of Funto’s suitors.

Her brain screamed no. Dave was a teacher. He couldn’t afford the cost of living in Lagos except she was ready to leave her job and relocate to Ibadan. And even at that, she was predisposed to living a below-average life.

Her body shouted no. She was too beautiful to end up with a man like Dave. Many crème de la crème set of people in the society wanted her.

Her mind shouted no. They had to remain friends only. It was risky staking his life on a man like Dave.

Funto shook her head. At the verge of saying no, regardless of the many eyes that were now watching them, she listened to her heart.

Each beat was wrapped in God's nature of love and punctuated with peace. Dave was the one. She'd prayed intensively in the past for divine direction. And in the noisy atmosphere of her mind, she could perceive her heart whispering yes.

Funto took a deep breath. Dave remained on his knee, his heart pounding, expecting an answer and praying in his mind for God's intervention.

Funto smiled, tears dropped unto her cheeks. "I'm sorry, Dave." She hesitated. She stretched forth her hand. "I don't have a choice than to say yes to you." Dave slid the ring on her finger. He jumped to his feet in excitement.

The witnesses except the stranger Funto had spoken to earlier clapped and wore smiles. The stranger cast Dave a scornful look instead.

Dave pulled Funto into a warm embrace, his heart overwhelmed with joy.

Dave was too happy to eat his pie. He sat on his chair, staring at Funto and expressing how much he loved her.

Funto fiddled with her ring. It was her perfect size. Perhaps another sign from heaven that she had made the right choice. Fear disappeared, replaced with a quiet calm. She was right to have accepted his proposal.

Funto and Dave spent some time talking. Funto told him how much she wanted to tell Mary about her engagement. How much she wanted to show her ring to her best female friend.

Dave and Funto agreed to make it a surprise. Dave put a call through to Mary and informed her he was coming to see her. After taking some time to discuss further, they straightened and left the eatery.

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Mary lay on the couch, half-asleep. Her phone rang. She opened her eyes and slouched to the table. The phone stopped ringing. She picked it up and checked who the caller had been. Dave.

The sleep in her eyes vanished. That was how much effect Dave had on her. Mary pressed a button, dialling his number. "Hello, handsome. How're you?" she said as soon as the call was connected.

"Hi, beautiful. I'm fine. Are you home?"

"Yes. Anything?"

"I have a surprise for you. I'm in Lagos. I'll see you soon."

"Really!" She beamed. "You didn't tell me you were coming."

“I know. Can I come over?”

“Of course. You need not ask for permission. You’re always welcome in my home.”

“Thank you. See you soon.”

“All right.”

Dave ended the call.

Mary rolled her eyes in their sockets. Fresh vigour seeped into her bloodstream. She dashed into her room. She removed her clothes and stepped into the bathroom. After a quick wash, she dried her body and moisturised her skin. She rummaged her closet for some minutes before choosing what to wear—a tight-fitting, V-necked pink top, black knee-length skirt and a pink bow for her hair. She dressed up and walked to the mirror to apply make-up on her face. She combed her hair thoroughly and attached the pink bow.

She simpered at her reflection in the mirror. She grabbed her Cologne from the bedside table and sprayed her hair, armpits, wrists, and skirt. She dropped it and checked the mirror again. Satisfied. She ambled into the living room.

She took a book from the shelf and sat on the chair. Something to pass time until Dave arrived. She opened the book to read but couldn’t concentrate. She picked her phone from the table and checked if Dave had called again. It had been over thirty minutes since he called that he was on his way.

Mary sighed, impatient. She stood and sauntered to the window. She peeped. No one was approaching.

Dave couldn’t be lying to her, could he? He’d better show up. Not now that she was already expectant would he disappoint her. Not now, not ever. She resumed her seat, her mind filled with thoughts of Dave.

Knocks on the door reached her ears. She quickly lay on the couch. She opened the book and held it over her face. “Come in. The door is not locked.”

Dave stepped into the house. Funto followed. Mary dropped her hands and the book rested on her chest. She lifted her head and sat up. “Dave!” She straightened. She opened her arms and walked to him. “Mary Mary,” Dave said, smiling.

Mary embraced him. Something pressed against her chest. She held his hand and shook it, stylishly peeking into his pocket. Her eyes caught a glimpse. A case, portable, roughly square, with a ribbon attached. The kind that houses engagement ring. She stole a smile and looked away. Dave had told her he had a surprise for her. She wouldn’t stop the music before it was her turn to dance. She would wait.

She turned to Funto. “You didn’t tell me you were coming.” She loosened her hold on Dave and drew Funto into her arms.

Funto smiled. “Surprise visit.”

The trio took their seats. Funto sat on a single chair. Dave sat on the couch and Mary dropped on the chair beside Dave.

“Ibadan man, what’s up? How’s IB? Trust you are doing great,” Mary said.

Dave grinned. His eyes glowed with excitement. “I’m very fine, Mary.”

Mary nodded. “I can see it all over you. You’re looking smashing.”

“You aren’t looking bad either. How’s Lagos treating you?”

“Not bad. How come you two came together? Did you go to her place first?” Mary glanced at Funto.

“We met out and came here together.” Dave spread his hands in the air. “It’s good, isn’t it?”

“Of course, it is. Only that I smell a plot here. What’s happening?” Mary’s gaze oscillated between her two guests.

Dave and Funto hushed, smiles on their faces.

“Someone should talk to me. Don’t leave me in the dark. What’s going on here?”

“I told you I have a surprise for you,” Dave said.

Anxiety danced in Mary’s eyes. “Yes, you did. So what’s it? Unwrap the surprise before it loses its flavour.”

“I want to be dramatic about it. Close your eyes.”

“Close my eyes?”

“Yes. P-l-e-a-s-e.”

Mary shut her eyes. “Okay, eyes closed,” she said. Thousands of thoughts ran through her mind. She did mental calculations. Dave was going to propose to her. Why else would he bring Funto along and ask her to shut her eyes? Her heart skittered in her chest. She exhaled slowly. Her answer would be ‘YES’. No doubt. She had loved Dave since the first day they met. She needed not think over it again.

“Open your eyes.” It was Funto’s voice.

Mary didn’t respond. She was lost in her fantasy.

“Mary! Open your eyes,” Dave said, forcing back Mary’s attention.

Mary’s eyelids flung open. Dave was not on his knee nor was he holding a ring to her. He wasn’t even close. He had relocated to the opposite chair. Funto was seated beside Mary, her left hand held out in a manner that made her ring finger stand out. The ring was new and beautiful. It complemented her complexion.

Mary blinked. This had to be a dream. It had better not be real. “Funto. What’s this?” She puckered her brow.

Funto beamed. “An engagement ring.”

“But you never told me you were in a relationship. Have you conceded defeat to your boss? Or was it the operation manager you said yes to? Sorry, maybe the admin guy, the one with the brown hair.”

Funto was piqued. "Mary! What's all that?"

"Sorry. I'm just shocked. I don't understand what's going on. Could you please enlighten me?"

"I'm getting married, Mary. You should be happy for me."

Mary forced a smile. "I'm tremendously delighted." She pulled Funto into her arms and embraced her briefly.

"Thanks, darling."

"So who's the lucky man?"

Funto smiled and glanced at Dave. He was watching the two of them in silence. "It's Dave. He asked me today to marry him and I said yes."

Blood drained from Mary's face. A jumble of feelings replaced the uncertainty in her eyes. "Which Dave?"

Funto shot her a weird look. "What kind of question is that? This Dave of course?" She pointed to Dave, who was staring and smiling.

"That is not possible. You guys should stop this prank and get serious." Mary glanced at Dave. "Dave, is this true? Or do you also want to pull my legs?"

Dave bobbed his head. "Don't be a Doubting Thomas. I know it's surprising, but it's true. We're getting married."

"Wow! Congratulations to you." Mary blinked. "Excuse us." She pulled Funto's hand and dragged her into the room.

Mary seated Funto on the bed and went to shut the door behind them.

"Funto, are you in your right senses?"

Funto stared at Mary. She couldn't lay her hands on why Mary was behaving strangely. Truly, the news came as a surprise, but it shouldn't necessitate this kind of reaction.

"What do you mean?" Funto said, puzzled.

"As in," Mary tapped her head, "are you all right?"

"What's the problem with you, Mary? Why are you acting up? I'm fine."

Mary exhaled. "I just want to be sure you guys are seriously getting married."

"Of course we are. I wouldn't take the ring from him if I did not intend to marry him. Don't you think?"

"But seriously, I still don't get it. You never showed a sign that you were interested in this guy."

"Nor did you, Mary. We were all friends. I didn't even have the notion of marrying him before now." Funto shrugged.

"But you said yes to him the moment he asked you to marry him?"

"Should I have said no? What exactly are you driving at?"

“I mean you didn’t fast and pray about it. At least I know you do that whenever you’re about to take decisions. And you need that even more before choosing who to marry.”

“You’re right. It’s just that I wasn’t waiting for food before I blessed it. I had been fasting and praying about who to marry ever before I was ready.” Funto raised her eyebrows.

“So did God tell you Dave is your husband? He could be meant for someone else. After all you have many better suitors—Ayo, John, Kunle, Mr Amadi, the personnel manager, and all the others you told me about. Why Dave?”

Funto sighed. She hesitated briefly, smiled and looked into Mary’s eyes. “Dave is the right man for me. I just know it. My Spirit consents. Aside that, he passed the peace test.”

“Spare me, Funto. I don’t see any wisdom in what you’re doing. You’re not supposed to marry our friend.”

“Who am I supposed to marry? An enemy?”

“You still don’t get it. I mean there are better people than Dave is. Dave is just struggling. You will only become a problem to him.”

“What do you mean? God forbid. Please leave me with my choice. After all, I will be fully responsible for my actions. Why should accepting his proposal give you a headache?”

“All right. I’m sorry. I’m just trying to be a good friend. I don’t want you to make a mistake. I love you both. I don’t want anything to jeopardise our friendship.”

“Thank you. We’ll be fine.”

“All right.”

They returned to the living room, where Dave was patiently waiting.

“Congratulations, Dave. I’m so happy for you.” Mary shot him a mirthless smile.

“Thank you,” Dave said with a smile.

Mary’s eyes grew misty. She excused herself, rushed into the room, and shut the door behind her. With the hem of her skirt, she quickly dabbed her eyes. She poured some talcum powder on her palm, rubbed it against the other palm, and raised her palms to her face. She powdered the areas tears had smudged. She checked her reflection in the mirror. She wore a forced smile and walked to her friends.

“Couple-to-be,” Mary said. “Guess our friendship bond will grow stronger now.”

“No one can take your place in my heart, Mary. Not even Dave. He has his own place. You have yours,” Funto said.

Mary smiled. "Maybe Dave will help convince you to get me a job at your company."

Dave glanced at the two. "Is Funto a job distributor now? Maybe she could get me one as well." He laughed and the others joined. He didn't understand, but Funto got Mary's message.

Funto clasped her hands. "I will do my best."

"Your best for months. It is well," Mary said.

"Don't be offended. There's more to it than you understand."

"It's okay. Never mind. What should I offer you both?"

"We're fine. We ate before coming over." Dave glanced at Funto. "Or do you want anything?" he said.

"No. I'm fine. Mary knows I wouldn't hesitate to go into her kitchen if I were hungry." Funto smiled.

Making joint decision already? Distaste welled up Mary's throat. "All right. I actually intended visiting my aunt before your call came through. Her children will be travelling back to school tomorrow. I don't want to miss the opportunity to see them. You understand what I mean." Mary winked.

"Of course. I have to return to Ibadan today. The earlier I leave the better." Dave turned to Funto. "Dear, let's be on our way." He straightened.

Funto rose to her feet and walked to Mary. She embraced her. "I love you. Thanks for caring about me," she whispered.

Mary patted her back. "Love you too." She withdrew from the embrace, carried her bag and followed Dave and Funto outside. She locked the door and walked her guests to the sidewalk before going a different way.

CHAPTER SIX

Mary knocked the door twice before an answer came from within.

“Who’s there?” a stout woman, in her late thirties, said.

“It’s me. Mary.”

The door opened and Mary stepped in. “Good evening, Auntie,” she said. She rushed to the living room and collapsed in a chair. The confined emotions she’d struggled with overwhelmed her. She burst into tears.

Mrs Alabi, Mary’s aunt, followed. Stunned. Mary sobbed like a baby, tears pouring from her eyes in gallons.

“Mary. What’s wrong with you? Why are you crying?” Mrs Alabi said. Mary couldn’t find her voice. The more she tried to speak the more she wept. Her aunt sat with her. She pulled Mary’s head unto her chest and caressed her back. “It’s okay to cry. But you should at least tell me why you are crying.”

Mary opened her mouth. Thoughts filled her mind, thoughts that stung her. She shut her mouth and wailed. Her aunt seemed to understand. She stopped talking and continued to caress her. Mary sniffed.

Her aunt straightened, walked away, and returned with a handkerchief. She put the handkerchief in Mary’s palm and sat on the opposite chair, watching her niece cry.

Several minutes after, Mary adjusted in her seat and looked up at her aunt.

Mrs Alabi sighed. She took Mary’s stare as a signal that she was ready to talk. Mrs Alabi left her seat and shared Mary’s. “What happened?” she said as softly as she could bring herself to.

“I’m angry. Enraged in fact,” Mary said.

“Okay. You have the right to get angry. But why?”

“Dave proposed to Funto?” she said and broke into fresh sobs.

“Really?”

“Yes. They both came by my place to tell me they were getting married.”

“Aren’t those two your best friends?”

“Yes, they are.”

“So why are you angry? You should be happy for them.”

“Why should I be happy for them? I hate them both. Especially Funto. I hate her so much I want to pluck out her eyes with my fingers.”

Mrs Alabi swallowed. Caution! An alarm sounded in her head. If she wanted to handle this issue, she needed to be careful. “As I usually tell you, we are emotional beings. We can’t deny that fact. So I can’t blame you for expressing your feelings. But I need you to tell me why you now suddenly hate your friends.”

“Could you believe that of all the suitors Funto has, she decided to settle for Dave? I don’t even have a quarter of her suitors.”

“Do you like Dave?”

“I don’t like him, Auntie. I love him. I have always loved him. He was the only guy that treated me so well. He cared about me and played with me. He would practically do anything for me. He knew all my weaknesses and liked me all the same. He never said any hurtful word to me ever. He was just the very person for me.”

“Hmm. Did he know you loved him?”

“I wouldn’t know. We were good friends. I was hoping he would propose to me someday. I showed him love in every way possible. During our school days, I did all sorts for him. There were times Funto even complained I did too much. Sometimes she wouldn’t allow him eat at our place. But he ended up proposing to her instead anyways.”

“That’s serious. Did he ever give you any sign that he was likely going to propose to you?”

“Why was he so good to me if he wouldn’t propose to me? So kind and caring. So much words of affirmation. I felt safe with him. Even when he was distant, I felt strongly connected to him.”

“Some people’s nature is good. It doesn’t matter what anyone thinks. He probably was just being himself.”

“I can’t take that, Auntie. I can’t. I loved him too much for him not to notice I wanted more.”

“Being good to you could have been the product of your kindness to him. He might have viewed his acts as a way of returning your favour.”

“If he wanted to return the favour, he wouldn’t go ahead and propose to Funto. If at all he wouldn’t marry me, he should have settled for someone entirely different. Not Funto. That girl makes me think God is partial. Perhaps because she’s so religious. She has stolen God’s heart as well.” She swallowed.

“She’s the beautiful one. I can’t count how many men drool over her. Even the director of the company she is working with wouldn’t take his eyes off her. She’s the intelligent one, a first class graduate for that matter. She has a good job. And now she has my Dave as well. She has it all. I hate her.” Mary sobbed.

Mrs Alabi exhaled. She kneaded her niece’s shoulders. “Don’t let your feelings make you blasphemous.”

“That’s no blasphemy. How could God give her everything and give me nothing? I don’t have a good job. I am not beautiful. How would I even attract a man?”

“The Psalmist says you are fearfully and wonderfully made. You’re created in the image of God. And the Bible also says all God made is beautiful.”

“Spare me that fable, Auntie. I’m not fearfully made at all. If I were, men would flock me as it is with Funto. How could God be so good to her and leave me with nothing? After all, God saw my heart and knew I loved Dave. Why couldn’t He at least touch Dave’s heart to love me as much? Why would He watch Dave propose to Funto? I guess Funto is His only daughter. I’ve just been wasting my time all these while.”

“Watch your mouth, Mary. May God forgive you. How about all the other things God gave you, which some people do not have?”

Mary flattened her lips in disgust. “Gave me? He gave me nothing.”

“You have sound health, some crave it, you have eyes, and some don’t. Why can’t you be grateful for all you have? The more thankful you are for what you have, the more blessing will find its way to you.”

“Never mind. You don’t understand what I am going through. I wanted to lose my sanity when she flaunted her ring at me, telling me she was getting married. I’ve been begging her for months to get me a job at her company. The director is smitten and would do anything for her. But she refused. She’s so selfish.”

“Hmm. Wait, did you ever tell Funto that you loved Dave and would like to be his wife?”

Mary gave Mrs Alabi a lopsided glance. “It’s like you don’t know Funto. She’s a sanctimonious witch. She would say I was lusting after a man if I told her.”

“That means you never told her.” Mrs Alabi raised an eyebrow.

“I didn’t. But she had no right to say yes to him. Was she not supposed to go back to God to ask? I could have seized that opportunity to tell her. But she just said yes right away.”

“Hmmm.”

“And they were expecting me to do a special dance and be happy for them.” Mary hissed.

Mrs Alabi adjusted and stared at her niece. “What do you think is the way forward?”

“The way forward?” Mary shrugged. “I don’t want to have anything to do with both of them ever again. I’ll keep them at arm’s length and mind my business. They should go ahead and marry. Two fools.”

“M-a-r-y. You’re being blinded by jealousy and envy. Sin attracts more sins indeed. Because of jealousy, you have blasphemed, spoken negatively, and you even intend to keep malice. Mary!”

“You can go ahead and judge me wrongly. That doesn’t change anything.”

“I’m not judging you. I’m only stating the obvious.” Mrs Alabi drew her close and patted her hair. “Will you listen to me?”

Mary frowned, chewing on her lips.

“Answer me, Mary. I need your response.”

“I will.”

“I understand how you feel.”

“You don’t understand.”

“Hear this. When I was about your age and I was preparing to get married. The man I was going to marry was my dream man. We were in love with each other, or so I thought. We did family introduction. I was the happiest. The introduction assured me marriage was certain. A month after, we had a minor quarrel and he broke up with me. I pleaded vehemently because I didn’t want to be put to shame. Our wedding was seven weeks away. He refused and disappeared into thin air. The more I chased him, the farther he ran. I couldn’t even tell my parents.” She swallowed. Mary leaned her head against the headrest, listening to her aunt.

“Three weeks later, I found out he was in a relationship with my friend and was avoiding me because of that. I almost ran crazy. That was a man I attended same church with.”

“Really? Things are happening! Wolves in sheep clothing.”

“Eventually, I told my parents and everyone. They blamed me for being naive and my mum complained I was lukewarm. That somewhat charged me. I got closer to God instead of farther away, as you’re aiming to.”

“Hmm.”

“I didn’t meet Segun Alabi until two years and a half after. And I had to double check with God to be sure. I didn’t want an omnibus.”

“What’s that?”

“Replay of the past episodes,” Mrs Alabi said. Mary smiled. “Today, I’m happily married with three children. The guy that left me was paraded last two years for a crime. He’s still in jail. How would I have coped if I had married him?” Mrs Alabi said.

“Maybe things wouldn’t have gone in that direction either.”

“That’s only a probability. He didn’t even marry my friend he was in a relationship with at that time. The lady he married is now a shadow of herself. Anytime I see her, I pray for her in my heart.”

“That’s pitiable.”

“I didn’t tell you the story to attract or invoke your pity. I’m trying to let you know that God always has the best in mind for everyone. That doesn’t rule out the fact that we’ll face challenges. But challenges will never undermine God’s love for us. He will give us the best if only we can trust Him.”

“Hmm.”

“If Dave was meant for you, he wouldn’t have proposed to Funto. And if he is still yours, sooner or later, he’ll retrace his steps. But if not, you need to do yourself the favour of letting him go. Don’t let the devil rob you of your joy. The devil keeps reminding you of what God hasn’t done for you. Devil takes your focus off all God has done so that he, the devil, can rid you of receiving more from God. If Funto has everything now, well, glory to God, but it won’t stop you from being blessed in your own time. If only we can focus more on what God does for us, we’ll keep opening doors of blessings unto ourselves. Do you grab what I’m saying?”

Mary nodded.

“The phase at which every human being will face challenges differs. If yours is getting a job and a husband, be patient and trust God. Don’t think God is partial and don’t dip your hands into sin in an attempt to get yourself your desire.”

“But Auntie, how am I supposed to react to the two of them? I understand all you’ve said. But that wouldn’t take my love for Dave out of my heart.”

“You need to pray about it and do contrary to what your flesh tells you. That way, you’ll get over it soon. If you can, you can talk to Funto about it. Tell her how you feel about Dave and tell her to...”

“I can’t. That’s a suicide mission. I can’t do that.”

“Well, I guess you need to talk to God and be intentional about guarding your heart. Don’t allow wickedness to grow in your heart. Treat them with kindness. Pray for them and their relationship. The more you wish them well the more the burden on your heart is eased. Then try to cut down on your association with Dave, talk to him only in open places, when others are around. Don’t discuss anything sensitive and refuse excessive kindness from him with simple courtesy—Thank you, never mind, I’m fine, I appreciate but not this time. Those simple statements will be helpful.”

“Thank you, ma. I understand.”

“Less I forget, you need to depend less on external validation. Speak to yourself daily in the mirror. Focus on the features you love most about yourself. Tell yourself how beautiful you are. And start believing it. It will radiate in the way you walk, talk, and do things. Once you have a right self-perception, leave the rest to God. Your own knight in shining armour will soon come looking for you.”

Mary smiled. “What shining armour?” She cocked an eyebrow at her aunt.

“Mark my words. But do all I asked. And you need to go to God and ask for mercy.”

“I will. I didn’t mean to speak that way. I was just consumed by anger.”

“God is gracious and merciful, once you’re genuinely sorry, He’ll forgive.”

“Thank you, ma.” She hugged her aunt. “That was why I came running here before I lost my mind. Thanks for fixing me.”

“It is God that does the fixing. I only did my part in telling you what’s right. You know you’re always welcome.”

Mary nodded, smiling. Relief washed over her heart. “Now I’m hungry. Where are the kids?”

“They’ve gone out with my husband. They went to an amusement park.”

“Uhn uh. That’s so cool. Why did they leave you behind?”

“All things work together for good. If I’d gone, you’d have met no one at home. I actually wanted to take some time to pack their stuffs together. We’ll be taking them back to school tomorrow after church. I chose to stay back.”

“Hmm. You’re right. Thank God for everything.”

“Hallelujah. There’s food in the kitchen. What would you like to eat?”

“Hmm. Don’t worry, I’ll fix myself something good.” Mary straightened and went into the kitchen.

Mrs Alabi beamed, happy that her niece was in a better mood than she came with.

CHAPTER SEVEN

Ijeoma Ogbonna, a field agent at Zeisel Corporation, was the first to notice the ring on Funto's finger. And she didn't delay to call others' attention to it.

Funto's engagement ring drew more attention to her than she imagined. She was teased by her friends and many of her colleagues congratulated her.

Funto stepped into her office and took her seat to begin the work of the day. She raised her head and glanced at the door as soon as a knock on the door reached her ears. "Yes, come in."

Theresa opened the door slightly and peeped through. Funto nodded. "Please come in."

Theresa walked in. "Hello."

"Hi. Please have your seat." Funto gestured to the chair opposite her.

Theresa sat. "Miss Peters. I want to apologise for how I've treated you for a long time now. I'm sorry."

Funto smiled. "You didn't offend me."

Theresa shook her head. "Whether you accept or not, I know I've treated you badly. I'm sorry. Please forgive me."

"All right, you're forgiven. But if I may ask, was there something I did to you that brought that about?"

"Uh Uh..." She hesitated. "I was scared the personnel manager would dump me for you. I saw the way he gawked at you and treated you always. I was angry. And each time I dared challenge him as regards that, he threatened to quit the relationship. I'm sorry."

Funto laughed. She never knew Theresa was in a relationship with Mr Udoh, the personnel manager. Theresa had been fighting her on a groundless basis. Funto never even gave any male colleague the room to woo her, let alone have an affair with her. "I'm sorry for laughing." She laughed again. "I'm just overwhelmed. I seriously can't believe you picked a fight with me because of something I know nothing about. So what made you come now?"

"Your engagement ring. I heard when the members of staff were congratulating you on your engagement. That was when I realised I'd been wasting my time being hostile to you. Also, you've been yourself nevertheless. You never

acted badly towards me in return. You remained the loving, kind, and generous person that you are. I just got tired of being bitter. I felt dirty. I'm sorry."

Funto straightened and walked to the other side of the table. She pulled Theresa to her feet and embraced her. "I have nothing against you, Theresa. And I do wish you the best of luck with Mr Udoh."

"Thank you."

"You're welcome."

Theresa left her office. Funto leaned against her table and laughed. She muttered words of prayers for Theresa under her breath. She turned around and resumed her seat.

Funto picked her phone and dialled Mary's number. She had to tell her about her experience. The call ended, unanswered. She tried repeatedly. No answer came. She dropped the phone and continued her work. But her mind wouldn't be at peace. Mary kept popping up her mind. Why would Mary ignore her calls? Mary hadn't spoken to Funto since the previous weekend Funto and Dave had been to her place. Was Mary angry with her? Probably because Funto was reluctant to ask her boss a favour for Mary. But Mary was supposed to understand that there was no vacancy at the company. And if Funto would demand her boss to create one for Mary, then Funto must be ready to pay the price, which she definitely wasn't ready to pay. She wouldn't even pay such price if she were the one in need of a job.

Have you prayed about it? A voice dropped in her heart. That was true. She hadn't prayed about God touching the heart of her boss. She shut her eyes and said some prayers. She rose to her feet and sauntered to the director's office.

Funto knocked once and turned the doorknob. "Good morning, sir." She glanced at the wall clock above and behind the director's chair. It was 11:55 am. She was right. It was still morning.

"How're you, Funto?"

"I'm fine, sir." She glanced at the empty chairs opposite the director.

"Oh, sit." Mr Amadi smiled. "You came to my office uninvited, that's quite surprising. What's happening?"

"Uh. I wanted to remind you that you haven't checked the remittance record of Cuss Store. I have prepared the document since last week, awaiting you to read through and append your signature."

"Oh. You can forward that to the general manager. Let him do that on my behalf. I don't have to do everything all by myself. That's why the company has many members of staff. If you had forwarded it to Mr Stephen. He would have finished with it and you would have been able to clear that store for the month and go on to the next. That's the beauty of delegation. It makes work faster and easier."

"All right, sir. I'll do just that."

“Please do.”

“And, sir, the salary spreadsheet is still with you. If we don’t finish up with it, payment can’t be made, sir.”

He laughed. “I thought you didn’t like money. Why are you keen about the spreadsheet? Today is just the 25th day of the month, isn’t it?”

Funto smiled. “Not really, sir. It’s just that the processing will take another three days. The earlier we start the better. And it is not just about my salary, it’s something concerning all members of staff.”

“I’ve heard you. I’ll inform Stephen about it. Both of you should work on it.”

“All right, sir.”

“Yeah.”

Funto sat still, staring at the director, unsure how to proceed with her request.

“Anything else?” He raised the outer corners of his eyes.

“Yes, sir. I- I was wondering if I could discuss something with you.”

He leaned forward and smiled, his eyes set on her oval face. “I’m all ears. Go ahead.”

“My best friend and I graduated the same time, but she’s yet to secure a job. It’s weighing her down and affecting me as well. I wouldn’t know if you could help.”

“Uh... What did she study?”

“Marketing, sir.”

He laughed. “Why is unemployment weighing her down when she could actually be her own boss? She could start a business, market it, and make money.”

Funto swallowed.

“You are not talking. Am I wrong? I think marketers are among the set of people who should never fear unemployment. They are men and women of the people. They are professionally trained to influence people’s decisions. With that, they could start anything and make people patronise them. Those kind of people shouldn’t even look for a job. They are equipped for breakthrough already.” He shrugged.

“It’s not that easy, sir. She was selling shoes and bags but unfortunately had to stop due to high debt.”

“She shouldn’t sell her goods to people who wouldn’t pay. And she should...”

Funto tuned out. She wasn’t asking him for business advice for Mary. If he had no help to render, he shouldn’t bother wasting her time on needless chatter. “All right. Thank you, sir,” she said when she realised his lips had stopped moving. She stood and walked to the door.

He stared at her, as usual, his focus on her hips and buttocks, which wiggled without much effort.

“Wait.”

Funto halted and turned around. “Sir?”

“Tell your friend to see me on Thursday. 11:30 am.”

“Thank you so much, sir.”

“That’s not how to say it. You’ll come here,” he pointed to his side, “and say that.”

Funto swallowed. She blinked, walked reluctantly to his side, and curtseyed. “Thanks, sir.”

“You’re welcome.” He brushed his palm against her arm. Funto jerked and stepped backward.

He grinned. “I will give you a reason to appreciate me better.”

Funto cast him a weary look, turned away and left the office.

CHAPTER EIGHT

Joy Peters, now Joy Oboli, sat in a recliner, facing her sister, Funto Peters. Light ray streamed through the open windows and brightened the living room.

Funto sat on a settee, her legs crossed, and her gaze fixed on her sister.

“Mum told me you brought home your fiancé,” Joy said.

“Yes. You are the only one he’s yet to meet. I thought you would come home that weekend as planned. But you didn’t show up.”

“Hmm. I couldn’t. I wasn’t feeling good.” She gestured at her protruded belly. “You think it’s easy to be near term? To even walk a short distance worries me, let alone jump around.”

“I understand. Hope the foetus is doing fine.”

“She is. Thank God.”

“She? Is it a female?”

“Yes, so we were told.”

“Hmm. That’s cool. Necessary for a change.”

“Of course. After two boys. If Jeremiah had been a girl, I wouldn’t have gotten pregnant again. I just decided to give it a last shot. Perchance it would be a girl. Thank God for answered prayers.”

“Wow. You’re blessed. But seriously, you mean you would have stopped after two kids?”

“Yes, I would have. And since the girl is here, I’m stopping at three.”

“What if it was a boy as well?”

“I would stop nevertheless. I can’t have more than three children. Never.”

“Sister, why? What if this was a multiple pregnancy? I mean if you were carrying a set of twins or triplet. What would you have done?”

“Just like I often say. God is perfect in His doings. He didn’t send that my way because He knows my capability. If I had a set of twins, I’d dump them in the hospital and run home. I tell you.”

“You wouldn’t do something of such. God forbid.”

“See, if you know what I’m passing through, you’ll understand better. That brings me to the reason why I summoned you. That man, Daniel, or what do you call him?”

“Which man?” Funto squeezed her brows.

“Your fiancé.”

“Dave.”

“Yes, Dave. You can’t marry him. Let him go and look for someone else. It’s not a crime to break a relationship. Remove that ring from your finger and allow somebody better to come in.”

“Come in where? I don’t understand what you’re saying?”

“You have to. How could you even settle for such a person? I heard he teaches in a private school in Ibadan.”

“What’s bad about that? Aren’t you a teacher as well?”

“Exactly why I am concerned. Why did you think I said if I had twins, I would dump them in the hospital? It’s because I can’t afford to cater for them. Why would you see a ditch ahead and jump into it. This guy isn’t even a teacher in a government-owned school, or a standard private school. How much does he earn? Tell me. How much?”

“Did you marry Uncle Jose because of money?”

“If I knew he didn’t have money as much as he claimed, I wouldn’t have married him. All the assets he was bragging of then are nowhere to be found. That foolish man tricked me into marriage.”

“Sister, I’m sorry to say, but that is what happens to ladies who marry for riches. They get disappointed.”

“Oh really. I guess that’s why you are marrying the guy for his poverty. There’s no disappointment in that, you just keep swimming in insufficiency.”

“God forbid. I don’t like what you are saying.” Funto frowned.

“I don’t expect you to like it. The truth is bitter. I can’t watch you marry a good-for-nothing guy. If he thinks he has seen a lady he could whisk away under the veil of spirituality, I won’t allow it.”

“I walk by faith, Sister. Not by sight. You had this counsel and you married Uncle Jose. How many houses have you built? And you even said the assets he had are nowhere to be found. He lost his job. Now you’re complaining.”

“Why won’t I? How do you expect me to cope? It’s the responsibility of a man to provide for his family. That’s why I won’t allow history repeat itself. If I had known, I’d have married a richer person. It was unfortunate that none came my way then.”

“Sometimes I wonder where all the teachings Mum gave us and that which we heard in church disappeared to in your life. You don’t cease to surprise me with this your worldly way of thinking?”

“So, is choosing to marry a pauper a heavenly way of thinking? When even the Bible says, ‘Silver and gold belongs to God?’ God is not poor.”

“Don’t worry about us. Dave is hardworking. He won’t cease to take opportunities that God brings his way. He’s not wealthy now. But he doesn’t have a poor mentality. That’s the difference. A man who has God, vision and the right supporting actions will soon be the centre of attraction for the wealthy visionless man. If it’s about money, God will take care of us. After all, he’s working.”

“Wait. Think about it, how will you guys cope? Are you intending to leave your job and relocate to Ibadan to spend that meagre salary of his with him? Or do you think the money he makes there can rent an apartment for you here in Lagos? I seriously don’t understand you.”

“Well, about that. We plan to live here in Lagos. He’s applying for every job in Lagos he lays his hands on. As soon as he gets a placement, he’ll move to Lagos. And we are praying. We have that assurance that all is going to be fine.”

“Funto, spiritual fanatic.”

Funto smiled. “I’m not perturbed. When you listen to God’s word, you no longer bank on what your mind can explain. You may not understand.”

“I hope you get a first class ticket to heaven. Because the way you play holiness, even the angels must tighten their seat belts. You had better not beckon on holy suffering. I’m sure Mum is displeased with you as well. Her hope was so high on you. But now you’re dashing it by going the wrong way. Who does that?”

“When you brought home an Igbo man, or what’s Uncle’s tribe? I remember daddy frowned at it. But you didn’t give a damn. You went ahead and married him. Why are you trying to interfere in my own life now?”

“Because I don’t want you to end up like me, penniless. You are supposed to make our family great again by marrying the right person. It was not a joke that God gave you beauty, the right shape, complexion, and everything. Please don’t waste it on Dave. I’m tired of being poor. I don’t want you to join the clique.”

“Dave is the one I’ll marry. Don’t worry, you’ll apologise for all you’ve said about him in the nearest future.”

“That’s your self-reassurance statement I suppose. You’re even lucky. I heard the director of your company is head over heels for you and would marry you if only you said one word yes. But you refused.”

“Sister Joy! My director is married.”

“What’s your business with that? If he were happily married, he wouldn’t be looking to you for an affair. Let him buy you a house in a good estate here in Lagos and furnish it. Buy you a good car and open a standard shopping centre for you. Those are the three things you need. You wouldn’t even have to disturb the woman in his house. You’ll be his wife in your own corner. That’s it.”

“Are you asking me to marry a married man?” Funto raised her brows.

“Many married men are better off single brothers. What’s the big deal in that? As far as he can take care of you both.”

“Sister, that’s fornication on my part.”

“You’d better forget all those Sunday school lessons. We are talking about real life here. Funto, make hay while the sun shine. This is the time you can flaunt what you have. Don’t let it bypass you.”

“Who even told you about my director?”

“Who else? It was Mary. That lady really loves you. She doesn’t want you to make a mistake either. After all, she’s a Christian like you, so there’s no point hyping what is not. She said she had tried to dissuade you but you wouldn’t listen. And she told me how all the big men in your company are wagging their tails at the sight of you. Do you think I would have been concerned if she hadn’t begged me to talk to you? I knew you wouldn’t listen. Your own Christianity is different from everyone’s.” Joy looked at her askance and hissed.

“I’m surprised Mary could do this. No wonder she’s been following the operation manager around since she began working with the company. I don’t know what went wrong with her. As for me, I can’t do what you’re requesting of me. I am not supposed to bring wealth to the family by marrying a rich man. Each person should work and fend for herself.”

“I have told you the truth. The ball is in your court. You can’t say we didn’t warn you.” Joy groaned as she rose from the recliner. Back arched, hands resting on her thighs. She straightened. “I want to get some rest in the room. Close the door on your way out.” She walked towards her room.

“So you’re just going to leave me here?” Funto said.

“We’ll talk more when you return to your senses. I can’t waste my time screaming the obvious.”

Funto straightened. “Extend my greetings to Jerry, Ezekiel, and their dad. I’ll be on my way now.”

“Take care of yourself.”

“Good bye.” Funto walked out of the apartment.

CHAPTER NINE

Days rolled into weeks and weeks rolled into months. Funto's wedding approached. Dave had secured a job with a plastic industry in Lagos, hence, had relocated. Funto and Dave prepared for their wedding. Relatives and well-wishers also saved the date.

Funto and Dave wedded on an auspicious day. The weather was great. And the event itself was simple and graceful.

Funto and Dave exchanged vows and the priest pronounced them husband and wife.

Reception took place in the small auditorium beside the church. People wined and dined. Those who remembered to bring gifts for the new couple dropped them at a designated stand, where the gifts would be blessed by the associate pastor.

The couple had some time to dance, making the event merrier. No one could be happier.

The event wrapped up early enough. And people returned to their homes.

The new couple went to their new home in the heart of Ikeja, Lagos, in a rented, decorated, black Jeep.

Dave and Funto climbed out of the Jeep. The driver who drove them home left with the vehicle. It was his duty to return it to the owner. After all, the vehicle had served its purpose.

Dave and Funto stepped into their apartment. It was Funto's first time of being with Dave, all alone, in a place she called home. They had started the journey on the right foot, she thought.

Funto pulled off her wedding dress with Dave's assistance. She dashed into the bathroom, cold bath prioritised above rubies. After a satisfying shower, she stepped out and slipped into something light and comfortable.

Dave took his turn. He showered and wore a casual wear.

They spent some time to sing and pray. The day had been a huge success. Thanking God for hours was worth it.

Funto served the meal her mum had packaged and kept in the Jeep for her. Funto's mum didn't want Funto and Dave to sleep on empty stomach since they had

little to eat during the day. Dave's appetite was lean. He ate little and fiddled with the rest.

Funto watched him. "Why are you not eating?" she said between mouthfuls.

Dave shook his head and raised a corner of his mouth. "I'm not hungry."

Funto smiled. "Joy overflows in your heart."

"Isn't that expected?" He smiled and lifted a spoonful of food to his mouth.

"Of course. How would I say it isn't?"

Dave smiled and joked with his bride. Funto finished her meal and packed the plates to the kitchen. She took the sponge and searched the shelf for soap.

Dave peeked. "What are you doing?" he said, his hands tugging at his singlet.

"Finding soap." Funto opened the next shelf and searched.

Dave approached her. He embraced her from behind and held her hands. "Let's leave the washing till tomorrow. I can do the washing myself in fact."

"There's nothing I'm doing now. Let me quickly wash them and put this kitchen in order."

Dave held her waist and walked her forward, out of the kitchen. "Darling," he kissed her nape, "the kitchen is fine tonight. I'll do everything necessary tomorrow."

"But..."

"It's been a long day. Let's get some rest."

Only if it was rest he truly meant, it would have been different. They walked into their bedroom and lay on the bed. Funto dodged his stare and gave a pretentious yawn. Dave got her message. But he definitely wouldn't regard it. He tickled her. "I want to send the sleep out of you."

Funto laughed. "Can't you be a saint for once? You have me as your wife till forever."

"I'm a saint, darling. And this is the type of play you can do even in your pastor's presence. Guiltless, warm, and amazing. It evokes God's blessing not wrath. And it joins us as one that God sees us as. Remember we're married."

Funto saw determination in Dave's happy bright eyes. She smiled. "Remember it's my first."

"I'll be gentle all the way, I promise." Dave fondled her face before leaning forward to kiss her. She was his bride. His legal bride.

CHAPTER TEN

Mary perched on the table, her hands resting on her thighs and her feet dangling. Funto was seated on her chair, her back resting against the spine of the chair. They talked and laughed.

“It’s good to be married. You’re glowing,” Mary said.

Funto beamed. “Naughty you. Don’t worry. You’ll get there soon. Isn’t that a ring on your finger?”

“I hope.” Mary grimaced.

“You hope? What’s happening? Both of you are gainfully employed. He’s the operation manager for crying out loud. You should both pray about settling down. Stop all this parading you’re doing about.”

“That man is not ready. But I’ll make him, trust me.”

“Seriously? When will you change? How many times will I tell you not to try to force anything to happen?”

“Some things are in God’s hands. Some are in our hands, Funto. That man’s straying, I can’t tell it all. The sooner I entrap him in marriage, the better. He still sees himself as single.”

“What makes you think he’ll do your bidding? And even if he did, he could continue these behaviours after marriage. Uh. That reminds me. What was the confirmation you had? You haven’t told me yet.”

Mary looked at her askance. “I have peace in my heart. Just as you did over Dave,” she said in a mocking way.

“Oh! May the Lord bless you both then.”

“Amen. Thank you.”

“Mary, with all sincerity, I love you. And I’ve gotten so used to you. If not, I could have kept a distance from you. I don’t understand who you are anymore. Sometimes you are the Mary I know, sometimes a persona.”

“You can’t understand, Funto. Sometimes I’m just angry with myself and I can’t hide it. Once I’m settled and fine, everything will return to normal.”

“Hmm. Just be careful. Don’t allow the devil...”

Mary saw it coming. A sermon on holy living. “Funto, you haven’t given me any gist about you and Dave,” Mary interrupted.

“We’re fine.”

“How’s his work?”

“He’s doing very fine.”

“That’s good to know. You guys should give us a baby soon.”

Funto laughed. “Look at you. Baby will come in God’s time. We barely just got married.”

“I know. Just teasing you.”

“I thought as much.”

Funto glanced at Mary, her expression drawn. Mary noticed. She knew Funto too well not to know what that expression meant. Funto had something on her mind. And was contemplating whether or not to tell her.

“You know you can talk to me. We’ve been best friends for over six years. If there’s anyone you can talk to, it’s me.”

Funto sniggered. “Why should I talk to you? Besides there’s nothing to talk about.”

“Funto! You don’t even know how to lie. Your eyes scream there’s something on your mind.” Mary lowered her voice. “Tell me. What is it?”

Funto exhaled. “This has to be between us.”

“Of course. I promise.”

“I’ve been wondering. I remember my dad’s saying, ‘Put your hands in fire and be charred. Lay with a virgin and be stained.’”

“What does that have to do with you?”

“I didn’t bleed,” Funto whispered.

“I don’t understand you.”

Funto sighed. “I was referring to my wedding night. I didn’t bleed. There was no stain of any sort. I just felt something was wrong somewhere. I can’t take it off my mind. Do you think that was normal?”

“I’m not sure. I remember I bled during my first time.”

Funto cast her a lopsided glance.

“Don’t start again. It’s not news to you that I’m not a virgin. You’re the Sister Keep-it-for-your-husband.”

“Mary!”

“I’m sorry. You know I’ve repented. Being your friend will allow no less. It’s a pity I didn’t meet you earlier.”

“Just leave me alone.”

“Sorry. I didn’t mean to speak lightly of it. Did Dave complain?”

“No. He didn’t even mention it. He’s been treating me better in fact. But I just have this thing crawling on my brain. I want to be sure it’s normal.”

“Since Dave is fine. Why are you making a big deal of it? Just forget it.”

“I wish I could but I can’t. I’m thinking of talking to a woman in church, she’s a nurse, and her husband, a doctor. I’ll hear what they have to say about it.”

“Aren’t you sure you were a virgin? You can talk to me. It’ll be between us.”

“Mary, I never knew any man in my life before Dave. Dave was my first.”

Spare me. Miss Jesus. “Hmm. Trash the thought then. Maybe you’re made in a unique way.”

“Okay. I’ll think about it.”

“All right. So how are you going to deal with Mr Amadi? His eyes aren’t off you still.”

“We’ve been working together in peace for a long time. It doesn’t matter what he wants. My stance is clear and firm. I have nothing to do with any other man aside Dave.”

“I trust you.” Mary straightened. “It’s almost 1:00 pm. I need to go see some of our clients and also try to get new ones.”

“That’s good.” Funto smiled.

“I hope I’ll be able to sit and work fully in an office like you and stop this energy-sapping evangelism they call marketing. Many people even avoid me. They know what I’ve come to say.”

Funto shook her head. “You think my job is easy? Do it for a day before judging. If it had not been the Lord on my side, I’d have been swimming in an ocean of debt. My job is energy sapping and mentally challenging. If a kobo disappeared, you’d have to account and recount, until it reappeared. It’s not an easy job, my dear. Be thankful for what you have.”

“I’m thankful. At least there’s something I can claim to be doing.”

“Exactly my point. Some don’t even have that.”

“You’re right, dear. Let me bounce. I don’t want to come short of target.”

“Okay. God goes with you.”

“Amen.” Mary turned and left the office.

CHAPTER ELEVEN

For Funto and Dave, life as a couple unfolded gradually. Dave was loving, caring and supportive. He and his wife seldom quarrelled. And when they did, they ensured they reconciled before they slept. It became their way of life.

Five months into their marriage, Funto was promoted. Her job became more demanding. She stayed late at work often and many of her weekends were consumed by office work or church activities. Zeisel Corporation was experiencing tremendous growth, increasing the onus on her. The director trusted her, she had been found faithful and loyal over time. As such, Mr Amadi wouldn't allow any other accountant handle some accounting duties in the company, causing Funto's duties to skyrocket.

Funto probably would have complained, but her boss was generous. He'd almost doubled the salary she started with. And he showed appreciation for her diligence at every opportunity he got. Sometimes in words, gifts or a sideways embrace Funto had come to accept.

During these times, Dave did most of the cooking and house chores. He insisted that Funto eat and have adequate rest. He was the reason she didn't burn out.

Whenever Funto was returning home, she went with excitement, knowing what kind of treatment awaited her at home—warm bath, a good meal, and massage performed by the soft broad hands of her beloved.

If she had to remarry, she would choose Dave a thousand times.

After their first year anniversary, Funto started getting uncomfortable. She hadn't missed her period, not even for once. Nothing changed about Dave. It seemed he didn't notice. He never spoke about it except at times Funto brought up discussions on parenting, and all he did was gloss over it.

When Funto told Dave she was getting worried, he discarded her fears and assured her all would be well. It didn't matter if the children came now or later. What mattered to Dave was their love, unity, and faith.

Funto wasted no time in meeting a member of her church, who was a doctor. The doctor counselled and encouraged her.

Funto returned home a changed person. She stopped seeing copulation as love fostering. She regarded it as a drug she needed for her childlessness. It became

almost routine. Daily. Funto wouldn't let Dave alone until he consented. Nothing he said mattered. She wanted a child and wanted it as soon as possible.

Dave certainly took after his parents. Despite Funto's fears and agitation, which she had probably developed as a result of watching movies where in-laws threw out the wife for bearing no children, her in-laws were kind. They didn't frequent her home. And whenever they came, it was a period of support and affirmation for her. Yet, she had her fears.

Before Funto's marriage was eighteen months, Funto had attended hundreds of church programmes to seek God's face, despite her tight schedule. She was becoming frustrated. All the words of wisdom she'd gleaned from her quiet moment with God seemed insufficient.

Her faith waned as her marriage approached its second year. It seemed God was distant.

Dave started complaining of neglect. When Funto was not at work, she was in church. If she wasn't, she was in her room all locked up, either crying, praying, or sleeping.

Her childlessness was creating a gulf between them.

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Funto swept the compound. Dave sat on the fence. Sweat covered Funto's face and neck and formed thick droplets. Funto dropped the broom in her grip and glanced at Dave.

"I've been exerting myself to make the compound better, and there you are, idle. Can't you join me?" Funto said.

Dave shook his head. "I don't have to hold broom or sweep to make this place beautiful. Where I'm seated right here, you can't imagine how much I'm doing," he said.

"What are you doing?" Anger welled up Funto's throat. "You're so lazy and apathetic. What kind of man are you? Lazing around like a child."

"Funto! Just concentrate on what you are doing and let me be."

"I won't let you be. Do you think working under this blistering sun is easy?" She wiped her forehead. "My body is as hot as a recently used hearth. You don't even have the candour to join me or do something else to make this place better. After all, the more beautiful this place is the better for us."

Dave ignored her. He continued to throw tiny things unto the portion of the floor she had swept. Funto wasn't sure of what he was throwing, but his calmness and nonchalance enraged her. She hurried to the iron gate. She struggled with the padlock until it was open. She pushed the gate open. A dog was there. It was

familiar. She allowed it in and pointed to her husband. The dog barked and charged at Dave. Dave's attempt to avoid the dog threw him off the fence to the exterior.

Funto's eyes drifted. She stared. The things Dave had been throwing were seeds and they had begun to grow. She saw one become a beautiful ornamental plant.

The dog growled. Funto glanced at the dog. It was different. It had become thrice its size. It charged at her. She flayed. It tore her clothes. She screamed and cried. The dog gallivanted around her with pride. It opened its mouth in victory to feast on her body.

Funto woke up. She screamed, "Jesus!"

Her voice aroused Dave. He rubbed his eyes to clear off the sleep that tugged at it. "What's the problem? Are you okay?" he said. He sat up in bed and stared at his wife. She was shivering, her arms folded on her chest, staring blankly into space.

"Dear. What's wrong?" Dave drew her unto his chest.

Funto sobbed, still terrified. Dave patted her back. "It is well with you in Jesus' name. Tell me. What's it? Why are you crying?"

She sniffed. "Ni- night- nightmare."

"No evil dream shall materialise in our lives in Jesus' name. The Bible says in Job 5:12, 'He frustrates the devices of the crafty, so that their hands cannot carry out their plans.' The Lord is our shield and defence. He'll keep us from all harm. It is written in Lamentations 3:37, 'Who is he who speaks and it comes to pass, when the Lord has not commanded it?' Only the will of the Father shall be done in our lives. No utterance, plan, or scheme of the enemy shall stand in Jesus' name."

"Amen."

"Tell me what it was all about."

Funto shook her head. "There's no need. Let's just pray more." She withdrew from the embrace and knelt on the bed.

Dave sighed and fell in the same posture. They prayed for a while before going back to sleep.

CHAPTER TWELVE

Mary sat in her chair in her cubicle. Her eyes focused on a study material. She scribbled in her small notepad as she read. She flipped the pages of the book. Word after word. Line after line. She digested the content.

Funto walked past the reception. She bypassed the open area divided by plywood into cubicles, each enclosing a table and a chair. She ambled towards her office on the second floor. A stapler fell from a table in one of the cubicles. The sound reached Funto's ear. She turned her head and caught a glimpse of Mary. She smiled and walked to her side.

"Mary. How're you doing?"

Mary lifted her eyes from the book and glanced at her friend. "I'm fine. How about you?"

"I'm good. I was going to my office, just decided to check up on you."

"Uh, thank you."

"This one you're consumed with reading. Do you have anything to tell me?"

Mary put her middle and index fingers on her lips. "Shush." She scanned around. Others workers were in their various cubicles. She straightened and pulled Funto. "Let's go to your office."

Funto smiled and shook her head. "Always hiding something."

"It's called privacy. I couldn't be talking there. It's not even an office like yours. Everyone would hear me."

Funto opened the door to her office. Mary entered. Funto shut the door and went behind her table. She sunk in her chair and stared at Mary. "Yeah. We are here. I'm listening."

"Uh. I was preparing."

"Preparing for what?"

Mary widened her eyes. "Don't tell me you don't know about the Beta QUI Community Program the company is launching?"

"Of course I do. What has that got to do with you?"

"Are you feigning ignorance or are you genuinely unsynchronised?"

"Call it whatever you like. Just answer my question."

“The company is choosing program coordinator, strategist, and implementation agents from the stream of staff. I heard they didn’t want to give the opportunity to outsiders. Once a person is capable of managing both ends well, he has a chance.”

“Yes, I know about that.”

“So why were you questioning me?”

“Because you were studying like you had an international examination to write.”

“That’s because I applied, just as many did. And the interview is on Friday. I don’t want to lose the opportunity. That’s why I have to study.”

“Are you serious the interview is on Friday? I’m completely oblivious of that. I actually didn’t want to register, but the G.M insisted. He encouraged me to give it a shot. I have more than enough work on my hands to want an addition.”

“Look at you. Do you know how much money will be given to program participants? Not to mention the handlers. And it’s just a six-week programme. You sure don’t want to miss it. I pray I’m chosen. I have plans for that money already.”

“You have a higher chance of being chosen. You’re better prepared. I’ve had a lot on my mind lately. And I didn’t even know the interview is two days away.”

“You can still do something in the little time left. At least you won’t look like a fool during the interview. And I learnt three of the interviewers are flying in from abroad tomorrow. There’s no slightest chance that result could be influenced from within. So just give it your best.”

“I have a program tomorrow evening in church. I’ll be heading there after work. I can’t prepare for anything. I’d rather not turn up, at worst. Or attend for register’s sake.”

Mary smiled. “You have enough. I dare not do that. I don’t even intend taking Priscilla home today. I already spoke to her nanny. I’ll only check up on her and go home. She’s not coming home until the interview is over.”

Funto laughed. “The love of money is the root of all evil. You’re leaving your six-month-old baby with a nanny for three days just because of an interview. I wonder what her father would say to you.”

“My husband? He won’t even notice. What does he care?”

“What! How will he not notice?”

“Just forget about him. He’s the least of my worries now.”

“Hmm. Okay. Just be careful, and treat your child with more concern. Some people have throes of passion for a baby and are yet to receive.”

“Don’t worry, Funto. You’ll have yours soon. After all it’s just about three years you got married.”

“Mary! Just? You definitely don’t know what you’re saying. You shouldn’t have gotten pregnant before your wedding. Maybe you’d have had the understanding of what I’m passing through.” Funto cast her a pregnant stare.

“Don’t give me that look. My case was different. I had to do that to secure my husband. He wasn’t serious. You knew it.”

Funto shook her head. All her talks on God’s will hadn’t influenced her friend. “So you chose to fast-track things.” She tightened her lips.

“Of course. When it seemed God wasn’t that concerned about me. I had to do the needful. And it worked. He married me.”

“It’s not my duty to castigate. I have problems of my own.” She sighed.

“Funto. I understand you. And I’m praying for you as well. That reminds me, how’s Dave reacting to this?”

“He’s been a wonderful husband so far. Loving, caring, supportive. And his family is the best. Especially his sisters and mum. His mum would pray for us for hours and counsel me, begging me not to worry. I’ve not seen such people in my life.”

“Wow, that’s awesome.”

“I believe God will remember me soon. I am so looking forward to having a child with Dave.”

“Funto! How could you be so blinded? It is true spirituality and wisdom differs. Don’t you smell a rat?”

“What rat? I don’t get you.”

“Listen to yourself.” Mary mimicked Funto, “He’s been caring, loving, and supportive.” She clapped her hands mockingly. “Don’t you know something is wrong? The fact that Dave’s family members aren’t even complaining should set off an alarm in your head. Maybe Dave has a problem, and they know about it.”

“God forbid. Dave is fine.”

“Listen to me. No mother-in-law will wait for this long for a grandchild and not express worry. That’s the way mothers-in-law are wired.”

“Maybe mine isn’t wired that way.”

“How long till you become wise? I suspect there is something wrong with her son. That’s why she hasn’t shown you the way to seven seas where you will wash away your barrenness.”

“I’m not barren, Mary.” Tears welled up Funto’s eyes. Mary left her seat and strolled to Funto’s side. She embraced her. “I’m sorry. I didn’t mean to use that word. But you need to be smart. If you think I’m blabbering, challenge Dave to follow you to the hospital to take fertility tests.”

Funto sighed and sniffed. “Telling him such means I don’t trust him.”

“Why are you reasoning like this? You’d only be asking for proof. When he does the tests and is certified fit, you can then intensify prayers. At least you’ll be at rest that all is well. What if there’s a treatment he must take as well? After all, you’ve tried your best and used all sort of drugs the doctor prescribed to you. The problem could be at his end.”

Funto stared at her friend. She blinked. There was sense in what Mary was saying. Maybe she needed answers truly. Answers to questions she’d been asking herself. Requesting Dave to be tested shouldn’t pose a problem. “Thank you. I’ll think about it.”

“All right. Don’t forget the interview is Friday. Let me get back to my desk. I’m going to the field by 2:00 pm. And I want to do some studying before then.”

“I understand. Thank you.”

“You’re welcome.” Mary left the office.

Funto placed her head on the table and sobbed.

CHAPTER THIRTEEN

It was 7:00 pm when Funto walked into the house, her legs heavy under the weight of her body. She shut the door. She dropped her bags on the floor and plunked on the sofa.

Dave raised his head and turned to face her. “How’re you?” He stared.

Funto hushed. Her brain whirred in her skull. She shut her eyes and exhaled loudly.

Dave stood and went to his wife. He sat at the edge of the sofa and kissed her cheek. “Sweetheart. How was your day?” He caressed her hair.

“Fine,” Funto managed.

“What’s wrong with you?”

“Headache.”

“Sorry. I think this your work is really tiring. And it’s telling on you already. I’m getting uncomfortable with it.” He shifted closer and kneaded her shoulders. “I don’t want anyone draining my wife every day. Your body is warm.” He felt her forehead with the back of his palm and moved to her neck. “I think you have a fever. You should take a shower.”

Funto raised her body to a sitting position. She needed more than a shower. It wasn’t just the stress of the job that precipitated her headache. She’d cried all through the afternoon, since Mary left her office.

“Dear, you need to take a shower. Please.”

Funto, wordless, straightened, and slouched to her room. Dave took her shoes and bags and dropped them where they belonged.

While Funto bathed, Dave rushed to the drugstore down the street and bought analgesic. He returned and went into the kitchen. He scooped food into covered dishes and set the dining table.

Funto lay on the bed. She’d slipped into her eveningwear. Dave entered. “Dinner is set. Come have some and take drug. I bought you analgesic.”

“I’m not hungry.”

“You’ve been out of this house since 7:00 am in the morning. The food you took to work, you brought back untouched. And here you are, telling me you’re not hungry.”

“I’m not eating.”

“Funto, please don’t do this to me. I can’t watch you in this state. Is there something I’ve done wrong? I’m sorry. I apologise. Now let’s go eat.”

“Dave, food is not everything. You can’t be feeding me and caring for me every day, and yet be denying me of an important need. I am not hungry. I’ve eaten enough.”

Dave sighed. “What have I denied you? There’s nothing I have that isn’t yours as well. Tell me, what am I missing?”

Funto sat up. “Well, you are missing the fact that I don’t have a child yet.”

“But we’ve both been praying about that. Solution to that can only come from God.”

“What if the solution is in the hands of man? Enough of blackmailing God,” Funto screamed. Angry.

Dave’s eyes widened. He stared, awestricken. He hadn’t expected her reaction. “What is it that I’ve not been doing? I’m doing my best, as far as I’m concerned,” he said.

“What if your best isn’t good enough? Perhaps it’s not even good at all.” Funto cast him a lopsided glance.

“What are you trying to say?”

“Dave. I think you should get tested. Maybe you have a problem. ‘Cause I don’t understand what is bringing about your nonchalance.”

“You think I’m nonchalant? Just because I’ve not been raging and blaming you for being unable to conceive?”

Funto shot up to her feet. “Excuse me. I’m able to conceive. You’re the one with the problem. I’ve done all necessary tests and I’ve been told I’m fine. No wonder all the drugs I was given didn’t work. You’re the hole in the bucket that won’t allow water reach the brim.”

“Funto! You’ve graduated from making guesses to making false claim?”

“It’s not false claim. It’s the truth. I’ve been patient for so long. I won’t stomach this any longer.”

“I don’t have a problem, Funto. Please stop saying that. I’m as good as any man can be. If we don’t have a child yet, it is because it’s not yet our time.”

“Pocket that arrant nonsense. It’s my time. My time is now. You won’t have peace in this house if you don’t do the needful.”

“I’m disappointed in you. Where is this coming from? So you think I’m inadequate.”

“I am not thinking. You are inadequate. Until proven otherwise.”

“If I had a problem, what would you do?”

Funto clapped and gestured. “O my God. I knew it. I knew you were the culprit.”

“I don’t have a problem. I’m only asking a question. What would you do?”

“Leave that to me. Just know that would be the end.”

“And what about your vow?” Dave shook his head. “I can’t believe what I’m hearing you say right now.”

“Excuse me. That’s not the point of discussion. Forget vows. Just follow me to the hospital and get tested.”

“And if result comes fine?”

“I’ll know what next to do then.”

“All right. I’ll go with you. Just know that things will be different between us afterwards.”

“I don’t care. Just follow me. That’s all I request.”

“You have your wish granted. When are we going?”

“Saturday.”

“All right.”

“Yes.”

“Will you eat your food now? The tablet is on the table.”

Funto walked out of the room. Dave sat on the bed. His head dropped unto his palms, supported by his elbows against his thighs. He’d lost his appetite.

What if he truly had medical issues preventing his wife from conceiving? He turned his head. His wife had told him his medical report would determine the continuity of their relationship. Or was that not what she meant when she said that would be the end?

He sighed. He had his own struggles as well. He had only decided to stay strong for his wife. He observed personal fast and prayers for this same reason. He wasn’t nonchalant, as his wife had claimed. But he didn’t want to worry or pressurise her. He loved her unconditionally. Whether or not she had children. And he never stopped talking to his family to be patient and pray along with them. He was giving his best possible. But now the table had turned against him. He was the bad egg now.

Dave couldn’t imagine losing his wife. Fear trickled in. He discarded his thoughts and went on his knees. He had to be medically fit. He just had to.

CHAPTER FOURTEEN

Mary dashed into Funto's office. Funto was not on seat. Mary sat on the chair facing Funto's table, awaiting her arrival. She waited for a few minutes, turning the chair to both extreme ends at intervals.

Funto didn't surface. Mary dialled her number. Funto's phone rang on the table. She had left her phone behind.

After a short while, Mary stood to leave. She had waited enough.

She placed her hand on the door handle and pulled. Funto stood at the door.

"I've been waiting for you for a while. I'm just about leaving."

"Oh sorry." Funto smiled.

"Where have you been? You left your phone behind. I've called." Mary resumed her seat.

"I went to see the personnel manager. And I branched at the reception. There was something I needed Theresa to do for me."

"Funto, you don't cease to amaze me."

"What's that?" Funto sat and moved the chair forward.

"Last week, I was talking to you about the launching of the Beta QIU Community Program and you talked as though you weren't interested. You even told me you wouldn't prepare for it."

"I didn't. I told you I had a program in church. It was on Friday morning that I decided to show up. And that was because I didn't want the general manager to think I chickened out."

"How come?"

Funto gave a puzzled look. "How come what?"

Mary stared at her, contorted. "Ask me again."

"How come what? Talk to me."

"Are you saying you don't know the list of successful candidates is out?"

"When was that released?"

"In the morning."

"I was not aware because I wasn't expecting it."

"I wish I could swap your name for mine."

"Why? What happened?"

“Your name topped the list. Only six people were picked. And your name was number one. Program coordinator. The juiciest of the offers.”

“Are you serious?” Funto straightened and beamed.

“I wish I wasn’t.”

“Aw Aww. Mary. Are you wishing me bad luck?”

“Do you know how painful it is for me to fail despite preparing so hard for the interview at the expense of my own daughter?”

“Don’t tell me you weren’t picked at all.”

“I wouldn’t be this unhappy if I was. I would have been excited even if I was offered the least of the positions.”

“I wish I could give you my place. That’s so unfair of them. How could they not find something for you?”

“The question should be how did they find something for you?”

“That’s God’s grace.” Funto stoked her friend’s anger.

“And you think I don’t deserve God’s grace as well?”

Funto sighed. She didn’t want to upset Mary any further. It wasn’t her fault that Mary wasn’t picked for any of the positions. They both had the opportunity to defend themselves as the best candidate. The interviewers’ judgement was completely not Funto’s doing.

“I’m sorry, Mary. I’ll talk to the director and see if it’s possible to give you my place. Then I’ll get back to you.”

Mary knew it was not possible. Over twenty people were interviewed. The interviewers saw her before they chose Funto. Even if Funto gave up her position, they’d choose the next best on their list. Who knew if that was someone else as well?

“Don’t bother,” Mary said, suppressing the urge to cry.

“I’m sincerely sorry. I understand how you feel. I wish I could do something.”

“Let me be on my way. I have some things to attend to.”

“All right. I’ll see the director regarding it. I promise. Please cheer up.”

Funto sank in her chair as Mary left. An indescribable feeling washed over her. She shut her eyes and prayed a prayer of thanksgiving.

In a split second, she saw herself opening the door and beckoning to a tigress to come in. The tigress was strong and gigantic, with many cubs following. The expression on its face was inviting. Funto stood at the door, smiling, and waving the animals into her house.

A trance. Funto shook her head. She prayed briefly and nullified the vision. The expression of the tigress flashed in her mind. It was friendly, calling out to her. As though they were friends. Long-term friends. The saying of her father popped up, “Put your hands in fire and be charred...”

A tigress was a wild animal. It didn't matter what anyone thought, the animal's proclivity was to kill to satiate its hunger. It wasn't the kind of animal she should allow into her home. She swallowed. Was she going to have a visitor soon? Or what was she being warned about? Allowing evil into her home? *God forbid.*

The door opened. Mary entered. "I forgot something."

Funto raised her head. "Oh, Mary."

"I forgot to ask about what we discussed the last time."

"What is that?"

"About your husband. Has he gone for the tests?"

"Oh. Yes, he has. I insisted."

"How far about the results?"

"I was told to come for the results today. I'll branch the hospital on my way home."

"Why you?"

"I requested that the results be given to me. I don't want to entertain doubt that Dave tampered with the results. That was why I chose to go retrieve the results."

"That's smart. You've done well. That will at least provide you a ground to know what next line of action to take."

"Thanks dear. Thanks for your love."

"Anytime." Mary walked out.

"*Tigress.*" Funto scanned the room to check where the voice came from. "*Tigress.*" Funto blinked. Was Mary the tigress? How could she be a tigress? She was only trying to help her. The expression of the tigress in her vision relived in her mind. Friendly, calm, and comforting.

What was she supposed to do? Mary had been her friend since she could remember. Was she supposed to avoid Mary? If she had to, wouldn't she have to resign from her job as well?

Funto glanced at the wall clock. 4:09 pm. She grabbed her handbag and walked out of the office.

CHAPTER FIFTEEN

Funto drove home, tail between her legs. She relived her encounter with the doctor over and again.

Funto parked her car and alighted, her shoes and two bags held against her chest. She walked to her apartment. The door was locked. She hit the door repeatedly with her leg. Her key was in her bag but she would have to drop everything in her hands before she could locate it. She didn't want to opt for that. She hit the door again. "Hello, anyone in?"

She glanced at the wristwatch strapped around her wrist. 6:15 pm. Her husband returned home 6:00 pm latest. Where did he go? "Dave!" She knocked with her elbow.

Someone rumbled inside the house. She heard footsteps and relaxed.

The key turned in the keyhole. Click. The door opened. Dave stood at the door. He was groggy, with a mildly swollen face. He stepped back to allow enough room for Funto to pass through.

Funto stepped in. "Good evening," she said.

"You're welcome, dear."

Funto went into the room. She dropped her bags and shoes by the bedside. One of the bags had to go to the kitchen. The one containing her flask. But she was tired. And she wanted to avoid Dave as much as possible. If only for today.

She removed her dress and wore a brown cotton lingerie. She lay on the bed and pulled a chenille blanket over her body.

Footsteps. Dave approached. Funto shut her eyes.

Dave walked in and stood by the door. "Funto."

Funto tightened her eyelids. *Go away. I'm sleeping.* She hushed.

Dave went closer. He sat on the empty side of the bed and tapped Funto. She lay still, unresponsive.

"Don't tell me you've fallen into deep sleep in ten minutes." He tapped her again and continued until she wriggled.

"Wake up," Dave said.

Funto had no choice. "What do you want?"

"We need to talk."

Funto knew it. She knew what he wanted to discuss. A topic she was trying to avoid like a plague. “Dave, I’m tired. I can’t talk tonight.”

“I don’t intend to drag the discussion for long. We’ll be done in ten minutes.”

“I can’t spare five.” Funto closed her eyes again.

“Funto!” His voice was loud and tinted with nervousness.

Funto shot up. Dave’s deafening voice couldn’t cause less. “What’s this? Can’t you delay whatever you have to say till tomorrow?”

He frowned. “I want to talk now and you will listen to me.”

Funto studied his face. She’d never seen him wear this kind of expression. “Go ahead. You have five minutes.”

“Today is Thursday. You’re supposed to check by the hospital and get my medical report. Where’s it?” he said, his eyes bronzed with something Funto couldn’t explain.

“I-I- I came...” She lost her voice.

“Did you get the result or not?” Irritation crept into Dave’s voice.

The past five days had been tough for them both. The usual conviviality in their home had gone on sabbatical leave. Dave was displeased Funto insisted on him taking the tests. And Funto was behaving strange, as if Dave was responsible for their problem.

“Uh I-I branched at the hospital. I was to wait for a while. The doctor was not on seat. I-I was tired of waiting.”

Dave observed. The confidence that bounced off Funto’s voice when she was requesting for the test was absent. She couldn’t even look at him straight in the eye. Dave’s brain analysed and gave him probable reasons. One thing he was sure of, his wife wouldn’t lie. She could avoid a question but she wouldn’t lie.

“Funto. I’ve heard your story. Both the one you said and the one untold. Please answer me in one word. Do you have my results?”

Funto looked away. She chewed on her lips. Her hands fiddled with the blanket.

Dave straightened and walked to Funto’s side. Funto stole glances at him. She wasn’t sure what he intended doing. Dave grabbed her bag and dashed out of the room. Funto shot up. But he was faster. He pulled the door open and stepped out.

There was no point evading this. It was bound to happen. He definitely had to see the report of what she forced him to do. She plunked on the bed and held her head in her hand.

Dave came into the room. He waved the brown envelope in his hand. His expression a jumbo of excitement, anger, and disappointment.

“Are you satisfied, Doubting Thomas?” He removed a sheet of paper from the envelope and threw it at Funto. “I’m sure you are aware of what is written there. If not, there you are, read it. Digest it and place it where you can see it every morning to remind you of your doubt.”

Funto swallowed her calm. “You can’t throw it at me. I have every right to ask you to get tested. How daft do you think I am? Do you expect me to sit here and pray without taking actions? I couldn’t do that.”

The doctor had certified Dave medically fit and capable of impregnation. He was fertile, as he had claimed. But his wife had expressed doubt and had threatened to leave him if the result came in the negative. Fresh irritation welled up his throat.

He shook his head. “You’re supposed to apologise, Funto. For everything you said to me and for thinking so low of me.”

“I didn’t think low of you. I was only being realistic. There was no way I could avoid taking actions.”

Dave stared intently at her. “Don’t let our challenges come between us. We’re supposed to face this together. I’ve been observing some signs lately. I think God is warning us to be cautious. We can’t let down our guards now. We must trust God.” Dave walked to Funto’s side. “I love you, Funto. Even if you never bear a child, it won’t influence my love for you.”

“I reject it in Jesus’ name. I shall be pregnant. And I shall bring forth wonderful children.”

“Stop overreacting. I’m not placing a curse on you. I’m only spilling my mind. Of course we’ll have our own children.” He pulled her close. “Maybe tonight is your night.” He smiled and fondled her.

Funto jerked. “Leave me alone. I’m not in the mood.” She stormed out of the room.

Dave watched her, surprise in his eyes. Was he not supposed to be the one angry? The more he was trying to bring her close the more she annoyed him.

He sighed. Something was changing about Funto. Something he couldn’t quite lay his hands on.

He lay on the bed and shut his eyes. Thousands of thoughts played on his mind.

CHAPTER SIXTEEN

Mary strolled into Funto's office. "Funto, how are you?"

Funto looked up from the file she was working on. "Mary. I thought you went with the other field agents."

"I did. Check your time."

Funto glanced at her wrist. 4:30 pm. "What! Am I seeing right?"

"Yes, you are. That's what happens when you lose yourself in this company's work. Anyways, you are only preparing yourself for another collection of awards at the end of the year. Best staff of the year. Most industrious staff. And the rest. Don't you get tired of all those accolades you get?"

Funto grimaced. "So you think I deliberately spend excess time at work so as to receive an award. Who told you time spent at work is the criterion by which award winner is chosen?"

"It's part of it. Funto, the face of Zeisel Corporation."

"Whatever. I'm just doing my work faithfully as unto the Lord not as unto men."

"I guess the rest of us are doing it as unto men." Mary glanced at Funto askance. "We're the lazy ones, right? How won't you even think that? You have an office to yourself. A fully air-conditioned office." She glanced around. "A refrigerator, microwave, resting couch, and all. What is left out is a wardrobe. The office is already designed for you to live in."

Funto chuckled. "You're not serious."

"Of course I am. Do you think if I have this luxury at my disposal, I won't work harder? Even if the company wants me living in, I will."

Funto laughed. "The slothful always has an excuse. Oh, if the weather were good, I'd till the ground. Oh, if the prices were low, I would buy. Oh this, Oh that."

Mary took a book from the table and flung it at Funto. Funto dodged, laughing.

"It's the truth. I didn't start in this office. I started in the smallest office in this company. Then, I shared the office with two other people. I know God gives promotion. But I also believe God wants us to put our best in all we do."

"You'll never change. Mrs Holier-than-thou."

“Thank you. When will you jibe with the fact that I’m not being sanctimonious? I’m only telling you the truth. I do my work, believing God is the One paying my salary and overseeing how I’m doing it. My boss only signs the pay check.”

“Whatever. One thing you forget is that there are factors that motivate. If my take-home is increased and the environment is made more conducive, I won’t spend even a minute off the job when I should be working. If you want the best of your employees, give them the best possible.”

“Change your philosophy. If you want the best of God, do His will. Give your best in all.”

“It’s easy to sit under a tree shade and castigate a hawker. Do you think the sun is nice to the skin? Consider how much the Beta QUI program is pumping into your account on a weekly basis. Isn’t that enough motivation? Let’s just forget this work thing. It annoys me altogether.”

“You exaggerate, Mary! Anyways, let me pack my things. I’ll drop you home.”

“Thank you. You read my mind. I actually came to ask if you could give me a ride.”

“That’s not a problem.” Funto straightened. She returned the file she was working on to the file tray. She arranged the documents on her table. And stuffed her bag with her belongings.

“We’ll branch at the next street. I have to pick Priscilla from crèche.”

“All right. I guess you’re paying extra fee at the crèche. The way you leave that girl with them for as long as you wish is scary.”

Mary smiled. “You can’t understand. By the time you have one of your own, you’ll stop blaming me.”

Funto ignored the comment. She picked her bag and walked to the door.

Funto sat behind the steering wheel. Mary sat in the front passenger seat. Funto inserted the key into the ignition and revved the engine.

“That reminds me. You haven’t updated me about the issue we discussed the last time. How was Dave’s result?” Mary broke the awkward silence.

“It was fine. Dave is perfectly fine. The doctor counselled me for a while. He said I should keep hoping and praying. The man is a member of my church.” Funto drove out of the car park.

“Hmm. I’m sure Dave was excited.”

“Well, he was calm. You know the kind of calmness you display when what you claim is true.”

“So he was so sure he was fine.”

“Of course. He told me I was the one doubting him. He wasn’t moved a bit.”

“Did that set off any alarm in your head?”

“What alarm?”

“Funto. When will you be smart? If he was so confident that he was fertile, and indeed the result testified to it, don’t you think he must have had proof even before the test?”

“I don’t understand you.”

“Listen to me.” Mary shifted sideways, facing her friend. “I will give you the dots. But you’ll have to draw the line to connect them.”

“Okay.” Funto slowed the car to a stop, awaiting the traffic light to change back to green.

“A lady is married to a man. She is yet to have a child. For over three years. She did all she should and could. The man isn’t bothered. At least he’s not showing that he is. He’s just calm and confident. When challenged that he was the cause of their childlessness, he wasn’t moved an inch. He just had the confidence he wasn’t. And yet he consented. His family members are quiet about the situation. They all seemed to play along. And yet the lady thinks all is well.”

Funto turned the car onto an untarred road. “I still don’t get what you’re saying.” She parked the car in front of a crèche.

“Let me pick my baby. Think on what I’ve said. I’ll make it clearer when I return.” Mary alighted. She scurried into the building and returned a while later with a toddler in her right hand and a big black bag in her left.

Funto opened the door to the back seat. Mary dropped her bag. She opened the front door and boarded the car.

“Priscilla baby.” Funto tickled the child in Mary’s arms.

“Say ‘Hello’,” Mary said to the chuckling child.

Funto started the car and reversed. “I’ve not made anything out of what you told me.”

“Do you know Pastor Jones?”

“Which Pastor Jones?”

“The one in Cara’s fellowship on campus.”

“Oh! I remember. The pastor with the pretty wife.”

“I’m glad you remember him. Do you remember they didn’t have any child till we left school?”

“Really? I didn’t know much about them. I just really liked his wife. Gentle and quiet. Both of them are made for each other.”

“Well, they couldn’t have a child.”

“Oh my. May the Lord remember them.”

“That isn’t their need now. Things evolved.”

“What happened?”

“The pastor was always acting like all was well. He never pressurised his wife nor did his family.”

“Okay.”

“His wife got carried away. She believed the lie and allowed religion to blindfold her.”

“Go straight to the point.”

“Pastor Jones had three children by another woman outside his marriage. And his family knew about it.”

“Jesus. Are you for real? You mean that easy-going pastor?”

“Forget it. It wasn’t until recently that his cover blew. His wife developed a psychiatric condition. She’s currently confined to a psychiatric home.”

“The devil is a loser. Such a wonderful home, he destroyed.”

“I heard people had told her that her husband was having an affair but she didn’t believe it. She couldn’t. The husband was too good to have a fault. She didn’t know it was all a cover. Well, it could have started genuinely, but when the child wasn’t forthcoming, he found his square root.”

“I still can’t believe this. No wonder the Bible says ‘The heart is deceitful above all things, and desperately wicked; who can know it?’”

“It’s the truth, my dear. The most painful part is that the pastor is currently living with his mistress. I even heard they were getting married. After all, she was the mother of his children.”

“Jesus!”

“I didn’t want to tell you this story at first, because I didn’t want you to think I was trying to imprint the wrong thing on your mind. But I’ve heard enough from you to deduce your case seems like that of the wife of Pastor Jones. And since you’re my friend, I changed my mind and decided to tell you.”

“God forbid. My story will not be like hers.”

“Pastor Jones’ wife probably said the same when she was warned. The ball is in your court. I strongly advise you to give it a deep thought.”

“Thank you. But Dave can’t do something like that.”

“No one thought Pastor Jones could. I trust Dave as well. But there’s an adage in my village that says ‘When the mouth is quiet about a problem, the heart is devising means to surmount it.’ Wisdom is profitable to direct. A word is enough for the wise.”

Funto hushed. Her mind beclouded. She drove in silence.

“Thank you. We’ll drop at the junction. I want to see someone before going to the house,” Mary said.

Funto parked at the junction that led to Mary’s house. Mary alighted. She took her bag and walked down the street.

Funto sighed. She was too troubled and disturbed to listen to her spirit.
She reversed the car and sped home.

CHAPTER SEVENTEEN

Funto worked on a file pausing intermittently. She forced the pain in her belly to the background. But it kept popping up every now and then. Sometimes the pain was serious enough to incapacitate her for minutes up to an hour. Sometimes it was the type she could ignore. It had been about a month since it started. And each time she planned to talk to her doctor about it, something else came up.

She placed her head on the table, her palm against her belly. She squeezed her face and tightened her lips. Someone knocked. *Not now*. She wasn't in the mood to see anyone. Pain shot up her nerves. She raised her head. The door opened. Theresa entered.

"Good afternoon." Theresa approached Funto's table and sat on the opposite chair. She noticed the tears in Funto's eyes.

"Hi. How're you?" Funto managed.

"What's wrong?"

"I'm fine, thank you."

"No, you're not. It's all evident on your face. What's going on?"

"Don't worry about me. What can I do for you?" Uncontrollable tears streaked down her face. She gripped her stomach and dropped her head.

Theresa shot up and dashed to Funto's side. "You're not fine. What's wrong with you?"

Funto bit her lips shut, praying in her heart for strength. The pain emitting from her belly was tearing her apart.

"I'll be right back." Theresa walked out of the office. If Funto wouldn't talk to her, she knew whom she wouldn't deny. Mary. She knew they were good friends. Theresa approached Mary. "Mrs Ayodele needs your attention. She's in a bad state and wouldn't talk to me."

"Funto?" Mary's eyes widened.

"Yes." Theresa nodded.

Mary left her cubicle for Funto's office. She pulled the door handle and dashed in. Funto lay on the couch in her office, tears dripping from her eyes, her hands running over her abdomen.

Mary dropped by her side. "Funto. What happened?"

Funto opened her eyes. “My belly hurts. I think my entrails will gush out soon.”

“You need to see a doctor. Can you drive?”

“I can’t.”

“Should I tell the director? He’s around. He could ask his driver to take you.”

“Why him? No. I’ll take a taxi.” Funto managed to sit up, pain gnawing at her brain.

Mary ignored her comment. “Wait here. I’ll be back.” She dashed out of the office. Minutes later. She walked in with the director’s driver. “Let’s get you to the hospital,” Mary said.

Mary pulled Funto to her feet. “You can’t be crying like a baby. Everyone will keep asking what happened to you. Now wipe your face clean.”

Funto obliged. She walked out of her office down to the ground floor. Mary and the driver followed. They stepped out of the door.

Funto and Mary sat in the back seat of the red Toyota Camry that belonged to Mr Amadi, the director of Zeisel Corporation. The driver sat behind the wheel and drove to the hospital.

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Mary sat in one of the waiting chairs in the hospital. She planted an elbow on her thigh, her palm supporting her chin. Her eyes drifted. From nurse to clients, patients, and impatient patients’ relations.

Dave barged in and scurried to the reception desk. Mary sighted him. She straightened. “Dave!”

Dave turned his head. “Oh, Mary. How is Funto?” He closed the gap between them.

“She’s sleeping. The nurses advised we leave her to rest. She was in so much pain she almost passed out. I’m glad they are able to calm her nerves.”

“What happened? She was just fine this morning. She didn’t tell me she was feeling sick,” Dave said. He breathed. He couldn’t tell Mary that Funto had been acting strangely of recent. He couldn’t say their communication had been malnourished.

“It was the receptionist that called my attention to her. When I got to her office, she was groaning and writhing in pain. Thanks to the director, Funto’s covenant-partner, I was able to bring her to the hospital. I just hope she recovers on time.”

Covenant partner? What was that supposed to mean? *Not now, Dave. Not now.* He had to see to his wife’s health first. “Thanks for calling me, Mary. I really

appreciate it. And thanks for staying by your friend. She couldn't get a better friend."

"Don't mention. It's the least I can do. She's my best friend. Friends watch each other's backs."

Dave smiled. "Where's her room?"

"It's over there. Let's check on her. But you mustn't arouse her."

"I won't. I just want to see her. I want to be sure she's fine."

Dave and Mary went into the third room by the left.

Funto lay on the bed, her head turned to a side, sleeping. Intravenous fluid dripped into her vein through a blue cannula.

Dave sat on the bedside chair and stared at his wife, praying for her recovery in his heart.

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Dave was seated in the doctor's office, awaiting Dr Ray. He glanced around. Medical charts hung on the wall. A particular one caught his attention. It had 'Breast Cancer' inscribed in bold on it. Dave leaned forward and read.

Breast cancer is cancer that develops from breast tissue. It is the most common invasive cancer in women. It affects about twelve percent of women worldwide. Prognosis is dependent on the stage of the cancer and treatment instituted. Survival rate could be as low as five percent or as high as ninety-eight.

Dave glanced sideways. The next medical chart was titled, 'Signs and Symptoms of Breast Cancer.' He skimmed through.

Lump different from breast tissue. Changes in the breast, including abnormal increase in size. Nipple becoming inverted. Swelling in the armpit or around the collarbone. Itching. Skin puckering or dimpling. A rash on or around a nipple. Nipple discharge. Constant pain in the breast.

Dave shook his head and sighed. If the condition was this life threatening, shouldn't there be a way to prevent it? He wondered.

His eyes seemed to understand his thought. They drifted to the right corner. Another chart. But the lettering was smaller than he could read from his seat. He stood and walked to the chart.

Prevention of Breast Cancer.

Adoption of a healthy lifestyle which include, maintaining a healthy weight, decreasing alcohol use, increasing physical activity, breastfeeding, and increasing intake of citrus fruits.

Pre-emptive surgery involving removal of lump or other lesions.

“Hmm.” Dave nodded. The contiguous chart caught his attention. It was colourful. It had diagrams of a woman standing before the mirror with arms hanging next to the body, and a woman lying on her back with one hand flexed and tucked beneath her head and the other hand on the opposite breast. Dave leaned sideways and read the inscription on the chart.

Breast Self-Examination.

It is a screening method used in an attempt to detect early breast cancer. It involves a woman herself looking at and feeling each breast for possible lumps, distortions, or swelling.

Inspect breasts with arms hanging next to the body, behind the head, and on the side. Check the mirror for dimpling, swelling, and redness on or near the breast.

Palpate the breast while standing and while lying on the back with the pads of the fingers in a circular pattern. Move fingers in concentric circles from the nipple outward and the armpit. Feel for lumps or soreness.

Squeeze each nipple to check for any discharge.

Report any abnormality to a professional healthcare provider.

Dave smiled. “This is a simple exercise that could prevent death. Wisdom.” He carefully studied the chart. He couldn’t imagine losing his wife to breast cancer. He would make it a duty to encourage Funto to carry out the examination every month.

He could even learn it with time and help her sometimes. He smiled at his thought. There was nothing bad about it. It was for the good of them both, he thought.

The door opened. Dave looked away from the chart.

Doctor Ray entered. “I’m sorry for keeping you waiting. Something came up.”

Dave walked back to his seat. “No offence taken, Doctor.” He shook hands with Dr Ray and resumed his seat.

“Thank you.”

“You’re welcome,” Dave said.

“Yeah. About Mrs Funto Ayodele.” Dr Ray breathed deeply.

Dave leaned forward, his ears attentive. He nodded him to continue.

“Considering all the tests results, I’m afraid...”

Dave’s heart lurched forward. *Afraid?* “What’s happening, Doctor?”

“She has fibroids. Fast-growing big ones.”

Dave’s shoulders sagged. He wasn’t a medical professional. But he didn’t need to be one to be familiar with the word fibroid. He had heard people talk about it. Some said fibroid was a disease of the elderly. Some said no one who had it would bear a child. Another school of thought believed fibroid was a demonic attack to prevent fruitfulness. And a few said it was a reward of promiscuity.

Dave’s head hurt. *Fibroids? Not pregnancy? Or even stomach ulcer at worst? But fibroids?*

He swallowed and stared at Dr Ray, who made no attempt at explaining what fibroid was and what predisposed a woman to it. Dave didn’t bother to ask. All he’d heard about it was enough.

“What’s the way forward?” Dave said, his voice wrapped with fear of the unknown.

Dr Ray shrugged. “She will need a surgery as soon as possible. I’m aware she aims to get pregnant. We need to remove the fibroids from her uterus, womb I mean. Then, I can place her on infertility treatment and watch how things evolve.”

Surgery? In a part of the world where the word surgery caused an average person to fret. “Is there no way around it apart from surgery? Maybe a drug therapy or something.”

Dr Ray shook his head. “Surgery is what your wife needs.” He opened a file on his table and pushed Funto’s ultrasound report to Dave. “The fibroid in her uterine cavity alone measures about 5 cm in diameter. And there are other smaller ones in the fundus. I advise you let her have the surgery.”

Dave swallowed. “Okay. How soon can this surgery be done?” He supported his chin with one hand. “And what are the complications?”

“Thursday.” Dr Ray glanced at his wristwatch. “That’s less than 48 hours from now. About the complications, let’s not hope for any. Bleeding and adhesions are likely complications.”

“There won’t be any in Jesus’ name.”

“Amen.”

“So, are there any special instructions for me?”

“Provide her support. As much as possible. I’ll speak to her as well. But she needs your shoulder to lean on. I believe good psyche improves outcome of surgery. If there’s need to get anything, the nurses will inform you.”

“All right. Thank you very much.”

“You’re welcome.”

Dave rose from his seat and walked out of the office.

CHAPTER EIGHTEEN

“Fibroids?” Mary said, staring at Dave as though she had seen a ghost. “Oh my!”

Dave’s head drooped, his expression drawn. “The doctor insisted surgery is the best for her. He slated it for Thursday.”

“Oh my God!” Mary’s gaze fell on her thighs. “What has Funto done to herself? I warned her. I told her all she was doing would be rewarded. But she never listened. Green snake under the green grass. Now nemesis has caught up with her. What a pain.”

Dave’s eyes widened as Mary lamented. He couldn’t believe his ears. Although, Mary wasn’t acting as if she was talking to him, but he could hear her. He had ears.

“Mary, what’s going on? Is there something I should know?”

“U-uh not really. I don’t want to come in between you two. Never mind.”

Inquisition crept into his eyes. “I insist. Tell me.”

“It’s sensitive. I’d rather not.”

“Please, Mary. Talk to me.”

Mary sighed. She looked at Dave. “Promise me it won’t affect your relationship with her.”

Dave searched her eyes. Was it that bad? He shook his head. “You know I love Funto. Go ahead, tell me.”

“Fibroids don’t just appear, Dave. Somewhere in the Bible says, ‘Whoever breaks through a wall will be bitten by a serpent.’ Gross unfaithfulness. That’s all I can say.”

Dave went numb. Funto, unfaithfulness? “I don’t understand you,” Dave said a while after.

“Are you not aware? I thought you were. Funto had a fling with the director of our company and some other top officials. Don’t you wonder why she got promotions with ease, all the awards, and the gifts? It’s not as if she didn’t take them home, didn’t she? And the recent programme she coordinated, did you think she qualified for it? Didn’t she tell you what happened behind closed doors?”

Dave processed Mary’s statements. Funto had glossed over the issue once. Her boss liked her. But she had drawn a line between official and private life. And

her boss understood enough not to cross the line. That was what Funto had told Dave. Was she lying?

“The moment the director realised Funto was sick, he immediately ordered his driver to take her to the hospital. And not just that, he personally told the personnel manager to issue her a sick leave with immediate effect. Do you think all that comes without something underlying?” Mary said.

Dave scratched his head. Maybe Funto had eventually consented to an affair with her boss. She had been acting strangely of late, after all.

“Why aren’t you saying anything? Didn’t Funto tell you about her past as well? After all, she wasn’t a virgin when you married her. Although, she lied to you that she was. And you were gullible enough to believe her and ignore the evidence. She told me you didn’t even notice. All I felt for you was pity. Nothing but pity.”

Dave relived his first night with Funto. It was true. There was no blood. Not even a drop. But he hadn’t given it much thought. He’d read in an article that not every woman would bleed during their first copulation. Some would not. He remembered the article covered some causes. Natural absence of a hymen and rigorous exercise, among others. Dave had believed that was Funto’s case. But now, he would think twice.

Mary scrunched her nose. “I’m not saying you shouldn’t play a fool. But be careful. If not, you’ll just suddenly realise you have HIV.”

“I reject it in Jesus’ name,” Dave said.

“Amen in Jesus’ name,” Mary said mockingly.

Dave took a deep breath. His brain whirred in his skull.

“I’m sorry to burst your bubbles. Funto isn’t who you think she is. I thought she would get over her lifestyle when she got married. I didn’t know she was just beginning. I got tired of trying to correct her. Every staff at the company knows how she jumps from one man to the other. The overall boss is the big fish. She told me she was doing it to keep her job, and perhaps she would get pregnant.”

“What! She even intended to get pregnant by another man?” Rage filled Dave’s eyes.

“She said she wanted to help your situation. So you could have a child to call your own.”

His voice skyrocketed. “What kind of help is that? I never asked her to help me.”

“Easy. Don’t transfer aggression to me. I warned you, but you insisted I tell you. Now you have to forget it and forgive her. I’m sure she would have learnt her lesson. Just move on with your lives. God expects us to forgive others.”

Dave shot up from his seat, his breathing pronounced. “I need to get back to work. I’ll come back later.” He stormed out of the hospital.

Mary guffawed. She'd never seen Dave enraged. And she noticed the tinge of jealousy that coated his face.

Mary straightened and walked into Funto's room.

Funto was awake now.

"You're awake." Mary sat on the bedside chair. She patted Funto's hair. "How're you feeling?"

"Better. Thank you," Funto said in a low tone.

"That's good. I was so scared."

Funto gave a weak smile. "Thanks so much, Mary. I appreciate your care."

"What are friends for?" Mary smiled. "I'll do more if necessary."

"Thank you. Where's my phone?"

"You left it in the office. But I called Dave with mine and told him how serious your condition was."

"So where is he?"

"He came briefly. Spoke with the doctor and left. He said he was going to work and would come later when he could. I was trying to make him stay and at least say hi to you. But he left anyways. Are you two on good terms?"

Tears stung at Funto's eyes. Dave had the effrontery to neglect her at a time like this. "We're fine. Thank you."

"All right, it is well. I'll keep praying for you. You'll be fine."

"Thanks so much for your staunch support."

"You're welcome, Funto. You don't have to keep mentioning it. It's the least I can do for you. You're my best friend."

Funto smiled. Tears that had formed in her eyes drained from the corner of her eyes.

"Stop crying, Funto. All will be well. The truth is, only God is reliable. Human beings are a bunch of unreliability. There's a common saying, 'True friends are known in turbulent times.' I don't see any reason why Dave would leave without talking to you for a second. You need to be careful, Funto. I only hope your story doesn't turn out like Pastor Jones'. The similarities are way too many."

Funto kept quiet. She had no strength to reject what her friend had said. Pain seeped in. She frowned.

"Are you okay?" Mary asked.

Funto shook her head.

The door opened. Doctor Ray walked in. "Mrs Ayodele. How're you doing?"

"Doctor." Funto forced a smile.

He approached her, his hands tucked in the pockets of the white overall he wore. "How are you feeling?"

“Not so better. The pain is back.” Funto ran her hand over her belly, her eyes fixed on the doctor’s face.

“Hmm. It will. Until a lasting solution is initiated.”

“Please initiate it. What are you waiting for?” Mary said.

Dr Ray smiled and faced Funto. “Has your husband discussed with you?”

“No. What’s happening?”

Dr Ray looked at Mary in a way that told her to excuse him.

Funto noticed. “She’s family. You can discuss everything about me in her presence,” she said.

“I think I should tell you first, you can then inform anyone of your choice.”

“Don’t worry, Doctor. Feel free. She brought me here. I’ll eventually tell her everything. Spare me the stress. Please.”

Dr Ray shrugged. “Okay, if you insist.” He pulled a stool to her bedside and perched on it. “You have fibroids, Mrs Ayodele.”

“Fibroids?” Mary and Funto chorused. They exchanged glances and fixed their gaze on the doctor.

“Yes, I’m sorry. And it’s symptomatic. You’re not oblivious of the pain.”

“But why, Doctor? How could I have fibroids? I see no why I should have that.”

“Well, the cause of fibroids is unknown. But it is believed to run in families and is also partly dependent on hormone levels,” Dr Ray said.

Funto frowned. “No one has it in my family. Nobody.”

He shrugged. “There are other risk factors. It could be associated with obesity, poor diet, and eating red meat.”

“I am not sure that relate to my case. I can’t find any of those factors in my life,” Funto defended.

Dr Ray sighed. “Madam, fibroids could develop in any woman within childbearing ages. Just as I have earlier mentioned, the cause is unknown. Not all fibroids are traceable to the risk factors I listed. I sincerely hope you understand.” He tugged at the stethoscope around his neck.

“I can’t believe this. Doctor. I... I don’t have a child yet.” Funto broke into fresh sobs. The news seemed to intensify her pain.

Mary rose and perched on the edge of the bed. She patted Funto’s hair. “Don’t do this to yourself. You have to take it easy. You don’t need to cry. You’ll be fine.”

Dr Ray cleared his throat. “I know how you feel, madam. I’m happy to tell you there’s a solution. It’s nothing to worry about. You’ll be fine.”

“Are there drugs she can use?” Mary said, pretentious pity in her eyes.

“Well, in her case, we’ll have to do a surgery. The fibroids are many. And with the symptoms, and the fact that she’s trying to conceive, surgery is our best bet.

We'll get rid of the fibroids. Place you on drug therapy. And then concentrate on the infertility issue."

Funto sobbed. "Have you told Dave? I mean my husband."

"Yes, I explained everything to him."

Funto nodded and bit her lips.

"You'll be fine. The surgery won't affect your chance of getting pregnant. Once there's no complication, we are good to go."

Pain shot up Funto's nerves. She grappled her belly and exhaled slowly through pursed lips.

Mary kneaded Funto's shoulder. "It's okay, darling. You'll be fine. God is faithful."

Funto nodded. "Thank you."

"I slated the surgery for Thursday morning. We'll start preparation for surgery tomorrow. Get some rest," Dr Ray said.

"How about this pain?" Funto said

"We will give you pills for that. Don't worry. You'll be fine."

Dr Ray stepped out. Mary resumed her seat.

"Seriously, do you really need that surgery?" Mary said, her brow raised.

Funto stared at her, her sob on hold. "Didn't you hear what the doctor said? He said that's the appropriate solution to what is on ground. Do you expect me to refuse what will make me better?"

Mary clapped her hands in a mocking way and laughed. Funto cast her friend a lopsided glance. "What's this you are doing?" Funto said.

Mary shook her head. "Funto. Funto."

"I can hear you. It's not as if I'm in the other room. And I'm not deaf."

"I'm surprised. Aren't you the Funto who spiritualises everything in less than a second? Why can't you spiritualise this? This is where you actually need your high-class spirituality."

"Mary! You're out of your mind."

"I'm not. I know what I'm saying. I think you should request for discharge. Go home. Start prayers and fasting. After all, you know what faith like a mustard seed can do. In a day or two, the fibroids will disappear as if they were never there. Then, I'll know you're a Christian."

Funto wanted to respond. She wished she could say something that will nudge Mary back to her senses. But her lips felt heavy. Too heavy to part. Her tears resumed from break and flowed in a rivulet.

Mary cast her a scornful glance. "You can't answer me? Or is your faith not up to a mustard seed? Can't you ask the God who awarded you Beta QUI program to remove your fibroids? I think you should do that."

“Mary, please leave. I can’t believe you’re saying this,” Funto said amidst sobs.

“I don’t mean to spite you. I’m only trying to invoke your faith. If you still want the surgery, so be it. I’ll be praying along with you. I trust God will make it a success.”

“Thank you. Please leave.”

“All right. I’ll be back tomorrow afternoon. Would you like me to bring you anything?”

“Nothing, thanks.”

“All right. Your phone should be safe in the office.”

“Oh. Please bring it for me.”

“Okay.” Mary tightened her lips. She rose to her feet and left the room.

Funto hung her head. *My God! Hear the mockery of human being.*

“Was that mockery or reality? How could you develop fibroids when you asked God for a child? Did He not hear you well? Or did He go on a vacation when you requested for a child?” a voice dropped in Funto’s head.

That was true. She asked for a child not an abnormal growth in her womb. Why did she have to develop fibroids?

“Romans 8:35-39 says ‘Who shall separate us from the love of Christ? Shall tribulation, or distress, or persecution, or famine, or nakedness, or peril, or sword? As it is written: For Your sake we are killed all day long; we are accounted as sheep for the slaughter. Yet in all these things we are more than conquerors through him who loved us. For I am persuaded that neither death nor life, nor angels nor principalities nor powers, nor things present nor things to come, nor height nor depth, nor any other created thing, shall be able to separate us from the love of God which is in Christ Jesus our Lord.’ Meditate on this,” another inner voice countered.

The first voice was not done yet. “Remember Jesus said, ‘Whatever things you ask in prayer, believing, you will receive.’ Why have you not had a child? Haven’t you believed enough? It is also written, ‘No evil shall befall you, nor shall any plague come near your dwelling.’ Was that a lie too? If it wasn’t, why do you have fibroids? Why?”

Funto reasoned. She had believed and prayed the promises of God.

Numbers 23:19 came impressed on her heart. ‘God is not a man, that He should lie, nor a son of man, that He should repent. Has He said, and will He not do? Or has He spoken, and will He not make it good?’

Funto sighed. God had been faithful to her. He had fulfilled all His promises in time past and now.

The first voice came again. “Hush and be fooled. It is written, ‘You will also declare a thing, and it will be established for you; so light will shine on your ways.’ Why have all your decrees not been established?” A roaring laughter followed.

“2 Corinthians 4:16-18 says ‘Therefore we do not lose heart. Even though our outward man is perishing, yet the inward man is being renewed day by day. For our light affliction, which is but for a moment, is working for us a far more exceeding and eternal weight of glory, while we do not look at the things which are seen, but at the things which are not seen. For the things which are seen are temporary, but the things which are not seen are eternal.’ Trust God, Funto. Trust,” the second voice, a sweet, gentle one, said.

“How long will you wait, Funto? How long will you suffer? Wouldn’t you look God in the face and renounce Him? What has He done for you? Nothing more than bring problems your way in the name of temptation or what name would you prefer for it?” the first voice shouted.

“Blessed be the Lord, who daily loads us with benefits, The God of our salvation! God’s works are innumerable. Gift of life...”

“Gift of life tainted with sickness,” the harsh voice cut in. “It’s better to be dead than live in troubles.”

“Those who sow in tears shall reap in joy.”

“Why sow in tears when you can actually reap without sowing? It’s high time you walked away from what endangers your life. It’s not spirituality. It is immense stupidity. Dump your faith and embrace millions of solutions the world can provide. Step out. Take a leisure walk away from God. You’ll survive and live fine.”

A nurse entered. “Hello, Mrs Ayodele.”

Funto stared blankly into space, a war ongoing in her heart.

The nurse shook her gently. “Madam!”

Funto blinked. “Oh. Forgive me.”

“Hope you’re fine, ma?”

“How better could I be? I’m okay.”

The nurse smiled. A generous smile that seeped through the crevices of Funto’s heart. “You’ll be better. Keep trusting God. All will be well.”

Funto managed a smile. “Thank you.”

“I brought your medicines.” The nurse uncovered a saucer containing four pills and handed it to Funto. She picked a bottle of water from the bedside table, opened it, and gave it to Funto.

Funto swallowed the pills all at once and gulped water. “Thank you, Nurse.”

“You’re welcome.” She returned the saucer to the tray in her left hand.

The nurse made for the door. Just before pulling the door handle, she halted and turned to face Funto. With a cheerful expression, she said, “Weeping may

endure for a night, but joy comes in the morning. Psalms 30:5b. If you faint not, you'll get through the tunnel." She pulled the door and stepped out.

Funto stared into space. Did the nurse know what was going through her mind? Or was she godsend? Her thoughts were almost pulling her mind apart. It was what she needed at the moment that the nurse had said.

Funto dropped her head unto her palm and shut her eyes. "Almighty God, I thank You because You love me. I thank You because You are steadfast despite my doubts, flaws, and unfaithfulness. I trust You Lord. Let Thy will be done. Help me realise my errors and help me make necessary corrections. Forgive me in all the ways I've erred. Grant me the fortitude to go through this. Heal me by your power. Work with the doctors and nurses to perfect my healing. Restore Your love in my immediate family and in the world as a whole. Thank You for answering. I pray in the name of Your only son, Jesus. Amen."

Funto lay on her back and shut her eyes, awaiting sleep to rid her of consciousness.

CHAPTER NINETEEN

Dave paced the room, his head heavy with thoughts. His conversation with Mary at the hospital replayed in his head. Over and over. The more he tried to forget it, the more it popped up his mind. He couldn't think of two things without Funto popping up. If there was any person he trusted, it was Funto.

He loved her. The love that made him want to do anything to see her happy, smiling, and at peace. If he could manufacture a child, he wouldn't have minded the cost of production. He would have done it without a second thought. But he couldn't.

What he could, he had done. But was that enough reason for Funto to cheat? How could she? A teacher of the word for that matter. How could she engage in extramarital affairs and still have the effrontery to teach in church? How could she?

Angst smeared his mind. How dare her? Was it because he was devoted to a fault? He had given her too much ground to trample on. How wouldn't she infringe his rights with impunity?

He plunked on the bed. He was right to leave the hospital. He needed to allow Funto clean her mess. He wouldn't provide any support. She deserved nothing from him. After all, she could stoop low to commit adultery, over and again, in fact. He hissed.

John 8:32 popped up his mind. *'And you shall know the truth, and the truth shall make you free.'*

Dave fluttered his eyelids. Was what Mary told him not the truth? The type of truth that put his mind in captivity of pain.

Ask Funto about it. She's never told you a lie.

Maybe he needed to ask Funto. It didn't matter what anyone told him. He had to hear from the horse's mouth.

Would you tell the truth if caught in the same web? Funto will definitely deny the accusation. Self-defence is an innate property of man. Don't you think?

Dave sighed. Unsure of what to do. How could he tell Funto had never lied to him? He still remembered their first night together. Maybe she was faking the pain. Who knew?

Dave got off the bed and resumed pacing. If Funto had nothing to hide, why would she behave strangely? Why wasn't she laughing or playing with him as she

was used to? Why did she stop connecting to him? And when he tried to enquire what went wrong, why did she avoid the discussion?

There had to be something on her mind. Maybe she was thinking of divorcing him. Mary couldn't be wrong about Funto. He'd known them as friends for a long time.

Dave's phone rang. He shambled to the bedside table and picked the phone. The screen displayed 'Pastor Oladejo'. The caller was the presiding minister of Dave's local church.

"Hello, sir," Dave said.

"Bro Dave, how're you doing?"

"I'm fine, sir."

"Glory to God. How's Sister Funto?"

"She's still in the hospital. The surgery is tomorrow morning."

"God will have His way. I should be at the hospital this evening to pray with her. God will prove Himself faithful as always."

"Amen. Thanks for your support, sir."

"Don't mention. I'm only doing what I should."

"We appreciate you."

"Are you at the hospital now?"

"No, sir. I went in the morning."

"Okay."

"All right, sir."

"Uh, Bro Dave."

"Yes, sir."

"I had a heavy burden on my heart for your family. I couldn't keep you out of mind. While I was praying for you and your wife, I was made to see a beautiful gigantic ship on the sea." He paused.

"Okay. I'm listening to you, sir."

"The ship was so strong and formidable that no one would imagine it sinking. I saw you and your wife on the ship." He paused and swallowed. "A tempest arose. But instead of you to try safeguarding the ship, both of you took pickaxes and began to scuttle the ship."

"Really?"

"Yes. As you did, water began to seep through. Yet you both continued. I have prayed for you. But I want you to be spiritually sensitive. This is not a time to quarrel with your wife. You are the watchman of your family. You can't afford your ship to sink. There may be many things warring against you at present, but you must work together with your wife to scale through. I pray God will keep your family and help you resist the devil and the works of the flesh."

“Amen. Thank you so much. I’m grateful for your love for us.”

“God be praised. Extend my regards to Sister Funto when you get to her. My wife and I will come see you in the evening.”

“All right. Thank you, sir.”

“God bless you.”

“Amen and you too.” Dave hung up.

He took a deep breath. Tears stung at his eyes. A wave of love washed over his heart. He loved Funto. If the devil wanted them apart, he must give no ground.

Dave walked across the room. He removed a blue t-shirt from a hanger and wore it in a rush. He picked his wallet and car key from the table and made for the door. If there was anyone Funto needed at this crucial time, it was him.

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Dave said a short prayer, holding Funto’s hands. He bent and kissed her. Funto felt uncomfortable. Two nurses and a nurse-assistant were present.

Dave cupped Funto’s face with his hands. “Whatever happens, I love you from the very depth of my heart. You’ll be fine and you’ll be back.” Dave’s eyes grew misty. He blinked, suppressing the urge to cry.

Tears flowed from Funto’s eyes. She nodded. Any word from her mouth and she would burst into sobs. She didn’t want that. Not now when she was on her way to the operating room. She’d repeatedly heard from the doctor that being emotionally stable and prepared improved recovery. She wouldn’t joke with that.

Dave planted a kiss on her forehead, on the bridge of her nose, and on her soft, warm lips. “I love you very much,” he whispered before standing erect.

The nurses exchanged glances and smiled. The couple’s expressive public display of affection tickled them.

Dave stepped back. The nurse-assistant took his position at the foot of the stretcher. One of the nurses stood at the other end, her hands firmly placed on the stretcher, looking down into Funto’s eyes. The second nurse scribbled on a sheet of paper affixed to a plastic slate.

The stretcher wheels moved in the direction of the operating room. Dave followed closely behind.

The operating theatre doors opened. Funto was wheeled in. Dave stood behind the red line marked on the floor before the operating room. That was the last point he could follow Funto to.

Dave ambled back to the waiting chairs and took a seat, praying in his heart for his wife’s safety.

Funto was transferred to the operating table. She lay still. The anaesthetist began his work. He wrapped a brown cuff—connected to a monitor—around Funto’s arm, and fixed a pulse oximeter to her index finger. Vital signs taken. Intubation done. Anaesthesia done. Funto lost consciousness.

The surgeon took his position. He said a routine brief prayer. Other members of the team said amen. The surgeon and his assistant draped Funto’s abdomen. Light focused. Skin scrubbed with antiseptic lotion and dried with methylated spirit. Scalpel poised to incise.

“Time of incision,” the surgeon said as he incised the lower part of Funto’s abdomen.

“10:05 am,” a perioperative nurse answered, writing in an operation register.

Hands worked. Instruments went back and forth. Suctioning done. Tumours excised. Suturing commenced. Surgery over.

“It’s a success,” the doctor assisting said.

“So we believe. Clean up the patient and transfer her to the recovery room,” the surgeon told the doctor. He stepped aside and slipped into the adjoining scrub room.

CHAPTER TWENTY

Dave held Funto's hand. It was cold. No thanks to the fully air-conditioned operating room. He massaged the hand gently. Funto was relatively still unconscious.

Cardiac monitor beeped intermittently beside her. Intravenous fluid dripped from a container hung on a drip stand into her vein. On the right hand, whole blood dripped into her vein through another intravenous access.

Dave sat beside her, watching her as though she was a newborn.

Minutes past. Funto fluttered her eyelids. A bit drowsy but awake. Her vision sharpened. Dave's face came into focus. Her ever-loving husband. Her heart bounced. The animosity, fear, and doubt she'd stored in it dissolved.

"How do you feel, darling?" Dave smiled. His worries melted.

"F-fine." Funto's expression told Dave she was fine. And she appreciated all he was doing.

Dave stayed in the hospital as much as his work permitted, supporting and caring for his wife.

Mary dropped by a day after the surgery. She was floored at the kind of bond that existed between Dave and Funto. She wasn't expecting Dave to be by Funto's side. And was awestricken to see Funto laugh so hard at Dave's jokes. Funto and Dave acted as if they were newlyweds. But their actions triggered a throbbing headache and heartache in Mary, shortening the time she spent at each of her visits.

Mary gave as much support as she deemed fit.

Mr Amadi visited. He was about leaving when Dave came around. He pulled Funto's cheek playfully. "Take care of yourself and recover quickly. Your absence is taking its toll on the company. And on me too," Mr Amadi said jokingly. He laughed.

Funto smiled and nodded.

Dave glowered. Mr Amadi's statement wasn't funny. Even if he had an affair with his wife, he had no right to rub it in his face. Who did he think he was? Fresh anger welled up Dave's throat.

Mary stood at the head of the bed. She cast Dave a pregnant stare. As though to tell him she was right.

Mr Amadi stretched his hand to Dave for a handshake. Dave shook his head. He raised his palm and waved at him instead.

Mr Amadi pocketed his hand, piqued. He smiled. "Thanks for taking care of her," he said. He couldn't show how embarrassed he was.

"Thanks for coming by," Dave said, his expression saying the opposite.

"You're welcome." Mr Amadi stepped out of the room and walked away.

Mary saw it all. She leaned and whispered something into Funto's ear before walking to the door. "I'll be back," she said. She patted Dave's shoulder with an undertone. "Take care."

Dave thanked Mary and took his seat on the bedside chair. For minutes after, Dave grappled with his thoughts.

"Funto, I need to talk to you."

"Okay. I'm listening."

"I saw the way your boss treated you. The familiarity was too much. Is there something I should know?"

"Something like what?"

"Something you're not telling me."

"I don't understand what you are saying."

"Are you having an affair with him?"

"An affair? Dave! What a question! How could you think that of me? I reject such in Jesus' name. Mr Amadi is a jovial person. Yes, he made advances at me in the past. But he knows having an affair with him is an impossibility. He has come to terms with that. We are nothing more than friends."

"You're your boss's friend?"

Funto put up a bewildered expression. "I don't seem to get you. Am I supposed to be his enemy?"

"No. You're supposed to be his employee, nothing but that."

"Dave, seriously? You don't know what you're saying. Are you supposed to be worried about an affair now? Do I look like someone interested in a cheap affair? I don't even have the time. You should be thinking of how we'll have our own child. Stop exercising doubt."

Dave had mixed feelings. Not that Funto didn't sound genuine, but there was more to it than he could explain.

"I don't like the way he fondled with your cheek. If he hadn't been doing that in secret, he wouldn't have the audacity to do it in public, and even in my presence. Was he so daft that he couldn't recognise I'm your husband? At least we've met at the company's get-together more than once.

"I'm disappointed in you Dave. You don't trust me. That's pathetic. And you can discuss this at a time like this? In the hospital? You should be ashamed. I'm

fighting to trust you and you are expressing doubts about me? Go ahead. Believe what you want.”

Dave felt hurt. He puckered his brow. “You’re fighting to trust me? What’s that supposed to mean. I don’t understand. Not in the tiniest way.”

“The same way I don’t understand why you doubt me.”

“Funto, Funto, Funto.”

“Speak, I can hear you.”

Dave exhaled. “Don’t break your home. Don’t.” He straightened and stepped out of the room. He needed some air.

Funto breathed. *Break my home?* How could he say that? Was he planning to pull out already? Maybe Mary was right after all.

The door opened. A nurse stepped in, wearing a bright smile, a medication chart and a rubber bag in her hand. “Good afternoon, madam. I hope you’re feeling better.”

“Yes, thank you.”

“It’s time for your medication.”

“Okay.”

The nurse served her drugs. Funto collected the drugs and swallowed them with water.

“Thank you, Nurse.”

The nurse smiled. “You’re welcome. Your care is our concern.”

Funto grinned. The nurses had been very caring. “God bless you all,” she said with a heartfelt gratitude.

“You’re welcome.” The nurse left her room.

CHAPTER TWENTY-ONE

Funto was discharged from the hospital. She travelled to her parents' place, intending to spend a week with them.

Every bit of the time she spent with her parents was refreshing. She could cry all she wanted. And sometimes her mum joined her. Afterwards, they'd comfort each other and move on to the next phase. Funto could tell her mum anything and everything.

Mrs Peters, Funto's mum, was a prayer champion. She was the one who taught Funto how to pray. After they had wept in the physical, they'd loose and bind in the spiritual.

Mrs Peters didn't stop encouraging Funto. Her frequent talks eased the anger in Funto's heart towards her husband. Funto's mum reiterated Funto had to be patient and perseverant. She mustn't lose her joy just because she was waiting.

Funto and her mum played games, chatted, and did all kinds of things. Anytime her father was in the mood, he'd complain he was jealous and tell Funto to leave his wife alone and return to her husband. Funto would laugh on such occasions. And she and her dad would fight over who had more rights to her mother.

Funto's dad was a septuagenarian, her mum in her early sixties. Yet they related as though they got married the year before. Sometimes, Mr Peters would give a free massage to his wife. And Mrs Peters would pay for the gesture with a kiss or a plate of his favourite meal.

By the end of the week, Funto was in the mood for some loving. She was thirsty of Dave's love and care. Her parents' consistent public display of affection couldn't invoke less.

Funto returned to Dave. They opened a new chapter and forced the old to the background.

Funto didn't miss a single appointment Dr Ray gave her. She continued steadfastly in prayers and did all the doctor advised.

At the end of six months after the surgery, Funto became worried. Her fear doubled. Perhaps she would never be able to conceive. She questioned the doctor severally. She wanted to be sure that she hadn't developed any of the possible complications of the surgery. Dr Ray reassured her she was fine. But that wasn't enough. Not for Funto. Getting pregnant was the only reassurance that could work for her.

Funto perturbed her pastor until he started avoiding her. Anyone in the busy man's shoe could do the same.

Funto grew weary. Her zeal for work plummeted. Her boss complained. Her colleagues noticed. She crawled towards depression.

Dave spoke to a member of the church, Sister Chioma. She was an Igbo who could easily be taken for a Yoruba woman. She was married to a Yoruba man. And she had spent twenty-three years in Lagos. Too long for her to be oblivious of the culture and traditions of the Yoruba.

Sister Chioma knew procreation was held in high esteem. Not only among the Yoruba but also in Igbo land. A barren woman was either tagged a witch, someone accursed by the gods, or anything worse that came to mind. Sister Chioma knew all those. Yet, she was a high-spirited, cheerful woman, despite having no biological child after thirteen years of marriage. She didn't lose her mind, or maybe she had and had regained it. She was always looking radiant and was ever zealous in her service to God and humanity.

Dave knew someone like Sister Chioma had to speak with Funto. If Funto slipped into depression or anything worse, he wouldn't be able to handle it.

Funto honoured Sister Chioma's invitation. They discussed for a long time. Sister Chioma shared her experience—several things people had done and said to her—with Funto. In all, Sister Chioma reiterated one point, “A happy life in Christ Jesus without children is worth living.”

However, Funto couldn't understand how a life without children could be happy to begin with. To her, happiness and childlessness were parallel lines.

All through the years, she trusted God, never doubted, and held on to her husband. Her husband was still as faithful to her as the day they got married, Sister Chioma told Funto. If there was anything Funto mustn't ignore, it was her relationship with God, and her husband. Whether or not she had children, once her husband was kept, he would cherish and support her all along.

Funto gave a sardonic smile. Perhaps Sister Chioma was from Venus or Mars and had landed on Earth the day before their meeting. How could she be unaware of the terror of childlessness? The unsurmountable pressure the man was predisposed to. Pressure that could rid him of a chance not to budge and find alternative.

Funto sighed. Probably her own in-laws were only giving her more time before they gave her their verdict—to leave their son for good, or allow him to have another woman. A thought that scared her to death.

Funto gnashed her teeth. The expression on her sister's face the last time she met her at a function flashed through her mind. Joy Oboli's smile had been sardonic. Funto couldn't forget some of her sister's statements. “Even if you were crawling to where children are distributed, shouldn't you have reached by now? Going about with flat tommy year-round every year. Shouldn't you tell us if you have a problem? Or maybe your husband has problems. Or have you both decided

not to have children? Because you women of nowadays can't be trusted. You can make and consent to any decision. I can only hope your husband is not seeing someone else." Funto couldn't respond. Not because she knew Joy was blunt, but because she had no response. Who would she say was at fault? And she didn't want to tell her sister about the surgery. Joy could immediately translate it into thousands of negativities. Funto shot her sister a mirthless smile and for no reason exercised the joint that connected her head to her body.

If her sister could be so derisive, how much more an outsider.

Funto's attention returned to the room. Sister Chioma stared at her as though she was expecting an answer to a recent question. Funto had missed all Sister Chioma said in the space of time her mind had trailed off. She nodded, wearing an expression that she understood everything.

"When we get to heaven's gate, will the barren be denied entry for their childlessness?" Sister Chioma repeated. She'd guessed Funto was lost.

"God said we should be fruitful and multiply," Funto said, her tone defensive.

"Are you saying having children is the certificate to heaven?"

"No. But it's important."

"I didn't say it is not. I'm saying there's more to life than having children. If God gives you children, train them in the way of the Lord, don't idolise them, or you'll end up losing out. But if you don't have any, don't lose hope. Focus on that more important goal, making heaven. After all, when you die, you'll leave the children behind. Completely unaware of what happens to them or what they do with their lives. God will not punish you for not being able to conceive. But He can question you if you mishandle the gift of children."

Funto inhaled. Her pastor had always told her nothing in this world was as important as heaven. He'd emphasised that whatever a person had or lacked in this world would be forgotten the moment the person died. He didn't discourage people from desiring good gifts, but he said the focus of every individual should be on God, irrespective of the challenges encountered in this world. Sister Chioma was corroborating that. It was high time Funto soft-pedalled her throes of passion for a child.

The two women talked some more and prayed. Before the end of their discussion, Funto was revitalised, as a dry root after a heavy rain. Zeal grew in Funto. Her readiness to serve in her home, ministry, and work bounced back to life.

Dave prayed the positive change would last. He made a mental note to schedule a monthly meeting between Funto and a counsellor—a teacher of God's word or a Christian with similar experience, or an experienced minister. He knew Funto needed as much support as she could get.

Dave simply wanted his wife basking in the joy that comes from God.

CHAPTER TWENTY-TWO

Mr Amadi flipped the pages of the document—contained in a file—on his table. He skimmed through the content. He took a black pen from the penholder and appended his signature on the last page, below the last paragraph.

He pushed the file forward. “I think I’m free now.” He returned the pen to its place.

Mary smiled. “Yes, sir. Thank you.” She stared at him. “It’s a relief the implementation will commence as soon as possible.”

Mr Amadi smiled. “Women and money. What do you need the extra money for?”

She wore a wry smile. “A lot.”

“Oh really?”

“Yes. I have loads of responsibilities to shoulder.”

“So do women claim. But they wouldn’t let their spouses’ wallets alone.” He drew the corners of his lips in a light grin.

Mary shook her head. “Out there, the responsibilities many women shoulder surpass your imagination.”

“If you say so.”

“I know so. For instance, you can’t compare me to Funto. There are different demands and pressure on us. Definitely our expenditures would differ.”

Mr Amadi nodded. “You are right. How’s Funto doing?”

“Funto?”

“Yes. How’s she faring? I’ve not had time to see her since I returned from the States.”

Mary’s expression went morose. “She’s coping. She only needs some attention, care, and support. It’s a pity her husband is not so mindful.”

“Hmm. I wonder why many women turn down the care shown by someone genuine, only to embrace another person who doesn’t care. I don’t seem to understand why.”

Mary shrugged. “Sometimes we just want men to be insistent. We want to be desired. A little pressure, more love and care, and some tenacity. We don’t even mind being stalked sometimes.”

“Not all men are cut out for that. Someone like me doesn’t have the luxury of time. Once I make my mind known and the lady refuses, I back off. I have too many women throwing themselves at me for me to become sick over one.”

“Sometimes a man needs the help of his crush’s best friend.”

Mr Amadi smiled. “In this century?”

“There’s no big deal about it. Just a statement or two on the guy’s behalf into the deepest parts of the lady’s ears. Yields positive result ninety-nine percent of the time.”

Mr Amadi wasn’t sure he still had feelings for Funto. Although he still liked her as any boss would like a faithful, diligent worker. His passion for Funto had waned with time. But there was no crime in trying. Increasing the number of women he had ‘conquered’—as he preferred to put it—was one of his ways of catching fun. “No problem in trying that.”

Mary smiled and raised a shoulder. “It doesn’t come free. Good strategies are not thought out on an empty stomach.”

Mr Amadi laughed. “Oh my! You sure love money.”

“Not necessarily money. Maybe promotion or something tangible.”

“Expensive service. I had better not patronise you. Promotion in this company is earned on official terms.”

Mary rose to her feet. “I’ll give you a tip of an iceberg. You’ll decide if it’s worth the price.”

He shrugged and wore a blank expression, his forearms folded on the table.

“I’ll be back.” She smiled and left the office.

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Funto sat across the director, her hands resting on her thighs. Mary had conversed with her, in her office, earlier. She reminded Funto of how caring and supportive the director had been, especially during Funto’s hospitalisation. And she formed false figures of how many times Mr Amadi had visited the hospital before travelling out of the country. Mary had insisted Funto show her appreciation to him.

“I want to thank you very much for your unflinching support during the time I was sick. I’m grateful for your care and concern. Thank you, sir. I should have come before now, but you’ve not been regular here since you returned from the States. And the times you were around, you were busy,” Funto said and smiled.

Mr Amadi grinned. “You’re welcome. I wish I could do more. But you wouldn’t allow me. You deserve more, Funto. A beautiful life.”

“Thank you, sir.”

Mr Amadi leaned forward, reducing the distance between them. "I still care about you. And I'm willing to take good care of you. Who knows if the solution to your problem lies with me?"

Funto blinked. "What solution?" she said before she realised it.

"I'm aware you're yet to have a child. It's a pity you can't get a different result by sticking to a particular method. You must try something different to get a different result."

Funto cast him a puzzled look. "I don't understand, sir."

"You do. We both do. You're not a toddler." Mr Amadi rose from his seat and walked to her side.

Funto shook her head. "I don't get."

He turned Funto's chair sideways. He held her hands and pulled her to her feet. "Let me make you happy, Funto," he said and pulled her unto his chest, one hand encircling her waist and the other caressing her hair.

Funto's heart skittered. She wriggled and withdrew from the embrace. "I'm sorry. I can't do this. I'm married."

"Same here." He raised his ring finger to her. "But it doesn't matter. I don't intend to break your home, just as I won't allow you break mine. We just make each other happy. In a coded way." He winked.

Funto cocked her eyebrows. "You mean an extramarital affair?"

"Is that the name you call it? I call it wisdom for a happy life. No big deal. Everyone does it."

"I'm not everyone, sir. I'm a responsible woman. And I'm a Christian."

"Don't take things out of proportion. All those boxes are ticked on my paper as well. Having fun won't untick any of them. It won't stop any of us from being a Christian or being responsible." He stepped forward and held her against his body. "Try me. In three months, you'll share a testimony."

Funto wriggled free. "I'm disappointed in you, sir."

She hurried out of the office.

CHAPTER TWENTY-THREE

Funto drove home. Her encounter with her boss relived in her head.

It's a pity you can't get a different result by sticking to a particular method. You must try something different to get a different result.

Maybe Mr Amadi was right. Maybe not. She pondered on his words all the way her drive home.

Funto parked her car in the compound. She alighted. She pressed a button on the remote, securing the doors.

A teenage girl sat some distance away, overseeing a well-dressed toddler seated in a baby walker. The toddler played with toys and giggled, hopping and sitting at intervals. A school-age boy pushed the baby walker about, stopping intermittently to playfully interfere with the toddler's activities. Both enjoyed what they did.

Funto glanced in the kids' direction. They were the two children of her neighbours. Funto approached them, smiling. The toddler was so endearing. Beautiful face, dimpled chubby cheeks, four pairs of shiny white teeth, and an appearance that screamed adequate care. Funto clutched her bag. Her heart reached out to the younger child. "Hello!" she said and put out her hands to carry the child.

The teenage girl walked towards the children. She didn't know Funto. She was the new maid Funto's neighbours had employed. And she had been warned severally by her bosses to be extra vigilant in the care of the kids. No stranger's touch or contact. Nothing of that sort.

"Auntie, abeg, no touch my oga pikin o," the teenage girl said, warning Funto in a Nigerian creole not to carry the child. "I no want oga trouble o. Because she go dey halla for me say I wan make her children get skin infection," the maid said, wanting to avoid being chastised by her bosses. The kids' mother would accuse her of wanting the children to develop skin infections.

Funto disregarded the maid and carried the child.

The girl charged at Funto. "Auntie, you be deaf? You no dey hear word? I say make you no carry am. If baby please you carry, go born your own nah. Or make you go carry your younger ones," she said, telling Funto to go have her own children or play with her siblings instead.

The toddler's expression changed. Her eyebrows shot up, her lips flattened and cheeks drawn up. Ready to cry. She wasn't sure she'd seen Funto's face before.

Funto smiled and shook the baby playfully, ignoring the maid's tantrum. The baby cried. Probably angry that her activity was usurped or because Funto's face wasn't familiar enough.

The maid pulled the child from Funto's grip. The baby's cry rent the air.

A pregnant woman hurried out of the first apartment. "Chidinma, what are you doing to my child? Why is she crying?" she said as she approached the scene.

Funto stood beside the girl, ready to explain what had transpired. "Good evening, madam," Funto said and managed a smile.

"Sister, good evening," the woman replied.

"Madam, abeg no vex for me," Chidinma fell on her knees, the baby clutched in her arms crying, "nah this Auntie wey I no know where she come from, con carry Pressure. I say make she no carry am but she no gree. As if say she no get ears. Abeg, madam. Forgive me. I tell am o, but she no answer," she explained. Chidinma was telling her boss she had warned Funto not to touch the child but Funto disregarded her warnings however.

The woman reached for her child. She took the toddler from her maid's hold.

"I'm sorry, I just wanted to say hello to the kid. Your maid actually told me not to carry the child but she said all sorts of insulting words to me as well. I thought I'd lived long enough in this compound for her to know me," Funto said.

The woman smiled, cuddling the baby in her arms. The toddler ceased crying and stared intently at her mother. She fiddled with her mother's hair. "Sorry, Sister. She's new here. I just employed her a fortnight ago. She definitely hasn't seen you around. Please forgive her pertness."

Funto nodded. "It's all right. No problem."

"Thank you. She's only acting based on instructions." The woman turned to her maid. "And you, you'd better learn to speak politely to people. Does she seem your age mate? She's our neighbour." She pointed to the apartment behind. "That's her house. And I've told you, my baby's name is Precious not Pressure. Dumb."

"No vex, madam," Chidinma said, apologising to her boss.

"Apologise to Sister," the woman said, gesturing.

"Auntie, abeg, I no know say, you be our neighbour. No vex," Chidinma said to Funto, apologising.

Funto smiled. "It's okay." She waved at the toddler. "Precious, darling."

The woman tickled Precious, smiling.

Funto stared. Precious was barely over a year and her mother was already obviously pregnant. And there she was, praying for one.

“John, get inside,” Precious’ mum said, gesturing at the school-age boy. “Chidinma, pack the children’s things inside.” She shifted Precious’ weight to her right hand. “Thank you, Sister.”

“You’re welcome, ma. How’s Uncle?”

“He’s fine. He travelled. He should be back later today,” Precious’ mum said.

Funto bobbed her head. “My regards to him.”

“All right. How about your husband?”

“He should be home already,” Funto said with a smile.

“Extend my greetings to him.”

“Your message will be delivered.”

Funto ambled towards her apartment. Chidinma’s words played on her mind. She exhaled, her legs heavy with each step.

CHAPTER TWENTY-FOUR

Dave lay on the couch, his head propped up on a soft pillow, wearing a drawn expression. Thoughts of what had happened at his workplace clouded his mind.

Dave had been a senior storekeeper in the plastic company. His duties included issuing products for sale and keeping record of what was left. As the most senior storekeeper, he monitored other workers in his unit and ensured records were accurate.

As much as laid on him, Dave did his work diligently, and with utmost loyalty. On several occasions, Dave ignored the overtures of colleagues who sought an avenue to loot the company's products for personal gain. A particular event came to focus. One of the store officers had approached Dave and said he could get him a hundred thousand naira in three weeks. Surprised, Dave asked how that was possible. The junior officer explained he had secured buyers for the company's products. All Dave had to do was give his consent and overlook disparities in records. No one else would know about it. Everyone needed extra cash after all, the junior officer had said. But Dave couldn't imagine himself in such a deal. He was the choir director in his church. And he claimed he was a born-again Christian. How could he condescend to do such? Dave had wondered. Dave warned the junior officer never to bring such matters to him. And he reinforced monitoring checks put in place to ensure accuracy in record keeping. He wouldn't leave a loophole for anyone to steal the company's goods. And on that premise, he made himself more enemies than he proposed.

Dave never knew the tides would turn against him soon. He simply worked hard and faced squarely the job that took him to the company. The promise he made to God when he was seeking for a job must be kept. Diligence, faithfulness to God and men, and upholding righteousness. He couldn't forget it. No matter how long he worked in the company.

All had been well until a new general manager was transferred to the branch where Dave worked. The general manager quickly made friends with the operation manager and the account manager. When his attempt to make friends with Dave failed, he extended a hand of love to a few other officers in the store department.

Supplies began to miss—most of which happened when Dave was not in the warehouse—despite Dave’s supposed checks. Dave wasted no time in reporting to Mr Ukah, the general manager. But Mr Ukah was passive about Dave’s numerous reports and hardly took a single action.

Dave feared being accused on the long run for what he knew nothing about. He knew how quickly people get roped into fraud in organisations.

He made appropriate documentations and mailed them to the head office. Two weeks after, an audit was done. And there was a huge irregularity between products sold and inventory.

Misappropriation of funds and gross loss of products drew the attention of the central management board. Mr Ukah denied receiving any report from Dave, the officer in charge of the warehouse. The director of the board accused the heads of departments of apathy and gross negligence. He held that they were irresponsible and careless about the growth of the company.

The management board ordered immediate retrenchment of the senior officers of the affected departments. The director vowed that investigation would be carried out and anyone found wanting would be called back to be prosecuted for his misdoings.

Officials who could pull strings did. The general manager had enough connection to keep himself and a few of his stooges in their offices. The ‘others’ were the guilty ones who aimed to drag the company into bankruptcy. Dave fell among these ‘others’. And he was the first person the general manager gave a letter of termination of appointment. Mr Ukah was aware of what Dave had done. The documents he had mailed the head office. Thanks to Mr Ukah’s web of connection that blocked the documents from reaching the management.

The door opened. Funto walked in. A mixture of feelings had tipped her mood to the wrong side. She slouched to the couch.

Funto’s arrival pulled Dave out of his reveries but not out of his cup-of-black-tea mood. He turned his head sideways. “You’re welcome,” he said before tipping his head the other way, facing the chair.

“Thank you,” Funto said as soon as her buttocks touched the couch. She stared at Dave. He was quiet. This was a wrong time for him to behave like this. He couldn’t even welcome her in a better way.

Funto had a lot running through her mind. She was expecting Dave to pull her into his arms and ask her what was wrong. She would recount how her day had gone, and all the nasty encounters she’d had, after which he was supposed to shower affection on her until she was able to get over her bad mood. But there he was, lying on a couch as though she was none of his business.

Funto sat on the couch for about half an hour, awaiting Dave to shower her attention. But Dave stuck to his thoughts. Irritation welled up Funto's mind. She stood and stormed into the room.

Dave shook his head. How could a woman be so insensitive? Didn't Funto notice something was wrong? That he wasn't his usual self? After all, he'd always been the right dose of medicine for her bad moods. But now that it was his turn, she turned a blind eye. At the point he craved her concern, she locked it far away beyond his reach.

Dave sighed. He turned and his gaze fell on the wall clock. 7:30 pm. He ought to have dinner now, but he had no appetite.

Funto rolled in bed. Hunger gnawed at her stomach. But she wasn't happy. Not in the mood to cook. Maybe Dave had prepared dinner. She rose to her feet and walked out of the room. The living room was quiet, illuminated by white bulbs. Dave was still lying on the couch. Funto turned into the kitchen. She opened the three pots on the gas cooker. They were empty. Funto hissed. What was Dave doing that he couldn't prepare dinner? Lying on the couch as if he was indisposed.

Funto opened the freezer. She took out a plastic container. The soup in it was frozen. She shut the freezer and warmed the soup. She put some cassava flour in a cup and added water to it. She scooped two meats from the soup onto a plate. She took a tray from the rack, placed her food on it, and went to the dining. She ate in silence. If Dave were hungry, he would prepare himself something to eat. She finished her meal, returned to the kitchen, and washed the plates.

Funto sauntered to the room, lay in bed, and slept.

Emotions welled up Dave's mind. Since he'd married Funto, he had never been this insensitive and unconcerned. He'd been a shoulder she could cry on. And he'd always ensured he gave his best.

He swallowed. He left the couch and went into the guest room. He couldn't bring himself to share the same bed with Funto tonight. He wasn't in the right state of mind for that.

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Funto woke up late. She glanced around. Dave wasn't in the room. She said a quick prayer and dashed into the bathroom. She dressed up. She took her bag from the bedside and hurried out of the room. Dave was not in the living room. She peered into the kitchen. It was as she'd left it the previous night. Where could Dave have gone? She walked to the guestroom. She opened the door and peeked. Dave straddled across the bed in a white singlet and brown boxers.

Was he not going to work? Why was he still in bed at almost eight in the morning? She shook her head. Perhaps he had a day off or something. But why did he choose to sleep in the guestroom? Something was definitely wrong. But there was no time to ask questions. She was late for work already. And she knew the toll traffic would take on her trip to work.

She closed the door gently and rushed out of the house, her car key dangling from her hand.

CHAPTER TWENTY-FIVE

Dave ate little. He roamed the house, allowing several thoughts to wander on his mind. He took some time to pray.

Funto returned from work. She walked into the living room and found Dave watching a program on television. Indifference laced his attitude towards her. Funto sat on the chair across.

“Dave, what’s going on? You’ve been acting weirdly since yesterday. What’s on your mind?” Funto said. She was in a better mood this evening.

Dave tipped his head, his face directed at the curtains.

“Dave! I’m talking to you.”

“Oh! You want a response?”

“Of course. Don’t I deserve one?”

“I don’t think you do. Yesterday, you behaved as if we were mere roommates. No care, no communication, nothing,” Dave said.

“You didn’t talk to me either. I was in a bad mood.”

“You can say that again. What does that matter? You expect me to always rub your back but you can’t lift a finger for another.”

Dave was right. She hadn’t done well. Allowing her mood to becloud her judgement wasn’t the best thing she could have done. “I’m sorry, dear. I just wasn’t fit to talk,” Funto said. She forced penitence into her voice. “Please, I’m sorry.” She strolled across the room and sat beside her husband. “Forgive me.” She kissed his cheek.

“It’s all right. You’re forgiven.”

“So, tell me. What happened yesterday? You didn’t even turn in with me.”

Dave drew a breath. “Excuse me.” He stood and went into the room. He returned with an envelope in his hand.

Funto’s brain kicked to work. Her heart thumped. What could be in the envelope? Promotion letter? Unlikely. She’d left Dave at home in the morning. Letter of termination of appointment? *God forbid*. Perhaps a letter from his mistress, informing him she had delivered a child. *God forbid. Please God. Let it be good news.*

Dave stretched out his hand. “Have it.”

Funto collected the envelope. She hastily tore it open and removed the sheet of paper it enclosed. She unfolded the paper with shaky hands. She read. Her eyelids fluttered. Tears gathered in her eyes. *Not now. Not now Lord. We have enough problems to suffice all day already. Why this? God!* Tears formed a rivulet on her face and streaked onto the paper.

Funto sobbed. "What happened, Dave?"

"Do you remember I told you about missing goods?"

"Yes, I do."

"The management board believed I connived with some other staff to pull that off on the company."

"But we agreed you would forward a report to the head office. Didn't you do that?"

"I did. About thrice, in fact. I'm not sure why nothing was done or said about that. I included it in my response to the written query I was served. I prayerfully answered it. I just don't know what went wrong." He scratched his brow. His expression displayed dejection.

Funto frowned. "How about the devilish general manager?"

"Mr Ukah. He's still there. I'm sure he must be laughing hilariously now. It took a word of prayer to get out of my mind the scornful grin he wore when he was to give me the letter."

"This world is so perverse. The righteous are punished and the wicked are enthroned. How could they do such a thing to you? After all you've done for that company. If you had consented to evil counsel and misappropriated the company's products, I'd have said this is a recompense. But now, what can I call this? I..." She sobbed.

"I've thought about it over and again. I couldn't just lay my hand on what I did wrong."

Funto dropped her head unto her palm. She'd returned home late because she'd branched at a fertility clinic a colleague had newly referred her to. The consultant had talked expressly about assisted conception with in-vitro fertilisation having been the focus. And the consultant had successfully piqued Funto's interest. But the cost was high. Almost two million naira. When the consultant emphasised that Funto had a high probability of having the procedure successful, her hopes skyrocketed. No wonder she returned home happier than she had left it.

She'd intended to talk to her husband about it, after which they would raise money for the procedure. She'd even thought about how she would secure loans. But now, things might not go the way she'd hoped. Her husband had lost his job and was there sulking. How could she raise money issues now?

“Oh my God. Not at this time.” She broke into fresh sobs. Her dream was going to be dashed. How could this happen at the brink of getting solution to her childlessness? She wailed.

Dave pulled her close. “It’s okay. Everything will be fine. We have to trust God for another job. I’ve been thinking. I know this is a dart from the enemy. We can’t give up now.”

“Not at this point, Dave. I came home with high hopes. I was going to tell you...” She sobbed.

“Tell me what, Funto?”

She hesitated. Checking with herself to confirm if she was sure she wanted to divulge the information.

“Talk to me, sweetheart. What were you going to tell me?”

“I-I wanted to tell you that I visited a clinic today. I got the place on referral. I’ve heard testimonies about the consultant. He’s a pro at what he does.”

“What does he do?” He searched her eyes.

“Assisted conception.”

“Funto!”

“What? It’s not a bad thing. In fact, it is very simple. He said he’d harvest eggs from me and sperm from you and put them together to make a baby. Just as it would have happened naturally.”

“So how does that become a pregnancy? Is that not some laboratory engineering?”

“Not really. When the fertilisation is done, he’ll transfer the product back to my womb. The growth of the baby then continues naturally. Nine months, ta-da, a live baby.” She smiled halfway.

“I pray this desperation of yours won’t put you into problem.”

“You call this desperation? Almost four years of marriage and no fruit to show for it.”

“I didn’t mean it that way.”

“How then did you mean it? Do you know the insult I bear as a result? I was humiliated yesterday, right here in our compound. All because I extended a hand of love to our neighbours’ baby. Their maid tongue-lashed me and told me to go have a child of my own.”

“How could she say such a thing? Anyways, let anyone say whatever comes to mind. It doesn’t matter. You can’t let pressure force you to do what’s wrong.”

“Do you mean having a child is wrong? After all, it’s not like I said I was going to a herbalist or an idol worshipper to seek a child. This is modern medicine. It only initiates the natural process and then allows things to progress normally. What’s wrong about that?”

“I’m not saying it is wrong. I just don’t want us to feel pressurised. We’ve been tested and certified medically fit. Let’s allow things to play according to God’s will.”

“The way you talk sometimes makes me think you have a mistress and children somewhere. I can’t fathom why you always maintain waiting on God as if I’m asking us to go to the devil. What we’re meant to do for ourselves, we can’t hang the responsibility on God. Who gave scientists the wisdom to do all these things anyways? That can be traced to God. I’m not requesting for anything odd. I just want us to try something different.”

No matter what Dave said, Funto wouldn’t agree. Dave knew that. When it came to issue of having children, Dave wasted no time in submitting to his wife. Especially, when it was about to spring up doubt in her heart about his marital faithfulness.

“All right. I understand.” He sniffed. “How much will that cost?”

“Over a million and a half.”

“1.5 million naira?” His eyes dilated.

“It’s actually 1.7 million naira.”

“Where am I supposed to get that from? Where? I just lost my job.”

“Well...” She drew back her cheeks and stared at the roof, thinking. “We will scrimp and save. We’ll sell my car since it’s the one that can fetch more money. I can always use yours. Then I intend taking a loan from the cooperative I joined at my workplace. We’ll pull our savings together as well. By the time we round everything up, we should have over 1.7 million naira.”

“And how do we survive? I’ve lost my job. There’s no hope of any income from my end for now. How about running the house and meeting our daily needs?”

“Dear, the Bible says ‘Therefore do not worry about tomorrow, for tomorrow will worry about its own things.’ Don’t worry.”

Dave shook his head. His wife knew Mathew 6:34. But had probably forgotten Proverbs 3:5-6. “Sweetheart, the Bible also says, ‘Trust in the Lord with all your heart, and lean not on your own understanding; in all your ways acknowledge Him, And He shall direct your paths.’ We can’t jump into this. We haven’t prayed about it. We can’t even afford it. God’s gifts have no such cost affixed. I am confident we’ll have our own children. Let’s be patient.”

“If you’re saying all these because of money, never mind, I’ll get the money.” She straightened and attempted walking away.

Dave caught her by the wrist. “Wait. I don’t mean to upset you. I’m sorry. But try to understand my perspective. Have you committed this idea into God’s hands? Sweetheart, let’s be more patient. Our miracle is on the way.”

Funto shrugged. "I'll pray about it. But I already know it is God's will. He says we should be fruitful and multiply. He said that for a reason. We don't need anyone to tell us this is a great idea."

Dave sighed. He ruminated about her wife's argument for a moment. "All right."

Funto stared at him. "All right? Does that mean you agree?"

"It's okay. We'll save towards it."

She smiled. "Thank you." She embraced him on impulse. "I'll also talk to my brother. He could give me something towards it. I'll put in my best to ensure we get the complete money."

Dave shoulder sagged. He leaned against the headrest. "It's all right."

"I was thinking of informing Papa Dee about my car. He could help us sell it for a better price than we could by ourselves. And since he's a car dealer, he could do it as soon as possible, too."

"All right."

"And I'll also take out our savings towards the land we planned to get."

Dave exhaled, uncomfortable with his wife's decisions. He muttered a few words under breath.

"What did you say?" Funto searched his eyes.

"Never mind."

"Okay. I'll call Uncle Ben and see how he can help."

"You plan to involve him as well?"

"Why not? We need all the help we can get. I want us to get the money before the end of the month. So first thing next month, we can go for the procedure."

Dave rose to his feet. "All right. I want to get some rest. I didn't sleep throughout last night. And I've been awake all day."

"Let me make you some rice. You have to eat before going to sleep."

"I'm not hungry. Don't worry."

"Don't let that letter get to you. You can't go on hunger strike just because you lost a job. Don't lose your health too, please. That's very important."

"Okay. I'll take a little. Let me know when you're done."

Funto nodded. "I will." She walked into the kitchen.

CHAPTER TWENTY-SIX

Dave sat across the general manager, his legs crossed and expression fixed. He had received a text message two days ago informing him that his presence was needed at the company today. Hopes high, heart joyful, he'd anticipated the meeting.

The secretary had ushered Dave and two other retrenched officers into the general manager's office.

The manager's expression irritated Dave. Only if he could avoid him altogether.

Mr Ukah grinned, exposing his heterogeneously discoloured teeth. "You're welcome. You were summoned to be updated on the decision of the management board as touching the case of gross corruption filed against you."

"The corrupt know themselves," a tall dark man, an ex-sales officer, retorted. He cast the manager a scornful glance.

Mr Ukah ignored him. "The management board employed investigators, who left no stone unturned in their work." He pulled a brown office file from the file tray on his table. He opened it and took three sealed envelopes. Each envelope was properly addressed. One for each of the manager's guests. "Uh, Mr Ayodele, here you are." He handed an envelope to Dave. "Mr Wuse, this is for you." The named fellow took the envelope. "And this is for you, able sales officer," he said, mockery dancing in his eyes.

Mr Ukah continued, "The result of the investigation was the premise on which the management board's decision was based. You're free to open your package. If you have any question, I'll be glad to answer."

Mr Toriola, the ex-sales officer, was the first to tear open the envelope. Mr Wuse did, as well as Dave.

Mr Toriola straightened and hit the table, livid. "Are you in your right senses? Where will I get this sum of money? I knew nothing about the stolen goods," he said at the top of his voice, fine tremors evident in his hands. "I won't pay a dime. Tell that to the board of stupidity that made such a decision."

Mr Ukah watched with the highest degree of patience he could afford. Mr Toriola raved until his voice became hoarse.

Dave stared at the content of the document. He was to pay the company a sum of four hundred thousand naira as a fine for gross negligence and corruption or face the law and possible jail term. The ball was in his court.

He sighed. Tears nibbled at his eyes. He gnashed his teeth and drew a deep breath. This wasn't what he'd expected. It had been three weeks since he lost his job. He had concluded the process of grieving and was beginning to adapt. He was just stepping out to exploit opportunities. How could the management make such a decision at a time like this?

It was claimed that the company had lost five million naira. And the investigators had made known in their report that he was guilty. Dave couldn't be more certain that he had nothing to do with the missing goods. Stealing wasn't something he could ever think of or imagine doing. How could he be roped into such a thing to this level? Was losing his job not enough punishment? Dave wondered. The sound around him drowned in the background as his mind soared into thoughtfulness.

Mr Wuse rubbed his nose tip, unsure of what to say. He had been a sales officer. But he ate on the same plate of corruption as the manager. It hadn't been his first time of marketing stolen goods. He'd been the manager's stooge. He just didn't understand why he had to be the only one retrenched of his clique. They were five who carried out the last operation that cost the company millions of naira. Mr Ukah had always taken the lion share of the returns. And he never stopped giving them reasons for that. He was the general manager and he had to settle some board members and other important officials if their secret was to remain safe and their backs covered.

Mr Wuse only got crumbs from such shady deals. He shouldn't be the one sacrificed for others. His letter stated he was to pay two hundred thousand naira. And the manager had called him a day before to assure him he would foot the bill. Perhaps to keep his mouth sealed. But what about his job? He had lost it already. And he knew Mr Ukah's promises to reinstate him were empty.

That was the general manager's way of beclouding his trail. Once he involved anyone in frequent shady operations, he ensured the person was retrenched. He didn't want anyone turning around to be a threat to him. And he was wise enough to act as if he cared during the transition period. He wanted nobody to have a glimpse of who he really was. A person strongly guided by 'Use and Dump' philosophy.

Mr Wuse glanced at the manager. Mr Ukah had warned him that if he dared try to be smarter, he would get himself in the quicksand of treason. Mr Wuse understood that. "When is the deadline for the payment?" he said.

Mr Toriola glanced at him. Was Mr Wuse sane? How could he concede defeat so soon, without the least fight? “I don’t understand you, Mr Wuse. Do you know anything about the stolen goods? Are you guilty of those allegations? How could you ask for payment deadline instead of declining to pay?” Mr Toriola glowered.

Mr Toriola’s voice forced Dave’s attention back to the room.

Mr Ukah tapped his table. “Please Mr Toriola, you can leave my office. I can no longer stand this uncontrolled disturbance of serenity in my office. If you choose not to pay, don’t. Prison isn’t designed for cats and dogs. But for humans like you. You don’t seem to value your freedom anyways.”

“How dare you say that to me? Do you think you can scare me with a jail term? I...”

Mr Ukah tuned out. He turned to Mr Wuse. “I’m really sorry. But I’m glad you made the right decision. The loss affected some other employees as well. Twelve other members of staff have been retrenched after you left. It’s not a nice decision, but you have to understand that the management must protect the company’s interest at all times.”

“It’s all right. Every event has a purpose, I believe. I want you to expatiate on the payment process,” Mr Wise said.

“Well, about that, it is stipulated in the letter. You’re to indicate your acceptance or rejection of the company’s stated terms in writing, which must be submitted in no more than three days of receiving the letter. This is to enable the company file a lawsuit against rejecters immediately. If you accept the company’s terms in writing, you automatically have two weeks to pay the stated amount. If at the end of the two weeks, the full payment isn’t made, a lawsuit will be filed. And the letter of acceptance you wrote will be used against you in the court of law. That’s all.”

“All right, thank you.” Mr Wuse stood and walked to the door.

Mr Ukah nodded. “You’re welcome. Have a nice evening.”

Mr Wuse stopped in his track. He turned around and glanced at the manager. “I’ll hand in my acceptance letter tomorrow.”

Mr Ukah smiled. “That’s a good idea.”

Dave observed it all. But his mind was too clogged to know what reaction to put up. It didn’t matter what he thought. The decision had been made already.

Mr Toriola exhaled. “I don’t care what you do. I won’t pay a dime. And there’s nothing you can do to me.” He stormed out of the office, slamming the door behind.

Dave sat still, head bowed, arms folded, eyes dimmed, and heart heavy with unexpressed emotions.

“I won’t be surprised if Mr Toriola is the first person to submit acceptance letter. It’s clearly written on his face, his dread for court of law. The company has

records and evidence that corroborate its claim. Why would one waste money to get a lawyer on a case one is bound to lose. Wouldn't that be a double loss on the part of the fellow?" Mr Ukah said.

Forged records you mean? Dave drew a breath. Only if he had access to the computer in the office he worked in before he was retrenched, he'd at least be able to retrieve the documents he kept to absolve himself. But he couldn't be given access. Perhaps the documents had even been wiped out as well. Only if he had known he would be retrenched. If he hadn't allowed feelings to overwhelm his reasoning, he would have safely copied the documents. Now, with what would he defend himself in the court of law? He had nothing to prove his innocence. Nothing but words of mouth. The manager was right. It was a lost case.

"Mr Ayodele, I'm sorry for what happened to you. Pray to your God to provide you the money. After all, you claimed you did nothing. Tell your God to vindicate you," Mr Ukah said and stole a quick smirk.

Dave straightened and wordlessly left the office.

§§§§§

Funto boiled with rage as she read the letter Dave gave to her. Why was the company trying to get in the way of her fruitfulness?

Funto wept, wailed, and threw tantrum. But that didn't change Dave's decision. He was determined to pay the money. He didn't want his name brought into disrepute.

"Don't you know paying that money means consenting that you did it? Where would we even get that kind of money?" Funto said. Her expression a wrap of anger and displeasure.

"Do you want me to risk going to jail? We're talking about a perverse system here. Where the innocent is led to the guillotine and the criminal walks free," Dave said.

"We will pray and hope for the best. You won't go to jail."

"Be realistic. What's the probability? I don't have more than words of mouth to defend myself in court. Which court of law acquits a man on such ground?"

Funto sobbed. "Where do you intend to get that sum of money from?"

"Well, first things first. We'll have to take it out of what we have on ground now."

Funto frowned. "Excuse me, what do you mean? You had better be joking."

They had been able to raise 1.5 million naira. Funto was planning to take another soft loan to complete the money, and here was her husband requesting her to remove four hundred thousand naira from it. It had better be a joke.

“I meant what I said. Would you prefer I go to jail because you want to have a child?”

“Stop saying it that way. God forbid. My husband will not be jailed in Jesus’ name. But we can’t pay that money. Let’s go to court.”

“So where do we get money to pay a barrister? Or do you think there’s no price affixed to a lawyer’s service?”

“No lawyer will demand that amount. It’s not a murder case.”

“Okay. Let’s say, we pay the lawyer about two hundred thousand naira. God is on our side, and the lawyer is good. I wasn’t given a jail term but enjoined to pay that fine. Where would we get the money from?”

“If God is on our side, you’ll be set free. That’s what we should hope for.”

“I believe God. I trust Him. But I will pay that money. I don’t want anything to do with lawsuit.”

“I know you are saying this because of the money in hand. But I’m sorry to say, I can’t remove a kobo from it for any reason apart for which it is set aside. Go ahead and pay the money, but forget any kobo will come from what we’re saving up for the procedure,” Funto said.

“Why are you so selfish? What has your passion for a child turned you into?”

Funto raised her voice. “You think I’m selfish? Thank you. You’re free to choose what to believe. When I become pregnant and put to bed. Whose name will the child bear? My father’s name or yours? You’re the apathetic one. How could you prioritise a waste of money over having a child?”

“Do what you will. I’m done with this discussion.” Dave straightened and dashed to his room.

“Whatever.”

CHAPTER TWENTY-SEVEN

Dave prayed all through the night. God had to intervene in the situation on ground. The God he stuck to throughout his working period at the company. The God whose words he had honoured daily.

Dave slept around six in the morning and woke up 11:00 am. He hadn't heard anything from God but he felt strength in his bones. The joy that sourced from no physical thing bounced in his heart. He took it as a go-ahead from God. God knew best.

Dave wrote an acceptance letter and went to the company to drop it. Some members of staff could think he was a thief indeed. But Dave didn't care. The Scripture told him that vengeance was the Lord's. God would repay.

Dave returned home. He made some calls. The plan that had sprung up his mind earlier in the morning was working out. Papa Dee, the car dealer who sold his wife's car, came to pick his car. Dave called some of his friends. A few responded well and agreed to lend him some money.

Funto didn't talk about the payment Dave was to make to the company. Dave didn't raise the issue either.

God did answer Dave's prayer about his car. It sold better and faster than he expected. Dave sold the washing machine and the freezer despite Funto's disapproval. They had a small fridge. That was enough for now, Dave had insisted. He pulled all the resources he could lay his hands on together. Few days prior the deadline stipulated by the company, Dave paid four hundred thousand naira into the company's account, and was cleared. Dave returned home happy. He felt free. Although it had been difficult getting the money.

Dave had been applying for jobs since he got over his last one. He intensified efforts to get a new job. He needed one desperately. He had to pay back his loan and meet his family needs. His account was already in the red. There was nothing he could boast of now.

Funto got the money for the infertility panacea her doctor had boasted of. She paid. And she was started on treatment. She was told the procedure wasn't a simple thing. Her body had to be prepared. She was encouraged to take adequate diet. Supplements and other necessary drugs were prescribed.

For his wife's sake, Dave gave some respect to all the precautions the doctor listed to him. He had to abstain from copulation for some time, eat well, rest well, and the likes.

After necessary preparation, Funto applied for a leave of absence at work. The doctor had told her total bed rest was necessary for the first month at least. He wanted nothing to tamper with the process.

Dave worried. He and Funto had spent all they had and were in debt. He had no job as at present. And his wife had the audacity to apply for a leave of absence at a time like this. How would they fend for themselves? Food was priority if at all clothing and other needs could be on a waiting list. And shelter. It was as important. The rent was due in less than a month's time. And the concierge in charge of the building was avaricious. He wouldn't take any excuse.

Funto couldn't see anything other than holding a baby in her arms. She didn't care if she wouldn't eat or drink water all the way. The joy the pregnancy and its result would bring her would suffice.

The procedure was done. Monitoring commenced. Necessary boxes ticked. Funto's hope heightened.

The following weeks pulled hardship along with it. Cassava flour became Dave's favourite. He barely had anything to eat. Funto still had some money. She was the expectant woman. Eating well was compulsory. She bought provisions. Dave knew too well to devour the food items. Even though he was the one in charge of the chores, he ate with caution. It was a hard time, it would pass, he encouraged himself.

"The procedure was successful, madam. You're four weeks pregnant," the doctor told Funto.

Funto's joy knew no bound. She ran her hands over her belly a thousand times, muttering words and blessing the unborn.

Dave's parents were supportive. Dave recounted the recent happenings about his job to them when he ran out of alternatives. They sent him the little money they had. Things gradually became unbearable. Dave was forced to take up menial jobs. He went to different parts of Lagos to do all sorts of jobs. Sometimes he assisted builders on construction sites. More often than not, he worked in block industries, carrying newly made blocks to where they would dry and become stronger. Sometimes it was following trucks to deliver blocks or sand to construction sites. A few times, he worked at printing presses. Anywhere he got opportunity, he explored. Nothing slipped from his hands. And he did well to dodge whenever he saw a familiar face while doing the menial jobs, except those he couldn't. Eyes that sighted him first. The jobs didn't bring much. But it put food on their table and changed the status quo.

Funto's pregnancy progressed. Although she didn't change much physically. Her doctor had said the pregnancy was eleven weeks old during the last ultrasound scan. By sixteen weeks, she would resume work. Risk of abortion would have plummeted.

Funto took her bath and went to bed. She squirmed in bed. Her belly rumbled. She gripped her lower abdomen. The pain was emanating from there. She felt something escape from her genital. She got off the bed. Blood streaked down her inner thigh. What was this? It couldn't be. Never. It couldn't.

Dave was not at home. He had travelled to Ibadan for a job interview, which was to hold the next day.

Funto stepped into the bathroom, cleaned up, applied a sanitary pad, and went to the hospital.

Threatened abortion, the doctor had said, before he picked another diagnosis—miscarriage—the day after.

Funto screamed and fainted. What made her faint wasn't clear. Perhaps the sum of money that had gone down the drain with the abortion. Or the dashed hope of carrying a child.

Funto recovered her consciousness but didn't stop crying and wailing. Probably her reactions would force the doctor to give a refund. But he didn't. The money was gone, absolutely. The doctor reassured her and made her realise the failure had nothing to do with him or defect in the procedure. An act of nature, he had insisted.

The interview went well. But Dave wasn't sure he would be called for the job. He'd done better in some other interviews in the past and wasn't given any appointment.

He was returning to his friend's place—where he was lodged—when he overheard a conversation between two of the interviewees. A job opportunity in another organisation.

Dave got home and told his friend all he'd heard. Dave's friend, Kenny, advised him to give it a trial. The interview was to hold the following Monday. Dave could either spend four days in Ibadan and do the interview before going home or go home now and return later for the interview.

Coming back was not an option. How about the transport fare? Where would he get that? There was nothing he was going home to do other than babysit his pregnant wife anyways.

Dave asked his friend if he could stay. Kenny welcomed his idea with open arms. Both of them had taught in the same school during their national youth service and had stayed in the same room.

Dave called Funto to inform her of his decision to wait for the next interview. But his numerous calls were unanswered. Probably Funto dropped her phone somewhere, he thought. He sent her a text message informing her of the new development.

The next day, Dave called as well, but no answer came. Dave got worried. But he knew what traveling to Lagos at this moment meant. He decided to try again the following day, if she didn't pick his calls, he'd travel over.

Funto saw Dave's calls. But she lost the strength to talk to him. She'd read his message and decided not to talk about the miscarriage until he returned.

Dave called again on Friday morning. He was at the verge of giving up and returning home when Funto picked the phone.

"Funto, I've been calling you. Thanks to God, my heart hasn't stopped beating. No thanks to your quietness. What's happening?"

Funto puckered her lips and swallowed. She composed herself. "I'm sorry. I've not had much access to my phone since Wednesday night."

"Why? What happened?"

"I came to the hospital."

"Are you okay?"

Tears stung at her eyes. She hesitated. "Yes, I am now. How was the interview?"

"It went well. I'm hopeful."

"Oh, you should."

"I'm preparing for the next one. I'll be on my way home immediately I'm through."

"All right. Take care." Funto hung up.

Dave heaved a sigh. His heartbeat normalised.

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Funto was discharged home from the hospital on Saturday afternoon.

She sat on the floor, beside the bed, and wept. The thought of the money and effort that had gone into the failed adventure ripped her apart. And the fact that her expectation had been dashed deepened her sorrow. She wailed.

"God, what have I done? Have I not been righteous enough? Have I not turned my face from evil and did good? Have I not walked according to your will?" She sobbed.

"The Scripture says in Psalms 16:10, 'For You will not leave my soul in Sheol, Nor will You allow Your Holy One to see corruption.' Why is my case different? Many people have had this same procedure with awesome results. What have I

done to You, Lord? How could You allow this to happen to me? Your blessings add no sorrow. Why is this so?" Funto said.

She stared intently at the roof. Rage crept into her voice. "How could this happen to me!" she yelled, and scratched the mattress. "How!" She sobbed. "Please, answer me."

No voice came. The room went quiet the moment she hushed. She exhaled. "I don't understand why I have to be in this condition. I have served You with all my heart. I have given myself to righteousness. I kept my pristine state until marriage. Why can't I have children? Why?"

She straightened and paced the room, her heart heavy with grief. She didn't deserve the miscarriage, did she? Not after all she'd been through to conceive. Her shoulders sagged. Tears streamed down her face, dropping off her jaw. Nothing could measure her anger, frustration, and gloom at this point

CHAPTER TWENTY-EIGHT

Monday crawled in. Dave dressed up for the second interview. Although he hadn't applied prior the interview. His friend had told him application was sometimes mere formality.

Dave arrived the venue. The intended interviewees were given a form to input their details as they came. Dave did all that was to be done. He submitted the photocopies of his credentials and awaited his turn. When it came, he muttered words of prayer and went into the room.

The interview was brief. Dave went to his friend's house. He appreciated Kenny and his wife for their hospitality before hitting the road.

Dave returned home. Funto had lost weight over the few days he'd left her. Funto explained what had happened to Dave.

Dave exploded. He had pleaded with his wife to delay the procedure until he got a job but she'd declined. Was the procedure not the major reason he was in debt and had nothing?

Dave stormed out of the room and walked to the living room. He wished there was a place he could go for months. He was tired. Tired and angry. If Funto had been patient, such wouldn't have happened. The fact that their life savings was lost on an inane adventure infuriated him.

Funto couldn't be less irritated. Was it her fault that she had a miscarriage? After all she had done all that was necessary and had toed the line charted by the consultant. Was her money not the largest share of what she had spent? Was she not in debt as well? Why would Dave be furious at her for what she knew nothing about? They were both at loss. No one had the right to blame another.

Dave and Funto lived like strangers in the house. Both consumed with anger. The concierge of the house they lived in served them the third warning. They were to pay the rent or vacate the house.

The incessant threats from the caretaker fuelled Dave's rage.

Funto wrote a letter to Zeisel Cooperation, making known her decision to resume work the following month.

Dave approached Funto. They had to find a way out of the mess.

"Next week Saturday is the deadline for the payment of the rent," Dave said.

Funto stirred the tea in her cup and sipped.

Dave took his seat across her. “Funto, I’m talking to you.” He folded his forearms, his gaze fixed on his wife’s face.

“I heard you,” Funto said, stirring the tea again.

“How do we go about this? I don’t have any money. I used all I had on me to buy the foodstuffs in the kitchen.

Funto munched bread.

“Funto. You’re not talking.”

“What would you have me say? I don’t know what to do either.”

“Really? You don’t know what to do? Do you want us ejected from the house?”

She drank the remaining tea in the cup and leaned against the backrest.

“I don’t understand this attitude of yours. I ought to be the one acting as you are but I’m not. After all, I warned you. I warned you we couldn’t afford the...”

Funto knew where Dave was heading. “Enough! I won’t hear any of it. ‘But if anyone does not provide for his own, and especially for those of his household, he has denied the faith and is worse than an unbeliever.’ Don’t you read that in your own Bible?”

“Meaning?”

“It’s clear enough. It’s your responsibility to meet the need of this family. And shelter is a pivotal aspect of the needs. Sort it out.”

“Arrant nonsense. If you hadn’t wasted so much money in the course of your impatience, would we be in this shoe?”

Her blood boiled. “You’re mistaken. If you hadn’t lost your job to carelessness and wasted fortune on foolishness, we won’t be in this shoe either.”

“Did you just call me foolish?”

“Not exactly. But there’s no other word to qualify paying four hundred thousand naira to a company for a crime you didn’t commit.”

Dave scowled. “Watch your tongue, woman. I don’t need to tell you that I’m angry.”

“What do I care? Get angry but pay the rent.”

“We’re both at fault. As such, we will split the rent in two. You take half and I take half. I don’t even know where to get the half yet.”

“Hear yourself.” Irritation smeared Funto’s throat. “How would you expect me to share the rent with you? I have two loans to settle. Even if I resume work today, I can’t be paid until the end of next month. And the money will be for loan settlement not rent. I’m sure the caretaker won’t wait that long before throwing us out.”

Dave lowered his voice. He realised anger wouldn’t resolve the issue. “Funto, you’re something else. I can’t believe you’re saying this.”

“Don’t play on my intelligence. Do what needs to be done. It’s your responsibility.”

“Will you stop screaming at me? I’m saying I don’t have money. Should I commit suicide because of that? When the caretaker comes, I’ll open the door to him. If he decides to eject us from the building, so be it.”

Funto shook her head. “God forbid. Anyways, I’ve wanted to tell you that I’ll be travelling. I’m sick of you and everything around here.”

“You have the guts to travel at a time like this? No way. You aren’t going nowhere. We are in this together. We’ll stay together to witness our ejection from this place.”

“I won’t be a part to that. Watch me. I’m leaving this house first thing tomorrow morning.” Funto straightened, ready to walk out on the conversation.

Dave jumped to his feet and dashed across the living room. Funto walked away. Dave stepped closer and pulled her cloth. “I won’t allow you to walk out on me,” Dave said.

Funto moved her other hand to stop him. Her hand moved speedily and landed on Dave’s face.

Dave’s eyes widened. “You slapped me?”

She didn’t mean to. She only wanted to get free from him. But she was enraged. She couldn’t admit her fault now. “You should have left me alone,” she said.

“How dare you!” Dave charged at her. Anger laced with pain shot up Dave’s nerves. An overpowering impulse to hit Funto welled up his throat.

Funto stepped back. “You want to hit me? Go ahead. Do it.”

Dave clenched his teeth, his hands thrown into tight fists. He shut his eyes. Tears flowed against his will. He couldn’t hit her. Not now. Not ever.

Dave turned his back and walked out of the house.

Funto went into the room. She slumped on the bed and wept.

§§§§§

Funto waited for Dave till past ten that night, ready to apologise for what she had done earlier. But Dave didn’t show up.

Funto went to sleep. She would do the needful when he arrived, she thought.

Morning came, with its pristine glory. The sun shone with gladness. Rays of light poured through the window.

Funto opened her eyes. She left the bed and checked the house. Dave was nowhere to be found. Where could he have gone? The story of Pastor Jones’ marriage, as told by Mary, crept into her mind. Perhaps it was true of Dave too. He

probably had a woman and children somewhere. Whom else could he have gone to meet at that time of the day that wouldn't advise him to return home to his wife?

Fresh anger dripped into her veins. No wonder Dave was angry about the money she spent on the attempt to have a child. He probably didn't need a child from her. Funto bit the lining of her mouth.

She took her bath and dressed up. She pulled out a box and stuffed it with her clothes and accessories. Everything she would need for ten days.

She checked her phone. No missed call. No text message. She felt a thickening in her throat. She swallowed and glanced at the wall clock. 11:00 am. She carried her bag and pulled the box along. She walked out of the house and locked the door.

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Dave walked into his apartment at around 11:30 am. He checked the rooms. Funto was absent. He entered his room and sat on the bed. He glanced around. The wardrobe was left ajar with signs of rummaging evident. Funto's black luggage had disappeared. It dawned on him that Funto had left the house.

Dave's conversation with his friend, Andrew, relived in his head. He'd gone to his place the previous day. In anger, he'd recounted the recent happenings to Andrew. Dave saw no harm in disclosing the truth to Andrew when he showed concern.

Andrew condemned Funto's attitude. He blamed Funto for all the family's problems. "Whoever breaks through a wall will be bitten by a serpent. There has to be sin somewhere that brought this misfortune upon you," Andrew had said.

Dave reasoned. He brought all Mary had told him about Funto to mind. Mary must have been right. He couldn't pin point anything wrong he had done. Funto was the one accused of extramarital affair. She was the cause of it all. He mused.

And she had the effrontery to leave the house as if she was the head. Where had she dumped her manners?

Dave paced. Thank God, Andrew had promised to help with the rent pending the time Dave would be able to pay back. God had provided the solution to the problem Funto ran from.

Funto had taken him for granted for too long. It was time he made her realise he wasn't a fool. He'd been the sheep for too long a time. If he didn't put her in check now, she would show no respect for him. She had already transgressed the law he knew, 'Wives, submit to your husbands.' She'd broken that carelessly.

Dave went into the bathroom and had a quick shower before returning to bed. He hadn't slept much during the previous night. No thanks to strange environment and troubled mind. He plunked on the bed and shut his eyes.

CHAPTER TWENTY-NINE

Dave didn't call Funto. He didn't message her either.

Funto roamed the living room. It was her fourth day at her parents'. Her dad had no inkling of what was happening in her home. And her observant mother who had asked about Dave before travelling couldn't get any tangible information from her. Funto couldn't bring herself to narrate all she had done to any of her parents.

Funto hoped Dave would call and attempt to resolve things between them, but he didn't. He didn't even reach her for once regarding the issue of rent.

As the days went by, Funto became worried. Dave would call her for help by the time the caretaker came to threaten him, Funto had thought. But Dave had disappointed her. Her ten-day vacation was wrapping up, and Dave hadn't called.

Funto's mum, Mrs Peters, stepped into the house. She had just returned from one-week retreat.

Funto welcomed her. She had missed her mum. Mrs Peters settled in. She ate and went to bed. She slept for some hours.

Funto took advantage of the available electricity. She ironed her clothes and her parents'. She took her dad's trouser from the chair and spread it on the ironing board. It was the last she had to iron before calling it a day. She switched on the socket. With her hand firm on the iron handle, she smoothed the creases on the trouser. Starting from the trouser mouth, she worked her way up its length, ensuring no portion was left out.

Mrs Peters stepped out of her room and walked to the living room. She halted on sighting Funto. She glanced at the pile of clothes Funto had ironed.

"Oluwafunto, God bless you. You've ironed all these already. I was just thinking of calling Kunle, our neighbours' son, to help with the ironing. Thank you dear."

Funto smiled, happy that her mum was delighted. "I can't be home and you'll have to look for someone else to do chores in the house. I'm only doing what I should."

Mrs Peters beamed. "God bless you, my darling. I appreciate it. The Lord will honour you, He will cause children to surround your table and you'll not lack help all your days."

“Amen.”

“I saw what you did to our room, toilet, and bathroom, everywhere in short. Thank you.”

“Mummy, you’re welcome.”

Mrs Peters straightened her expression. “That reminds me, we need to talk. There’s a burden on my heart to speak with you.”

“Okay, ma. This is the last cloth. I’ll round up in a few minutes.”

“I’ll be waiting for you in the living room.”

“All right, ma.”

Mrs Peters went to the living room. She took her seat on the couch, awaiting Funto.

Funto finished ironing. She unplugged the iron and returned it to its stand. She carefully packed and distributed the ironed clothes to their rightful places. Her parents’ to their wardrobe and hers to the room she stayed in. Done, she went to the living room to meet her mum.

“Here I am, Mum,” Funto said and plunked on the couch beside her mum.

Mrs Peters turned sideways, facing Funto. “How’re you, Funto?”

“I’m fine.”

“That was the same thing you told me before I left for the retreat. I wasn’t even expecting to meet you on my return. What’s going on?”

“Mum, it’s not my first time of coming on a visit. I remember I spent one week the last time I came and you didn’t ask me questions. Am I no longer welcome in my parents’ home?”

“Funto, I have complete eyesight. I’m not dumb. Do you think my God will leave me in darkness? No. He never does. The Bible says in Job 12:22, ‘He uncovers deep things out of darkness, and brings the shadow of death to light.’ I know what I saw about you. Tell me, Funto. What’s going on in your home?”

Funto broke into sobs. Her mum was a fervent Christian. And she knew it. There was no point hiding. The burden on her heart had been overwhelming. Probably spilling the truth would lessen the burden.

Mrs Peters held Funto’s hands and shook it gently. “Stop crying. Talk to me.”

“Mum, I’m tired. I’m sick. I just want to die.” Funto wept.

“God forbid. You will not die but live and declare the works of the Lord. What’s wrong?”

“Everything is wrong. I’m beginning to wonder if all I know about God and all you’ve told me about Him are true.”

“Don’t blaspheme, Funto. You’ve had a first-hand experience of this same God, haven’t you? You’ve taught about Him. He’s spoken to you severally. How can you doubt Him now?”

Funto sniffled and swallowed. "I don't know, Mum. I don't know if all that was a figment of my imagination. I don't know." She wailed.

Mrs Peters sighed. She leaned close and massaged Funto's shoulders. "None of that was your imagination dear. God is real. He's always been real to you."

"Maybe He's gone on vacation then. Mum..." Funto hesitated, tears pouring from her eyes.

Mrs Peters hushed. She allowed her daughter to weep. If that was what she needed to pour out her mind, so be it.

"You brought us up in the way of the Lord, Mum. I served God in my best capacity. I kept myself unsullied. I knew all I lost just because I didn't follow the trend. I earned myself names. Some even said it to my face that I was Miss Holier-than-thou." Funto paused and wiped the tears that glazed her vision.

"I didn't buckle, not even under pressure. I trusted God with all my heart. Time came for me to marry. I didn't look for wealth or riches. I sought His will. I married Dave. How could I be barren for so long? It's been almost five years already. Even those who messed up their lives and aborted countless times in school have two or more children in their respective homes now. But what do I have, nothing. Have I not been righteous enough? What sin is there in my life? Have I not obeyed God?" Funto said and resumed weeping.

Her mum sighed. She stood and walked towards the television set. *God help me to talk aright. This daughter of Yours is hurting. Our greatest enemy, the devil, is at work. Help me to speak the right words. Soften her heart to receive Your words. And please, intervene in her affairs.*

She picked the Bible on the centre table and returned to Funto. She resumed her seat, looking intently at her daughter.

"Oluwafunto. I have heard you. I understand how you feel. But I want you to listen to me as well. I'll be reading from the Scripture from time to time."

Funto nodded, her heart still heavy with sorrow.

"You said you were righteous and didn't deserve any challenge." Mrs Peters opened the Bible and flipped the pages. "Job 4:17 says, 'Can a mortal be more righteous than God? Can a man be more pure than his Maker?' That was Eliphaz, the Temanite, talking to Job. Job was claiming he was righteous and undeserving of the troubles he was encountering. But his friend called his attention to the truth," Mrs Peters said.

She studied Funto's countenance. "Funto, you can't rub God in the face with your righteousness. You're not more righteous than He is. Isaiah 64:6 says, 'But we are all like an unclean thing, and all our righteousnesses are like filthy rags; we all fade as a leaf, and our iniquities, like the wind, have taken us away.' If God were to mark iniquity, who would stand? Not even me, your mother. Wasn't that why Jesus

came? That through Him, we may be saved. Therefore we no longer boast in self-righteousness but in the righteousness imputed upon us by the death and resurrection of Christ.”

“I know. But, Mum. I’ve tried enough. Can’t God just be merciful unto me? I believe in Jesus. I’ve heeded His words. Can’t the righteousness of Jesus prevent these problems I’m facing?”

“Hmmm. Hear this.” Mrs Peters flipped the pages. “The very words of our Lord Jesus. Matthew 7:24-25, ‘Therefore whoever hears these sayings of Mine, and does them, I will liken him to a wise man who built his house on the rock; and the rain descended, the floods came, and the winds blew and beat on that house; and it did not fall, for it was founded on the rock.’ Jesus knew rain would fall, flood would come, and wind would beat on the house. This means challenges will come. Temptations and even persecutions will arise. Even for those who obey the word. But the assurance we have as children of God is that we won’t fall. That’s the comfort.” She swallowed.

“Some people give their lives to Jesus with the hope of swimming in the realisation of all the promises of God. They believe it has to be all positive once you are in Christ. They share testimonies and sing the praise of God when they get desired jobs, houses, great marriages, children, and so forth. But when challenges come, maybe as loss of a child or loved one, loss of job, or in any form, they say they didn’t bargain for that. They feel cheated. Hence, they stop believing God. Why do you think longsuffering is one of the fruits of the Spirit? If nothing unlikable will come our way, why do we need longsuffering? It is because we’ll face challenges. But we won’t be tempted than we are able to bear. And even in that temptation, God will make a way of escape. That’s the understanding I have of 1 Corinthians 10:13,” Mrs Peters said.

“That was what I thought God provided when a doctor told me about assisted conception. Mum, I was introduced to two different couples who did it and had babies. Dave and I spent all our life savings on the procedure. You can’t believe it, Mum,” Funto sobbed, “it failed. I lost the pregnancy. How could that happen to me?”

Mrs Peters sighed. She took her daughter’s hand and patted it. “Challenges of life come in different forms for different people. Every child of God must always take note of John 16:33, which says, ‘These things I have spoken unto you, that in Me you may have peace. In the world you will have tribulation; but be of good cheer, I have overcome the world.’ We’re not promised a bed of roses. But we’re promised God’s unflinching support at all times. Life can be likened to a journey. The roads are linked by alleys. These alleys are of various types. Some are of fire, some of water, and some of roses. But the alleys are never as long as the tarred roads. As one goes and grows on one’s journey, one has to take an alley before accessing the

next road. Some people's courses have fewer alleys than others do. But in all, every course has an alley of fire that must be crossed. Our confidence as believers comes from God. Isaiah 43:2 says, 'When you pass through the waters, I will be with you; and through the rivers, they shall not overflow you. When you walk through the fire, you shall not be burned, nor shall the flame scorch you.' When we have to pass through an alley of fire, God will be with us." She caressed Funto's hair.

"When it's truly God's time, you'll have your own child. And even if you don't, you can't lose focus on your heavenly home because of that. Only he that endures to the end shall be saved. You can't give up now," Mrs Peters said.

Funto took a deep breath, her eyes shut. "I thought God has forgotten me."

"That is a big lie of the devil. He goes about sowing seeds of hatred, hopelessness, anger, and guilt in the hearts of men. God said in the book of Isaiah 49:15-16, 'Can a woman forget her nursing child, and not have compassion on the son of her womb? Surely they may forget, yet I will not forget you. See, I have inscribed you on the palms of My hands; your walls are continually before me.' He will not forget us. But we must walk in faith. The more we look up to God in faith and in total submission to His will, the faster we are able to get through the alley. You must focus, Funto. You must."

"It's hard to focus when one sees the wicked and those living immoral lives having every good thing. Mum, it's hard."

Mrs Peters flipped the pages of the Bible. "Job 20:4-8, 'Do you not know this of old, since man was placed on earth, that the triumphing of the wicked is short, and the joy of the hypocrite is but for a moment? Though his haughtiness mounts up to the heavens, and his head reaches to the clouds, yet he will perish forever like his own refuse; those who have seen him will say, "Where is he?"' Funto, you can't fret at the success of the wicked. For it is but for a moment if such person does not repent and turn to God. Their destruction comes in a flash."

Funto nodded. "I understand. But..." She shook her head. "It's not easy."

Mrs Peters heaved a sigh. "I never said it is. I remember when I was diagnosed with breast cancer. I jittered at first. I questioned God. I wept. Each time I looked at you and your siblings, I would cry and roll on the floor. I didn't want to leave you. You were young. You needed me. I became angry. I did all sort." She wiped off the tears that had formed in her eyes.

"But when God gave me the understanding of His steadfast love for me. I lost focus on the medical diagnosis. I submitted my life to God. And told Him to let His will be done. I knew if I died, He would take care of you, your siblings, and your father. That didn't stop me from praying for healing, however. I had surgery done. The doctor said there was little hope even with the surgery." She exhaled, her expression changed to misery. Tears dripped from her eyes.

“I was started on chemotherapy. Our finance plummeted. There was no help. I stopped going for treatment. We couldn’t afford it. I told my husband to work so as to take care of you. Enough of spending on chemotherapy. I pleaded with him not to weep too much when I pass away. I prepared his mind. I wanted a simple funeral. I was going to meet my Lord, after all. But here I am today, over twenty years after. I’m not yet dead. I’m still serving Him. God came through for me.”

Funto embraced her mum and wept on her shoulders. She allowed her words to sink in.

“Funto, you’re blessed with the right man. If you hadn’t sought God’s will and gone after your desire. I doubt if you’d have a place to call home now, with this kind of challenge. If it were some men, they would have sent you packing long before now. God knows best. He orchestrates things in our favour. Even at times we choose not to recognise it.”

Funto withdrew. “Mary told me Dave was likely having an affair secretly.”

“Don’t listen to that lady. Dave won’t do something like that. Don’t allow anyone to pitch you against your husband. He’s been a supportive man all this while.”

Her mum was right. Thoughts ran through her head. Dave had been every good thing put together as a man. Patient, loving, kind, everything good. She was the impatient one. She was the one at fault. “Mum, I fought Dave. I slapped him. I didn’t mean to but I did. We’ve not spoken since I came here.”

Mrs Peters’ eyes widened. “What! Why? What happened?”

Funto took time to explain to her mum. How Dave had lost his job. Dave’s opinion about assisted conception. Dave’s payment to the company. The rent issue. And the fight.

“The devil is a liar. He intends to tear your home apart so as to break you. You’ve allowed him enough to run your affairs.”

Funto flattened her lips. “What do I do now? Dave has never stayed away from me for so long without reaching me. I thought Mary was right. I thought he had an affair and a child elsewhere.”

“So you have stayed here, pining away, instead of sticking with your husband and fighting this battle together.”

Remorse washed over her. “I don’t know what to do. I’ve lost Dave.”

“You haven’t. You must wake up and stand your ground. First, you need to ask God for mercy. Forgiveness for all you’ve done. In your supposed righteousness, you have sinned. Seek God’s face again. Second, you must return home. First thing tomorrow morning in fact. Apologise to your husband. Win him back physically and spiritually. Then hold his hand and walk through this alley together, never minding what the fire does to you. The righteous are as bold as a lion.”

Funto wept. “Mum, can you lead me to Christ all over again. I I-I’m so sorry.”

“It’s okay. God loves you still. The Bible says in Psalm 51:17, ‘The sacrifices of God are a broken spirit, a broken and a contrite heart—these, O God, You will not despise.’” She held Funto’s hands and they prayed together.

“Take.” She handed the Bible to Funto. “Open the book of Job 8:20-21”

Funto did. “It reads, ‘Behold, God will not cast away the blameless, nor will He uphold the evildoers. He will yet fill your mouth with laughing, and your lips with rejoicing.’”

“I leave that with you to ponder on. Funto, our God is faithful.”

Funto nodded and smiled. “He is.” Something touched the shutters. The windows of her heart opened, and rays of God’s light streamed into her heart, ridding it of gloom and dispelling the thick darkness that had enveloped it.

She smiled. Peace flooded her heart.

CHAPTER THIRTY

Dave lay on the couch. He flexed his hands and tucked them beneath his head. He had slept so much his eyes were sick of it. Thanks to Andrew, he could sleep with his eyes closed.

Andrew had lent him a six-month rent. Although the concierge had threatened Dave that he wouldn’t take anything less than a year rent from him. But it seemed God had intervened. The moment Dave gave the man the money, he simply murmured and issued him a receipt. He warned Dave not to tarry in paying future rent and left him in peace. Dave couldn’t be happier. Being finally able to get the brusque agent off his neck was an achievement.

Dave’s phone chimed. A text message. He stretched out his hand and took the phone from the table. He pressed a button and read the message displayed. He blinked and read the message again. He had been offered a job in an organisation based in Ibadan.

Dave jumped off the couch and screamed. He ran in various directions. “Wow! Thank you, Lord.” He read the message again. It was real. And was addressed to him. He was to resume work the following Monday. He jumped with glee and threw a fist in the air. “Glory to God!”

He dialled a set of numbers. Kenny picked. Dave told him about the offer and informed him he would be staying at his house until he got his own place. Kenny congratulated him and joyfully told him he would await his arrival.

Dave spent the rest of the day packing his things. Everything he would need. He needed to travel to Ibadan as soon as possible in order to be ready for work on Monday.

Dave left Lagos for Ibadan the next day. Kenny and his wife welcomed him with open arms. Dave would stay in the guest room and eat from the family's pot until he could fend for himself.

Dave's first day at work went smoothly. He was informed about his role, duties, and everything relating to the offer, including his salary. The salary wasn't much—thirty-five thousand naira—but it was something to start with. Until he had a better choice.

Dave was dressing up for work on Tuesday morning when his phone rang. *Not now. I'm late.* He went to the socket where his phone was plugged. The phone had been switched off since the previous day until this morning. He checked the caller. Funto. He eyed the phone and walked to the mirror.

He fixed his cufflinks and checked his reflection. He was good to go. The phone didn't stop ringing. Once a cycle ended, another began. Dave snatched the phone and declined the call. Why was Funto calling him now? She had left him when he needed her most. She probably had gone after her lovers. Was her drama over? Irritation welled up his throat. He pressed some buttons and began to type a text message.

Hi. I'm not sure why you are calling me. But you need not. It's over between us. And I mean it. I wish you the best in life. Good luck.

Dave sent the message to Funto before switching off his phone. He would need to get another number. Because Funto could call again.

He stepped out of the room, said his good bye to Kenny and his wife, and made his way out of the house.

Clock ticked. Hands rested and feet moved. The day's work was over. Dave left. On his way home, he branched at a telecom and got a new SIM pack. He registered the number and left for home.

What he needed now was to focus on how to make a headway. He didn't have time for a wayward, impatient, and inconsiderate wife.

Dave inserted the new SIM card into his phone. A good way to start, he thought. Only those he wanted would have access to him.

Funto returned home a changed person. The house didn't have a new lock and their things were still in the apartment. She needed nobody to tell her the caretaker hadn't ejected Dave from the house. Maybe he had finally paid the rent.

Funto went into the kitchen. It was neat, although recently used. There was no unwashed kitchen utensil.

She checked the rooms. Dave was absent. Probably he had gone to one of the places where he did menial jobs.

Funto went to a nearby market. She bought choice meat, vegetables, and other foodstuffs. She returned home and began to cook. She made Dave's favourite meal. She wanted to apologise. And she knew she had to do it well.

Funto waited all day. But Dave didn't show up. What went wrong? Where could he be? She reached for her phone and dialled his number.

"The number you are trying to reach is switched off. Please try again later or press one to leave a voice message," an automated machine informed her.

She tried over and over again, it was same answer. Negative thoughts crawled up her mind. Dave with a mistress. Dave involved in an accident. Dave gone crazy. She discarded the thoughts and rebuked them as they came.

When dusk came with its unloving darkness, Funto went to sleep.

Funto woke up to a new day. She said her prayers, with Dave being at the centre of it.

As soon as she got off the bed, she picked her phone and called Dave. It rang, exciting her nerves. She awaited an answer. None came. She tried over and over. The connection broke. 'User busy' displayed on her phone. She knew what that meant. Dave saw her call and declined.

Maybe he wanted to call her back. She waited. Her phone beeped. It was a text message from Dave.

"Hi. I'm not sure why you are calling me. But you need not. It's over between us. And I mean it. I wish you the best in life. Good luck," the text read.

Funto blinked. This had to be a bad dream. It couldn't be real. She read it again. It was the same. She broke into tears. "Oh God, please. I can't cope with this. Please." She crumbled on the floor. She redialled Dave's number. It was switched off. Funto wailed.

She forwarded the text to her mum. Her mum called. She picked, still weeping. "Hello, ma."

"I got your text. What was that?" Mrs Peters said over the phone.

“I lost Dave. He didn’t come home. I called him...” Funto sobbed. “But he wouldn’t speak to me. He sent me that text message. I’ve not been able to reach him afterwards.”

Mrs Peters exhaled. She knew what the message meant. “Funto. Stop crying. I guess the devil has gotten to him. You have to fight for your marriage. You need to fast and pray if that’s what it requires. Win him back. Take your stand and get back your home.”

“Mum, I need help.” She sniffed. “I can’t lose Dave. Help me.”

“God will help you. I’ll be praying for you as well. I will also try to reach his mum and talk to her. God will have His way.”

“Amen.”

“Don’t stop praying.”

“I won’t.”

“How about your work?”

“I ought to resume today. But I can’t. I have to stay home and pray today. Tomorrow I’ll go.”

“That’s a good idea. Devil will surely be put to shame.”

“Amen. Thank you, Mum.”

“You’re welcome.”

Funto hung up. She read the text message again. Her heart bled.

She straightened and paced the room. The dream she’d had a long time ago flashed in her mind. She’d carelessly paved a way for division. But she was ready to allow God mend things. She wouldn’t give up on her marriage. Never.

She walked to the bed and took hold of her Bible. She read from it and began to pray. Heartfelt prayers.

δδδδδ

Dave sat in the cubicle that served as his office. He copied some notes from a ledger onto a sheet of paper. Someone peeked from over the partition board. Dave looked up.

Stella stood across him, smiling. “Hey Dave. How’re you? It’s past one. Let’s go for lunch.”

Dave smiled. Stella’s face wasn’t strange to him. She was his senior colleague at work. And she liked him. Or was that not what he perceived? She practically doted on him. Right from the first day he resumed.

Stella stepped out from behind the cubicle and approached him. She was tall, spotlessly fair, and a ravishing beauty, just as Funto was. But unlike Funto, Stella was leaner and didn’t have much muscles and fat. Funto had gained weight over

time. Stella was the right kind of figure one could call statuesque. She paraded. Dave stared, smiling.

Stella held his hand and pulled him to his feet. “All work and no play make Jack a dull boy. Let’s go eat.”

“I I-I don’t...”

“Don’t worry. I’m paying.” She always paid. She was caring and kind, turning the organisation to a safe haven for Dave. She was the reason Dave’s homesickness was reduced to the barest minimum.

Dave shook his head. “I feel ashamed. You can’t keep paying. You, go and eat, I’ll be fine.”

Stella smiled. The kind of smile that could steal the heart of a man in half a second. It was a wonder that her kind of woman would be unmarried at thirty-six. So many good attributes. Was she not the perfect woman to make a wife? Or was there more to her than meet the eye? Maybe that was all in the past.

Stella was more than ready to make any willing man her husband. How much more if the man in question was the one that met her dream description? She would give anything to have him.

Stella opened her purse. She removed a couple of one-thousand-naira notes and placed it on his desk. “Okay. You pay this time around.”

“But the money is still coming from you,” Dave said.

“That’s known to you only.” She bent her head and whispered, “No one has to know. You can have everything in my purse if you want.” She adjusted her head, smiling. “Now let’s go. No more excuse.”

Dave exhaled. “Okay then.” He stood, pocketed the money, and followed her.

They went to a nearby restaurant. Dave and Stella sat across each other.

Dave glanced at Stella. “What would you like?”

“Anything you order. Men are the heads. They are to make the orders. Mine is to obey.” She winked.

Dave smiled. *So humble. Isn’t she?* Something dropped in his mind. “I insist that you order today. I’ve always ordered. Let today be your turn.”

“As your lordship pleases.” Stella ordered for food for both of them.

An attendant served them. They ate. Stella took a meat from her plate, bit a chunk off, and raised the remaining to Dave’s mouth. Dave glanced at her in an awkward way.

“Take it,” Stella said, smiling.

Dave opened his mouth to talk. Stella pushed the meat into his mouth and chuckled.

“Look at your face,” she said.

Dave chewed, laughing. “Naughty you.”

They finished eating. Dave beckoned on the attendant. “How much are we to pay?”

“Two thousand, six hundred naira only,” the attendant answered.

Dave frowned. “For what?”

“Two plates of amala, catfish, goat meat and two bottles of water.”

Stella grinned. “We ate well, we need to pay well.”

Dave handed three thousand naira to the attendant. She collected the money and turned to Stella. “Auntie, this your husband is a miser.”

Stella smiled. “My husband is not a miser, he’s only being prudent.” She poked Dave’s cheek teasingly.

Dave wanted to correct the attendant that he wasn’t Stella’s husband, but was stopped short. He wondered why Stella welcomed the comment so warmly.

The attendant turned to go and get their change.

“My husband said you should keep the change,” Stella said at the top of her voice.

“Uh-oh. Thank you, sir,” the attendant said, smiled, and left.

Dave and Stella straightened. They walked out of the restaurant hand in hand.

“Stella, you were supposed to correct that lady. But instead, you screamed, affirming what she had said. Why did you do that?”

“Dave, you are funny. Why would you think I would rebuke a good pronouncement over my life? We’re both adults. Won’t I be glad if you become my husband?”

“Are you kidding me?” Dave said. Marrying another woman was not a priority now. Breakthrough first. Other things later. He just wanted to be her friend. That was all.

“I was even going to tell you that people are beginning to speculate that we have something going on between us. Shouldn’t we turn that into reality?” Stella said.

Her statement hit him. His jaw sagged. Reality? So soon? He had barely spent three weeks at work. Was having an affair the next thing on his agenda?

“You’re a clown, Stella.”

She arched a brow. “I’m serious. We are not kids. We can make this work. And if you want it discreet. Well, I know how to do discreet as well.”

Dave exhaled. “That’s impulsive. We’re just getting to know each other, Stella. And I just got to the company.”

“It’s not impulsive. It’s wisdom. We don’t need years to familiarise with each other before we make necessary decision.”

“What makes you think I’m not already married?”

“You don’t wear a ring. And it doesn’t seem so. At least I know you stay with your friend.”

She was right. Dave had removed his wedding ring in anger and kept it in his bag. He had wanted nothing to bring Funto to his mind.

“What if she’s not just around here?”

“It doesn’t matter. I don’t care much about stuffs like that. If she was in your past, she’d stay there. If she’s somewhere in the present, she could maintain her space. That wouldn’t affect us.” Desperation flashed in her eyes.

“Hmm.” Dave nodded. “I’m married, Stella. I don’t talk about my wife because we are currently having issues. But I don’t take my own decisions like that. I take time to think.” He withdrew his hand. “And I pray,” he added.

Stella smiled. “I’m not desperate. I’ll wait for you. Take your time. When you’re ready, we’ll kick off.”

“I can’t make any promise.”

Stella took his hand and patted it. “You don’t have to make any, darling. You’ll yield when it is time.” Confidence bounced off her voice.

Dave exhaled. He would think about it later.

δδδδδ

Funto walked on a pathway, dragging a beautiful, black leather bag along. The bag hit stones and got scratched as she walked on. Funto didn’t notice. Her focus was on an ornamental plant ahead.

Funto got to where the ornamental plant was. She dropped the bag and reached for it. In an instant, the plant became dust. Funto hissed. She turned around to pick her bag and continue her journey. But the bag was gone. She glanced around and saw a female giant taking it away.

Funto ran after her. She lay hold on the bag and pulled it. “This is mine. Why would you take away what is mine? Give it to me.” Funto struggled, trying to force the bag out of the giant’s hand.

The giant’s hands were unlike Funto’s. The hands were made of brass, holding the bag in death grip.

“This bag isn’t yours. I didn’t take it from you. I saw it on the floor, unkempt and scratched. It belongs to me now,” the giant said, her voice the deepest baritone possible.

“How could you say that? Did you lose your own bag? Why would you pick something that belonged to another? That’s covetousness. It didn’t matter if the bag had an owner or not. It’s not yours. You shouldn’t have taken it.” Funto pulled the bag. The more she pulled, the tighter the giant’s grip.

“Teach me, oh teacher. If you truly needed it, you wouldn’t have left it on the floor. Anything that gets into my grip stays there. Forget this bag, it is mine now.”

“It’s my fault that I left it there. But I won’t let go of it.”

“Let’s destroy it then. No one gets it. How about that?”

“No,” Funto screamed and fought frantically to snatch the bag.

Funto woke up. It was all a dream. She understood the dream immediately. It was a call for battle or she would suffer a great loss.

It had been over three weeks she’d been trying to reach Dave to no avail. She’d gone to his parents, but all they had to tell her was that Dave was fine. They claimed they didn’t know where he was. And told her Dave only called to assure them he was doing fine. They couldn’t reach him either. Only he could reach them.

All her efforts geared towards locating Dave had been futile. But she’d kept her hopes up and continued prayers.

Funto took her Bible. She sang some songs of praise and said prayers of thanksgiving.

She opened her Bible to Isaiah 49:24-25 ‘Shall the prey be taken from the mighty, or the captives of the righteous be delivered? But thus says the LORD: Even the captives of the mighty shall be taken away, and the prey of the terrible be delivered; for I will contend with him who contends with you, and I will save your children.’

Funto paced. “I decree in the name of Jesus, Dave you’re set free. From every iron grip. From the grip of strange woman...” she prayed on, until her body was drenched in sweat.

CHAPTER THIRTY-ONE

Dave sat in his cubicle, working.

Stella came by. She dropped a package on Dave's table and leaned against him.

"I went by a store and got you this." She placed her hand on his shoulder. "Happy Valentine's day, darling."

Dave had completely forgotten. Today was February 14th, Valentine's day. "Uh. Thank you."

Stella bent and kissed his forehead. "You're welcome, Friend."

Dave felt something stir in his heart. "We're in the office, Stella."

"Sorry, I just couldn't hold back. And it's not as if I kissed your lips." She pouted.

"Stop it, Stella."

"Sorry. I don't want you upset."

Dave opened the package. A pair of pointed-tip, black Italian shoes, a striped brown T-shirt, a pair of denim trousers, and a wristwatch case. He removed the wristwatch. It was branded. The type he could only afford with a months' salary.

His jaw dropped. His eyes widened in bewilderment. "Stella! These are too much."

"It's the least I can do. All I need is your consent and I'll take you on a trip to the moon."

Dave removed his shoes and put on the new ones. Perfect fit. "How did you know my size?"

"Keen observation." Stella smiled.

"Oh my!" Dave shot up and embraced her. "Thank you so much. I appreciate your kindness." He withdrew from the embrace. "But I can't accept these."

"Why not?"

"Is Valentine's day not about exchange of gifts? How could I accept your gifts when I have nothing to give in return?"

Stella smiled. She tipped her head. "Oh you do. Right here." She tapped the left portion of his chest. "I already told you. I'll wait for you. When you're ready, we'll kick off." She kissed his cheek and left.

Dave stood, stunned. Strong emotions fired in his brain and body.

What is wrong with me? How can I be feeling this way towards Stella?

He plunked on his chair. His eyes running over the gifts Stella had brought him.

It had been a while he was with a woman. And here was a woman who wanted him with every fibre of her being. Who would respect him and care for him. Perhaps this was God's way of rewarding all his years of loving kindness and faithfulness to Funto.

Stella went to church. She was a Christian. Single. Beautiful. Amazing. What else did he want? In Ibadan, a city he loved, he could get an apartment of his own and settle down with Stella. He needed a child to bear his name. Stella could be the answer to that. Answer to it all.

Dave fantasised. A beautiful apartment he shared with Stella. Three kids—two boys and a girl. Stable flow of income. Happily ever after.

"Mr Ayodele!" Hannah, a petite woman in her late twenties said, tapping Dave.

Dave jerked. "Oh sorry."

"I've been calling you. You seemed lost. What's on your mind?"

"Nothing, Hannah. What can I do for you?"

"Mrs Omotowo wants to see you in her office."

"Oh my God. She's back already?"

"Yeah. What is the problem?"

"You can't understand."

"Try me."

"I was supposed to submit the K.E.C advert plan yesterday. But I couldn't. And I'm still not through with it. She must be requesting to see me because of that. What do I do now?"

"Have you not started work on it?"

"I have. It's just that it needs some adjustment."

"Take what you have to her and explain why you're not yet done."

"As if you don't know she's a very strict person."

"She's strict for the good of the organisation. But she's a very understanding, kind-hearted woman. Try doing what I told you. You'll be surprised."

"Okay. Thank you. I don't even have a choice."

Dave searched for a particular brown file amongst a pile of files. He got it, pulled it out, and went to his boss's office.

Dave knocked, turned the doorknob, and entered. "Good afternoon, ma."

"A good afternoon to you, too. Please have your seat," Mrs Omotowo said.

“Thank you.” Dave sat across her. “Er. I’m sorry I’ve not brought the advert plan before now.” He placed the file on the table and opened it. “I’ve started working on it. All that remains is perfection. You can go through it.”

“Not until you are through with your part.” She pushed the file forward. “I didn’t call you because of this.”

Dave nodded. *Another task.* “All right, ma.”

“Mr Ayodele, are you a Christian?”

Dave raised his brow. “Yes I am.”

“Okay. That’s a good start. I’m sorry for intruding in your life. But I must do this.”

Dave wore a puzzled look. “I’m all ears, ma’am.”

“God told me you’re slipping away. I didn’t really give it much thought until I had a revelation about you. It was so terrifying that I couldn’t wish it for you even if you were my enemy.”

Dave blinked. “Uh, I don’t understand.”

“I sincerely apologise. This is absolutely unofficial and private. Please bear with me.”

“Okay.”

“Thank you.” She sat straighter and leaned forward, her forearms planted on the large table. “Mr Ayodele, you need to beware so you won’t be caught in the web of darkness. God loves you and He’s calling out to you. In the revelation I had, I saw you caught in a web of thorns and thrown onto quicksand. You were sinking, but the thorns incapacitated you from trying to reach for a nearby tree stump. A woman appeared with a rope. She slung the rope around you to pull you up, but then another woman came and tried to frustrate the first woman’s effort. Allow me to be a bit informal please. Dave, what can you make of that?”

Dave exhaled. Web of thorns. Quicksand. Two women—one attempting to save, the other trying to destroy.

Was that not quite simple? Web of thorns represented the hardship he was in. And the Quicksand? That should be the fact that he had a poor-paying job and less than an average life, which he definitely needed help to get out from. The woman trying to save—that couldn’t be anyone but Stella. She’d been his help, no doubt. The other woman—that could be his wife or any other intruder. He nodded. “Uh...” He hesitated. He couldn’t tell his boss all that.

“I’m not sure. But I think it’s a call to pray more against evil intrusion.”

“Well, you’re partially right. I prayed about it vehemently. And I perceived in my spirit that you’re caught between two women, because in that revelation, you were ignoring the woman trying to save you and looking up to the one with the evil agendum. Are you married?”

“Er... Yes, I was.”

“Was? What happened?”

Not now. He wasn't interested in talking about Funto. “Nothing much, things didn't work out and we parted ways.”

“And your children?”

“We had none.”

“Thank You, Holy Spirit. Now I have a clearer understanding. The thorns I saw represented unforgiving heart and hatred. And the quicksand is the evil that is and that is to come. The woman with the rope is your wife. And the other woman...” She exhaled and stared into his eyes as though seeking his permission to continue.

Dave was interested. He wanted to hear it all. He nodded her to continue.

“That other woman was Stella Ugba.”

Dave froze. What! How did she know what was happening between him and Stella? There were speculations going around in the office but that remained among the junior staff. Dave wondered. “Er... Uh...”

“Are you surprised? I have seen the two of you together a couple of times. But that's not the premise for my conclusion. I saw Stella's face in my revelation.” She paused and studied his face.

“Dave, you can't jump into the arms of another woman because your wife hurt you or is not good enough, whatever the excuse. What makes you think the other woman is better? She would do anything to get your attention but once you step onto her land, you'll realise it's nothing but quicksand.”

Dave bowed his head. Thoughts ran through his head.

“I beg you, Dave, please don't make this mistake. I want you to revisit the issue between you and your wife and seek possible solution. Don't make a decision you'll regret forever. I don't know your wife from Adam. I don't even know what she looks like, so I couldn't be making this up for her. Stella on the other hand is a member of my staff—a diligent one at that. Meaning that she has a place in my heart. I've been praying for marital settlement for her. So I have no reason whatsoever to hinder her blessing. But this isn't the blessing I prayed for her. You're a married man. Both of you aren't meant to be. I hope you understand me. I genuinely mean no harm.”

“Thank you, ma.”

“I want you to go back and seek the face of God concerning it. Don't make a mistake that would be irredeemable. P-l-e-a-s-e.”

“Thank you very much. I appreciate your concern.”

“You're welcome.”

Dave straightened. He picked the file from the table.

“Back to business, please make sure the plan is ready latest by Friday,” Mrs Omotowo said.

“Friday is too long. I’ll submit it before Thursday.”

“All right.”

Dave returned to his cubicle. Various thoughts ran through his mind.

“Hey, Dave.”

Dave lifted his head. Stella approached him. “Hi.”

“What’s wrong with you? Your expression is…”

“I’m fine. Thank you.”

“I was wondering if we could go out after work. Celebrate today together.”

Dave looked lost. “What are we celebrating?”

Stella beamed. “Valentine’s day of course.”

“I’m sorry. I have to do some things at home. Some other time.”

Stella clasped her hands. “Please. We won’t stay long. Just an hour, I promise.”

Dave shook his head. Her boss’s revelation set off an alarm in his head. “No!”

Stella’s eyes widened. Dave had never raised his voice at her. “Are you okay, Dave? Have I done something wrong? I’m so sorry.”

Dave controlled himself. He forced a smile. “I’m sorry I was impulsive. I have a lot on my mind right now. Please, just give me some time.”

“All right. Anything for you.” Stella patted his back and left him.

Dave placed his head against the table and muttered words of prayer.

CHAPTER THIRTY-TWO

Dave opened a backpack. He dumped his things—toothbrush, toothpaste, shoe polish, a pair of trousers, a round-necked vest, and a few other things—into it. He zipped the bag.

He was travelling to Lagos for the weekend. Mrs Omotowo's advice had been a burden on his heart. He strongly felt a need for some alone time to pray. Kenny's house wasn't the best place for what he wanted. Dave knew every last Saturday was a day to tidy up the house and its environs. Dave couldn't give his hosts an excuse for not participating. His apartment in Lagos was the perfect place where he could have a personal retreat. Where he could be free from distractions. Funto couldn't have known he had paid the rent. She probably was still wherever she ran to.

Dave tied his shoelaces. He slung the backpack over his shoulder. He switched off the bulb in the room and stepped into the living room. "Kenny, I have to be on my way now."

Kenny looked away from the TV. "Oh, that's all right. When should we expect you back?"

"Sunday evening. You know I have to get back to work on Monday."

"All right, man. Have a safe trip."

Dave walked to his friend and shook his hands. "Thanks, man. My regards to your wife."

"Okay. Stay good."

Dave walked out of the house and began his journey home.

It was 8:05 pm when Dave arrived Lagos. He boarded a tricycle home.

Dave checked the door. It was locked. Definitely, Funto wasn't back. He shook his head, took out his keys, and opened the door.

The house was in perfect state, no cobwebs, dust cover, or disuse smell. Was four weeks not enough to develop all that? He sat on a couch.

Hunger gnawed at his stomach. He opened his backpack and brought out suya—local barbeque—wrapped in a paper. He had bought it on his way home. He needed some cassava flour and a cup of water to make a complete meal.

He walked into the kitchen. The bucket containing cassava flour was filled to the brim. The last time he'd checked, it was almost empty. Was this a miracle? How

come? He checked other food containers. They were all stocked. He glanced at a corner. Tubers of yam were stacked on a pallet beside a small basket filled with onions. Above it, stockfish hung from a hanger impaled on the wall.

Dave's eyes widened. Had Funto been around the house? He checked the pots. Empty.

He scooped some cassava flour into a cup. He opened the fridge to pick a bottle of water. The fridge was jam-packed. Different containers, different food. Juice. Water. Milk. All sorts.

Something was definitely happening here. He shut the fridge, dropped the cup in his hand, and walked out of the kitchen.

He hastened to the room, opened the door, and peered. Bed was empty. He turned to leave. On a second thought, he walked into the room. His eyes drifted. On the floor, beside the wardrobe, a body lay. Head covered, face down, and still body.

Dave froze. He took a step back. "Hey!" he said. He focused. It was Funto. He hissed and made for the door. But what was she doing on the floor, in that position? He turned around and went close to her. "Funto." No answer came. "Funto!"

She lay there, still, unruffled.

Dave's heart skipped a beat. He bent and tapped her. She didn't respond. He shook her, screaming her name. No response. He pulled up her hand and dropped it. It fell without resistance.

"Ah! What have you done to yourself Funto?" Tears tugged at his eyes. His heart pounded. His head was clogged. He threw his hands over his head. He was in trouble. What would he do?

A thought dropped in his heart. *No one knew you came home. Go out. Return to Ibadan. Steer clear of this trouble.*

He paced. Sweat formed on his face. The hunger he felt before became impalpable.

He's your wife. You can't just leave her and disappear. It's the doctor's duty to certify people dead. Take her to the hospital. Another thought.

How would he take her to the hospital at this time of the day? He didn't even have a car. He reasoned briefly.

Dave ran out and went to the next apartment. "God please. God please," he muttered as he knocked repeatedly.

The door opened. A tall dark man stood in the doorway. "Good evening. Long time."

"Good evening, sir. I just came home. Please I need your help. My wife is sick. And I need to take her to the hospital."

"Oh, please do. The Lord will heal her."

"I was thinking you could help with a ride."

The man's countenance changed. "My wife gave birth three days ago. We just got home. I can't leave her with the kids all by herself."

"Okay. Congratulations, sir. Actually, I can drive. Could you lend me a car? I'll bring it back immediately I get my wife to the hospital. Please."

The man thought about it for a few seconds. "Okay. Wait here." He went inside. He reappeared few minutes after, a car key dangling in his hand. "Here you are. The key of my wife's red Volvo. Please be careful. You know women and cars."

Dave nodded. "I will. Thanks so much."

Dave dashed to the car. He opened the door. He rushed back into his room, lifted Funto in his hands, and carried her to the car. He drove out of the compound to the nearest hospital.

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Funto lay on the hospital bed, eyes shut, body flaccid. If any movement occurred, it was of a fly.

Some medical equipment was connected to Funto's body. And the incessant beep of the cardiac monitor upset the quietness in the room.

Dave perched on the bedside chair, staring at Funto's face, her hand in his. He muttered words of prayer, gently fiddling with her fingers. His locked-up love for Funto flooded his heart. He couldn't wish her dead. Never.

It was the third day he'd been frequenting the hospital. The doctor had told him she was in a hypoglycaemic coma and would recover. But she was yet to regain consciousness.

Funto's eyelids fluttered. She opened her eyes. Closed them. And reopened them. Her eyes slowly absorbed the pictures of her surroundings. The hospital bed, medical equipment, the intravenous fluid that dripped every ten seconds, the bedside chair, and Dave.

Dave? She zoomed in. Dave had his head bowed and eyes shut, muttering. Was she dreaming or was it really Dave? The Dave she'd been fasting and praying as well as craving for. Dave, her estranged husband.

Tears sprung up her eyes. She didn't want to know where she was or what she was doing there, as far as Dave was beside her, she was at peace.

"D-Da-Dave?" she stuttered.

Dave flung his eyes open. He wanted to be sure he heard his name and wasn't imagining.

"Dave." Funto's lips quirked in preparedness for sobs.

"Funto. You're awake." Dave straightened and bent over her, running his hands over her face and body. "Are you okay? Are you fine? Can you see me?"

Funto nodded and broke into tears. Dave embraced her. They wept. Until Dave's brain warned him his back was stressed. Dave slowly released her and resumed his seat.

"I'm so happy you're awake," Dave said.

"I'm the happy one. I missed you so much." Sincerity hopped in Funto's eyes.

Dave's quietened a laugh. Funto missed him? "Hmm."

"Dave. I'm sorry for all I have done wrong." She grappled his fingers as though to prevent him from running away. "I apologise for being arrogant and self-willed. I am sorry for frustrating you and losing confidence in you. And..." She sobbed. "And... I apologise for deserting you when I was most needed."

Dave inhaled and exhaled. Funto's words shattered the remnant of the wall he'd built around his heart. He placed his head against her body. "I forgive you, Funto. I sincerely forgive you. And I'm sorry for all my inadequacies."

Funto pulled out the nasal oxygen catheter and the nasogastric tube. She raised her head, ignoring the dull headache she felt. She kissed Dave's forehead. "I love you, Dave, with all of my heart. I was just confused, angry, and scared. Scared that you probably had a mistress and a child somewhere."

"You know I can't do that to you. I love you as I love my very self. It never crossed my mind in fact. You should have talked to me about it."

"I wasn't sure. And Mary said you wouldn't confess."

"Mary? Which Mary?" Dave hoped the Mary in question would be different from his wife's best friend.

Funto blinked. Mentioning Mary's name was a slip of tongue. She knew she wasn't supposed to tell her husband what Mary had told her about him. "Uh. Er."

With piqued interest, Dave searched her eyes. "Tell me nothing but the truth, Funto. Which Mary were you talking about?"

"My- My friend. Or maybe I should say our friend."

"What did she tell you," Dave said. Funto hesitated. "Talk to me, Funto."

"She said something about having a child outside of marriage. And that your calmness about my childlessness was probably borne out of your desire to cover up an extramarital affair."

Dave sat straight. He clapped his hands in a way that signified he was surprised at Funto's confession. "You mean Mary told you that?"

"Please just forgive us both. Please."

Dave laughed. "This same Mary told me you were having an affair with your boss and was sleeping around with your male colleagues. She told me how bad your past was. And how deserving of fibroid you were."

Funto gaped. How could her friend fabricate such?

"You are surprised? I was as well."

“Dave, I bare my heart before you. I have never known any man beside you, and I never will. Mary’s story is a bunch of lies.”

Dave took her hand. “I believe you. And I’m sorry I doubted you.”

“I’m sorry, too.” Funto wiped her face.

“So what did you do to yourself? I was frayed when I came home and met you lying lifeless on the floor.”

“I’m not sure. All I know is that I’ve been fasting and praying since the second Tuesday of the month.”

“What! Why?”

Funto sighed. “So you would come home.”

“Fasted for that long because of me?”

Funto nodded. Dave kissed her. “I love you, dear. No wonder God warned me through my boss.”

“Boss?”

“Yes. I have a job in Ibadan now. That’s why I’ve not been home.”

“Oh my! I thought you moved to a mistress’s place.”

“No. I stayed with Kenny. Thanks for fighting for us. I almost lost it.”

“Thank God. I bless God for sending you back at the right time. I’d probably have passed away.”

“Glory to God.”

Dave embraced his wife again.

CHAPTER THIRTY-THREE

The weeks following Funto's discharge went into establishing a new beginning between Funto and her husband. They prayed for God's mercy as a unit and sought His face.

Dave returned to Ibadan. To his work. With the promise of visiting home on weekends. Funto went back to work as well.

Funto intensified prayers about her husband's relocation. She couldn't leave her husband in the hands of women like Stella. Desperate and covetous. Not after Dave had told her all about Stella Ugba.

Funto and Dave had both submitted to God's will and chosen to stop worrying, whether or not they had children. But Funto knew what havoc Stella could cause in her home if she wasn't prayerful.

Funto discussed with her husband about moving to Ibadan. She didn't mind quitting her job. Although she'd have to pay off her loans before tendering her resignation. But Dave dissuaded her. Funto's job was paying better, enough to clear their debts over a shorter period and maintain an average lifestyle. And they didn't have any leading from God concerning her resignation. They had to keep pushing until God intervened and changed the situation.

Dave promised to keep Stella at arm's length. And he didn't stop applying for jobs.

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Funto sat in her office, busy sorting out files. She dropped the last file in her hand on a file tray.

Thoughts of Mary crossed her mind. Funto hadn't seen Mary since she returned fully to work. Funto had been unstable at work for a while. Going back and forth. Taking leave of absence. Thanks to her assistant who took majority of the burden on her shoulders. And the director, whom Funto believed had been touched at heart by God Himself. She probably would have been retrenched or forced to resign.

Funto's instability and condition had created a gulf between her and Mary.

Funto's conversation with her husband at the hospital relived in her head. She had forgiven Mary, but couldn't douse the urge to air her mind. Only if she could ask Mary the reason for her baseless talk, she would be fine.

Funto straightened and stepped out of her office. She walked to Mary's desk. Mary was not on seat. Funto would have turned back if she hadn't seen other field agents on seat. If they were on seat, it meant today was not their field-trip day.

Funto walked to the reception. She knew Theresa was Mary's friend as well. Theresa and Mary's duty post were closer. Funto's office was on the second floor.

"Hello, Theresa," Funto said and leaned against the counter. "Good afternoon."

Theresa looked away from the computer on her table. "Good afternoon, ma."

"How're you?"

"I'm fine. You?"

"Not bad. Sorry to disturb."

"Not at all."

"Please, do you know Mary's whereabouts? I've not seen her around lately. I went by her desk but she wasn't on seat."

Theresa smiled. She grimaced in a way that sought Funto's approval.

"Talk to me, Theresa. What's going on?"

"Mary is no more with us."

"What! What happened?"

"She left during your last leave. The director retrenched her."

"What went wrong? I'm totally unaware."

Theresa hesitated. Funto stared inquisitively.

Theresa lowered her voice to almost a whisper. "Her husband relocated to Abuja with his pregnant mistress. But not before he harassed the director. Someone informed him Mary had a fling with Mr Amadi. The irresponsible man came here screaming and assaulting boss. He left home the following day. Mary wasn't surprised anyways. The man had never been sound since day one."

"But couldn't Mary apologise to Mr Amadi? Why did he have to lay her off?"

Theresa scoffed. "You can't understand. There's more to that than anyone could grip. Boss was tremendously humiliated. In anger, he said Mary was the one trying to seduce him and blah blah. Mary, of course, was piqued. She took sides with her husband and shouted at the director that he was a womaniser. She blamed him for wanting to disrupt the peace in her marriage. A war zone she called marriage. Everyone knew she wouldn't see the light of another day in this office. I'm sure she wasn't surprised either."

Funto shook her head in sincere pity. "But how is she coping?"

"Does she have a choice? She doesn't. She has to cope."

“How about Priscilla?”

“Priscilla is fine. Going in and out of the hospital.”

“Why? The girl didn’t have sickle-cell disease the last time I checked.”

“I’m not sure of what’s wrong. When I asked Mary, she said Priscilla was diagnosed of a syndrome. I don’t know which one exactly. But it’s bad enough to make her sick every other day. She’s spending her life savings on that girl.”

Funto flattened her lips. “Oh my!”

“The most annoying part is that her husband doesn’t care if the child lives or dies. He completely switched off on them. You need to see Mary now, you’ll pity her in less than a millisecond.”

Compassion welled up Funto’s throat. Her eyes grew misty. “The Lord is her strength. I’ll call her.”

“You will? Well, I don’t think you should.”

“Why?”

“If you knew what Mary had done to your reputation in this place, you’d never associate with her. But it’s your decision anyways.”

Funto exhaled. “Mary is my friend. I’ll call her. Thanks for your time.”

Theresa shrugged. “All right. You’re welcome.”

Funto turned her back and left for her office, her face coated with gloom.

CHAPTER THIRTY-FOUR

Dave walked into AV Plastics. He checked his wristwatch. 2:05 pm. He was five minutes later than the time he was scheduled to meet the director of the company's management board. He'd received a message three days previously to be present today.

Dave adjusted the lapel of the turquoise blue suit he wore. He wanted to look good, as much as possible. He didn't want anyone mocking him that he'd gotten worse since he left the company.

He approached the receptionist. She wasn't familiar. A new employee, she must be, he thought. "Good afternoon."

"Hello, you're welcome to AV Plastics. How can I help you?"

"I'm Mr David Ayodele. I'm to meet with the director today."

"Do you have an appointment?"

"Yes, 2:00 pm."

The receptionist checked through a log. She placed a notebook on the table. "Please write your name and sign."

Dave did as he was told.

"Do you know which office to go?"

"Yes, I do."

"All right. Go ahead."

"Thank you."

Dave walked away. The third office after the lounge. He pulled the door handle and stepped in.

"Good afternoon," Dave said and bobbed his head.

"You're welcome. You are?" a sturdy, dark man with a rotund belly said, rocking his chair.

"Mr D.O. Ayodele."

"Please have your seat. I've been waiting for you."

"Thank you, sir." Dave pulled a chair and sat.

"I am Mr F.B. Okoye. This meeting will be very brief. I have many assignments competing for my time."

"All right."

“Firstly, I want to apologise for the ill-treatment and injustice meted out to you. The decision was based on the available facts at that period.”

Dave shook his head and sighed. “It’s all right. I’m glad God brought this day. I can’t say I wasn’t humiliated, but I thank God all the same.”

“I know how you feel. But you have to let it go. Please.”

Dave nodded. “It’s okay.”

“We eventually got your mails. After thorough investigation, the truth surfaced. We found out you were innocent. On behalf of the management board, I beseech you to accept our sincere apology.”

“Thank you. I appreciate. Apology accepted.”

“And...” He opened a white file and took out three envelopes. “These are for you.” He handed the envelopes to him. “We will await your response.”

Dave examined the envelopes.

“Thanks for your time. I have to leave now,” Mr Okoye said and straightened.

Dave rose to his feet and shook his hands. “Thank you.”

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Dave and Funto finished dinner. Funto cleared the table. She washed the used plates and cutleries, wiped her hands with a flannel, and walked out of the kitchen.

She sat on the couch and watched a program on the plasma TV.

Dave went into his room. He returned to the living room, one of his hands hid at his back.

He sat beside his wife, grinning like a just-fed child.

“Sweetheart.”

Funto turned her face towards her husband. She cocked an eyebrow. “Yes?”

“I have a surprise for you.”

Funto pulled up her legs onto the couch. She flexed her knees and tucked each leg under opposite thigh. “What?”

“Guess.”

Funto glanced at the roof. “Er- uh- uh... A present?”

“No.” He smiled.

“A gift?”

Dave laughed. “What’s the difference between a present and a gift?”

“Okay, I don’t know what the surprise is. Just tell me.”

Dave brought the hidden hand forward. He handed the three envelopes he had received earlier that day to Funto. “Have it.”

Funto collected the envelopes and cast her husband a glance. “And what’re these about?” She examined the envelopes.

“I told you I was going to AV plastics. Those are what I came back home with. Just read through.”

Funto opened the first envelope. An apology letter to Dave from the management board of AV Plastics signed by the director. Smile tugged at Funto’s lips. “Glory to God.”

She opened the second envelope. An offer of appointment as the general manager of a branch of AV Plastics. Her eyes ran through.

...we have found you hardworking, dutiful, credible and worthy.

On this premise, we are pleased to inform you that you are hereby offered an appointment as the general manager of AV Plastics, Ikotun branch.

You are to tender your acceptance in writing, within seven working days of receiving this letter.

Upon acceptance, you are expected to assume work as soon as possible.

However, assumption of duty must be within one month of receiving this letter.

You are expected to abide by the rules and regulations stipulated by the management at all times.

Accept our hearty congratulations...

Funto jumped up. “Glory to God. God is awesome. She lay on the floor and began to roll, singing the praise of God.

Dave laughed. “Dear, check the third envelope as well. So you can sing all your songs at once.”

Funto stood. “My God never fails. God is good.”

She took the third envelope. She opened it and pulled out the content. It wasn’t only a letter as she’d thought. A cheque of seven hundred thousand naira in favour of David Ayodele and a letter indicating the money was a refund plus compensation.

Funto dropped the envelope. With overwhelming delight, she threw her hands around Dave’s shoulders.

“God answered us. His mercy found us. What a faithful Father! May His name be praised,” Funto said, excited.

“Hallelujah!”

Dave held his wife in a warm embrace. They sang hymns and songs of praise to God before they started praying.

CHAPTER THIRTY-FIVE

Eight months rolled by, with Dave as the general manager of AV Plastics, Ikotun branch.

Dave and Funto continued in love, thanksgiving, and faith.

Funto walked out of the hospital. She had been sick for a few days. And her husband had insisted she visited the hospital rather than self-medicate.

Funto stopped a tricycle, her bag hung over her shoulder. She could have called Dave to come pick her up with his car, but he had told her there was an important meeting he had to attend today.

Funto got home. She removed the transparent polythene bag that accommodated the pharmacy supplies prescribed by the doctor.

She slouched to the kitchen, took a sachet of water, and returned to the living room. She dispensed the drugs as prescribed. She swallowed the drugs and gulped water.

Funto took some time to pray before she lay on the couch. She needed to get some rest.

Dave returned from work much later than usual. He opened the door and stepped in. Funto lay on the couch, sleeping.

Dave tiptoed into the room. He changed into his casual wear and went into the kitchen, despite the fatigue that gnawed at his muscles.

He boiled water and made some semolina. He took out a container of vegetable from the fridge and warmed the content. He set the dining table before walking to the living room.

He tapped Funto gently. "Sweetheart, I'm home."

Funto rubbed her eyes. She sat up on the couch. "How are you?" she said, still a little groggy.

"I'm fine. How was your day? How do you feel now?"

"Much better. My day was fine. I left work at noon."

"That's good. I'm sorry for coming home late. I was caught up in another meeting. I didn't know it would span for a long time."

"It's all right. I didn't even notice. I've been sleeping since I returned home."

"Hope you went to the hospital?"

“Yes, I did.” She pulled her bag up from the floor and rummaged it. “I had some tests and was given some drugs.” She pulled out two sheets of paper folded as one. “Have it.”

Dave unfolded the paper and read. The first was a positive malaria test result.

“I’m sure this malaria is stress-induced.” He looked up from the result. “You need to rest more, Funto. For how long will you keep overworking yourself? I know you are diligent, but all work and no play make Jack a dull boy. I think we need a weekend getaway. We could find somewhere nice to go. You’ll unwind and get refreshed.”

Funto smiled. “I’m doing my best, Dave. You know we put our best in all we find our hands doing, as unto the Lord. The extra is simply to repay my boss for retaining my job.”

“I understand. But no more extra henceforth. Just do your best and get some rest. It’s high time we got your own car. I’ll talk to Papa Dee. Public transportation is a bulk of stress on its own.”

“Uh uhn. Thank you, darling.”

“You’re welcome.”

Dave returned his gaze to the results. He removed the first sheet and read through the second. His eyes widened. He straightened. His glance oscillated between Funto and the result. Could this be real? “Funto, you’re pregnant!”

Funto smiled. A smile that grew from the depth of her very soul. “Yes, darling. Our joy is full.”

Dave blinked, his lips flattened. Tears dropped from his eyes. He went on his knees and embraced his wife. He drew a breath.

“Thank You, Lord. Thank You, Jesus,” he said continuously. He withdrew from the embrace, held his wife’s hands, and prayed.

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Funto changed in physicality as well as in few other ways. She slept more and ate more. Sometimes she was tetchy, but she was lively most of the time. Her belly protruded. Her figure changed, as well as her gait.

Funto missed no antenatal appointment and stuck to her doctor’s instructions. She prayed for her unborn children daily. It had become routine. She prepared to receive the children. The ultrasound report had indicated multiple pregnancy. She bought all necessities and awaited delivery.

Days rolled into weeks and weeks into months. Funto fell into labour. The process was normal and progressive. In less than sixteen hours, Funto was

delivered of two bouncing baby boys. It was without doubt the happiest day of Funto and Dave's lives. Their jubilation knew no bound.

On the eighth day, the boys were christened. Caleb and Joshua, they were called.

Amidst the celebration, Mrs Peters called Funto into the room.

She stared into her daughter's eyes. Joy of motherhood danced in Funto's big brown eyes.

"All glory be to God. The Bible says, 'God is not a man, that He should lie, nor a son of man, that He should repent. Has He said, and will He not do? Or has He spoken, and will He not make it good?' God is a faithful Father," Mrs Peters said.

Funto beamed. "Definitely. He is."

"Congratulations to you for getting through this alley of fire."

"It's the Lord's doing, it is marvellous in our eyes."

"It doesn't mean you wouldn't face another in life. As long as we are in this world, challenges will come."

Funto nodded and sighed. "I know, Mum. But I've learnt to trust God better. The Bible says in Psalms 34:19, 'Many are the afflictions of the righteous, but the LORD delivers him out of them all.' Regardless of what comes my way, I will bless the Lord."

Mrs Peters clapped. "Exactly, my darling."

Funto straightened and went to her mum. She wrapped her hands around her.

"Thanks, Mum. Thank you for being a wonderful mother. Thanks for being a model of truth and steadfastness. Thanks for making yourself available for God to use. Thanks for everything." Tears of joy flowed from her eyes.

"All glory belongs to God, ever-faithful, ever-loving Father." Mrs Peters patted her daughter's back, joy shed abroad in her heart. "

THE END

**From the author's desk,
Nigeria.**

Dear Readers,

I want to express my profound gratitude to you for coming along with me on a journey through the pages of 'Alley of Fire'.

I hope the story of Dave and Funto has touched you just as it has done to me.

This story was inspired by God, through the book of Job, in the Holy Bible. I was studying the book when the story was impressed upon my heart. I jotted down the storyline a while before its title came.

Not many believers will encounter what Job did. But we'll face challenges. Different strokes for different folks.

How do we react when we get to the junction of an alley of fire? Do we turn back, find alternative, or go through it with confidence in Christ?

We should all have a deep understanding that our journey as believers will not be all roses. As though being put to test, I faced a short alley of fire during the course of writing this book. I had written well over thirty thousand words. Unfortunately, the device I was using gave up. And effort to retrieve the file was futile. The file was lost. And backup file was not found. It was a crushing disappointment. I believe writers would relate better to that. It felt like a dream at first. Then I wanted to give up on it. I prayed. And God came through, right in the midst of that.

He gave me a fresh start. A better start. Glory to God. I strongly believe He will touch innumerable hearts with this story.

Some of you reading this book have faced challenges in life such that hope was almost lost, but things turned around for good eventually. Some may be currently going through an unpleasant circumstance, to such I say, "Don't give up. Your miracle is on the way."

Others of you may not be in taut shoes like Funto or Dave. But perhaps you have friends or relations passing through challenges. Don't forget to encourage them to hang in there. God's love is as steadfast as ever.

May the Lord give us grace to always look up to Him regardless of what comes our way.

I beseech you to consider this Scripture:

Isaiah 43:2 'When you pass through the waters, I will be with you; and through the rivers, they shall not overflow you. When you walk through the fire, you shall not be burned, nor shall the flame scorch you.'

Matthew 28:20 'Teaching them to observe all things that I have commanded you; and lo, I am with you always, even to the end of age. Amen.'

Finally, several people have written to me in the past, and I have digested every word of every mail. What a tremendous delight to hear from you! Your prayers are a huge encouragement.

Feel free to contact or connect with me. God bless you now and always.

In Christ's steadfast love, Elizabeth Kazeem.

Email: beakreviews@gmail.com

Facebook: www.Facebook.com/elizabethkazeem

Or @elizabethkazeem

Twitter: @elizabethkazeem

Linked in: Elizabeth Kazeem



ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Elizabeth Kazeem is a lover of God, a fiction writer, and a passionate health care provider.

She enjoys reaching out to people.

You can find Elizabeth on social media platforms.

Facebook: www.Facebook.com/elizabethkazeem

Or @elizabethkazeem

Email: beakreviews@gmail.com

Twitter: @elizabethkazeem

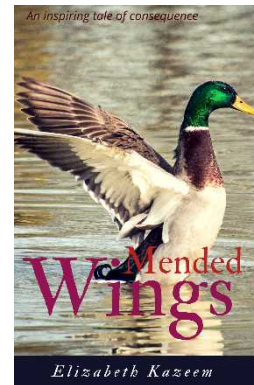
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PEOPLE'S COMMENTS ABOUT ELIZABETH KAZEEM'S BOOKS

I love Elizabeth Kazeem's books. All-encompassing and spirit-lifting. ~~~
Omolara K.

*The book "Mended Wings" is epic, powerful, anointed, intriguing, engaging...
And I could go on and on. Thanks for such a great work. It would definitely bless
many souls, millions I hope and pray. ~~~ Ben Chuks*

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*The book 'Mended Wings' is an inspirational book. I gained a lot from it. I
think a lot of singles, especially ladies, need to hear more on the aspect of 'Will of
God in Marriage'. Kudos to the writer. May God continue to strengthen you. Keep
up the good work. ~~~ Charity Sago*

*This book is really an eye opener, coincidentally a verse of the bible I got
before reading the book was in the book and enlightened me the more. Thank you
Elizabeth Kazeem. God bless you~~~ Kuteyi Bisola*

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This book is really an eye opener for every believer. Thanks ~~~Doris Homa*

*Mended Wings. Hmm, I was extremely touched by the message in the novel.
It is a most read, I cried for Ella and prayed for my soul. Keep up the flame. God
bless you. ~~~Gift D.C*



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