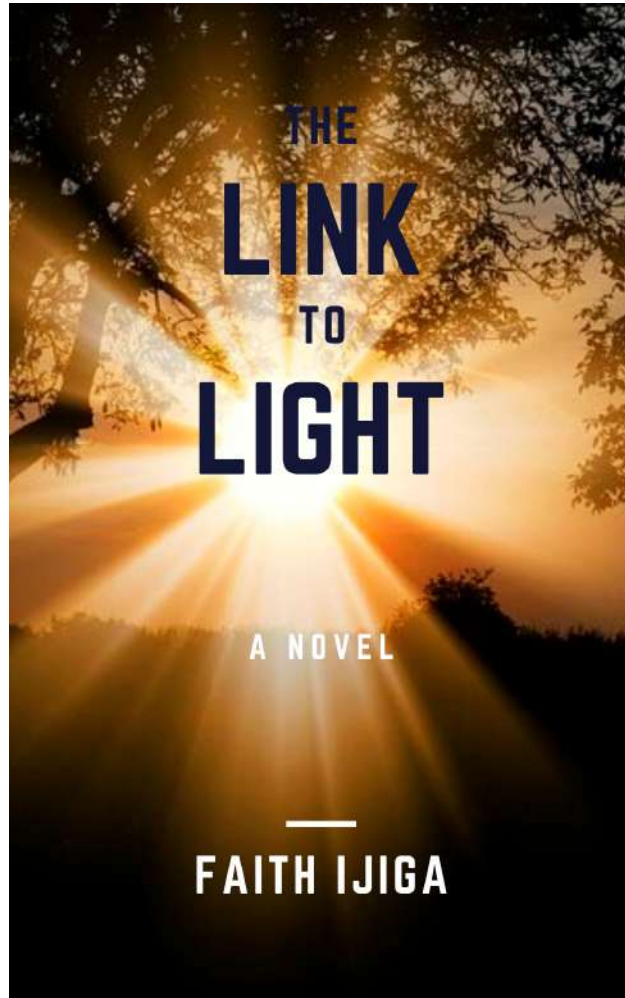


# THE LINK TO LIGHT

*FAITH IJIGA*



*Book cover design by Praise Abraham*

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All Bible references in this book were obtained from the Authorized King James Version.

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## ENDORSEMENTS

*The Link to Light* is a captivating story that has the answers to many questions hiding in the crevices of the reader's mind. Christian themes are blended with real life situations with such dexterity from the author that must be commended. This is a novel full of secrets, and love, and fights, and humour, and miracles, and light. A warning before you get started: You won't be able to stop. You'll even beg for more.

-Praise Abraham,

Author of *A PASTOR'S DAUGHTER DIARY*.

Book editor and cover illustrator.

Having gone through this wonderful book, I've been able to find this book a Spirit-filled book. Not just that, it was written under the influence of the Holy Spirit. I've also been able to discover that this book will be a guiding instrument to as many as those that will read it in several ways, such as: Teaching, most especially, youths, the importance of salvation. Unveiling the impact of through friends. The benefits of commitment, consistency, tolerance and patience. Opening the eyes of the readers to understand that one's background has little or no effect on his or her destiny and future. This book is what you cannot afford to miss because its impact will have no expiring date.

-Ifeyanyi Ukwueze,

Guardian and counsellor.

Reading *The Link to Light* brought out the best in me. I used to think that reality cannot be found in books written by youths, but I have come to connect myself to the realities found in this one. Indeed, there are so many problems amongst youths and in the family today and this book offers solutions to them. I celebrate the writer, for she has let herself to be led by God to bring out such a beautiful masterpiece that is and will continue to impact generations.

-Aquila Kyeng,

Author of *THE TALES OF BELDA*.

*The Link to Light* is a story of God's love and faithfulness towards mankind. It captivates your entire being and resonates within, making you savour every word.

-Oremodu Oluwabukunola Ruth,

Author of *WON OVER*.

*The Link to Light* is an amazing book through and through. Based on what I've read, these were one of the few characters that really spoke to me: diligence, hard work and faith. I also realised that in life what matters isn't how rough the journey is, but that God is with you

through it all. This is yet another masterpiece from this talented author, and I know it is going to renew a lot of people's perception of faith and bring them into the marvellous light of Christ.

I hope the world is ready for this book, because it's unlike anything you've ever seen.

-Idowu Kehinde,

Author of *SANDS IN THE DARKEST NIGHT*, *BITTERSWEET*, and *THE SIN*.

Ifesinachi's story urges us on and let(s) us know that discovering and fulfilling purpose is not as hard as we sometimes make it seem. Faith opens our eyes to see(ing) that God doesn't follow a pattern drafted by man, and every little ink stain found out of place on/in this beautiful canvas called Life is just God(the artist's) trademark for identifying and claiming ownership of our lives...

Veronica Ugbem, spoken word artist.

## **DEDICATION**

This book is dedicated to my Lord and Savior, Jesus Christ, who gave me hope, and has never given up on me.

## ACKNOWLEDGEMENT

There are people whose presence, directly and indirectly, in my life has contributed in bringing me to where I am today, and I'd like to thank them immensely.

To my parents, Mr. and Mrs Felicia and Samson Ijiga, for being my cheerleaders regardless of the condition that befell me from my childhood to adulthood. Thank you so much Mum and Dad for giving me equal opportunities with my siblings. I pray you will reap the fruit of your labor. And because I cannot wipe away your tears, I pray that God Almighty will do that and replace it with smiles. I love you two with all my heart.

There are great men of God who have affected my life with their books, messages and prayers.

In no particular order, let me start by thanking my father in the Lord, Pastor David Ibiyeomie of Salvation Ministries. Thank you, Sir, for showing me the importance of Matthew 6:33. I hope this book lives up to that expectation.

Thank you, Bishop Dan Agada of Miracle House International, for your prayers and kind words. I'm grateful, Sir.

Thank you, Pastor George Izunwa of Gateway International, Pastor Chris Oyakhilome of Love World aka Christ Embassy, and the late Rev. Kenneth Hagin of Rhema Bible Ministry. The books and messages from these great men of faith have really helped me in ways that cannot be explained with words.

Thank you, Pastor George Izunwa, for all those messages you kept broadcasting three times daily on radio for years to reach out to those spiritually hungry and desperate to know that God is with them.

And thanks to Pastor Chris Oyakhilome and Rev. Kenneth Hagin for their books and recorded messages which have impacted lives around the world including me.

Thank you to Pastor Mrs. Nwaokolo. I remember that fateful Sunday, when I was but a small girl. You majestically walked up to me, bent down until your face was a few inches from mine, and then whispered to my ears. That Sunday was the same day a church member had just sold his books. You told me that someday people will read my books as well. Even though I said 'Amen' and nodded my head in satisfaction, I didn't share what you told me with anyone because I thought you were just being a motivational speaker as I never saw myself writing. Now, almost two decades later, what you said is finally coming to pass. I hope I'll make you and Jesus proud.



Thank you to my Aunt Zippora, for providing me with a conducive environment at your house at the time I wrote part of this book.

Thank you to my sisters, Clementina and Blessing Ijiga. You gals are the best and I couldn't have asked for better sisters. I appreciate every help you offered me at the time of writing this book

To my brothers, Shadrach, Linus Raphael, Emmanuel and Joseph Ijiga, thanks for having me as your sister. I love you.

To my wonderful editor and book cover designer, Praise Abraham, I knew I didn't make a mistake coming in contact with you. You've done a good job for me here. May God bless you.

To my friends who have prayed for me throughout the writing of this book, and who never hesitated to feed me with their words of encouragement. Stretch Edache, Isaac Achin, Buchi Emmanuel Awiri, Ifeanyi Ukwueze, AFFIONG ENE-OBONG, Ikechukwu Ndubisi, Samuel kolawole, Udochi Ndu. Thank you, guys, for also giving me your input on the book..

A big thank you to all the readers, for giving this book your time.

I have saved the best for the last, and that is appreciating my best and precious friend, the Holy Spirit. I would like to declare that He is the real author behind this book, and I'm proud to be His vessel.

## PROLOGUE

6:00am.

Wednesday, 23rd April.

Ifesinachi Uzundu jerked up in excitement from her bed. Finally, the D-day had arrived. The day she'd been waiting for. The day she would be writing her final WAEC paper.

"Isn't God great?" she mumbled to herself. Soon after, she lifted up her hands to the heavens to do what her parents taught her to always do first thing in the morning.

"What a mighty God I serve. What a mighty God I serve. Heaven and earth adore Him, even angels bow before Him. What a mighty God I serve."

The lyrics poured out like a river from the very depths of her soul. She expressed herself like never before.

After singing and praying for thirty minutes, she undressed, wrapped her almost threadbare towel about her bare skin, and entered the bathroom. She could not attend the general family devotion which they constantly had by 5:00am every morning in their living room. Her parents understood why she could not attend. Ifes had done overnight reading and praying. She had finally slept by 4:00am.

Ifes and her family lived in a three-bedroom flat that wasn't elite-class standard. It had a single bathroom and toilet which they all shared, and the compound was as good as a Nigerian face-me-I-face-you house's.

She opened the door and stepped out, making sure she clicked shut behind her. She whirled around and made for the bathroom, but paused when she saw her mother.

"Good morning, Ma!" She bowed slightly as a sign of respect.

Her mother smiled. "Good morning. How was your night?"

"My night was—" Before she could complete that statement, her sister Udochi interrupted her with her greetings.

"Good morning, Ifes." Udochi walked past her mother and her sister to the kitchen to wash the dishes she and her brothers had had their breakfast in.

"I know you are prepared for your last paper, my dear?" Ifes' mother, Mrs Oluebube, asked after Ifes replied to her sister's greetings.

Ifes smiled confidently. "Yes, Mum!"

"I trust you my dear." Oluebube patted her daughter's back gently. "Now, go and take your bath. Your food will be waiting."

Ifes had her bath immediately and came out with her body still dripping wet. She rushed back into the room she shared with her sister. Her sister was already dressed in her school uniform and ready to go to school with her brothers.

"Okay, sis, I am off to school with Uchenna and Obinna. See you!" Udochi waved at her sister, grabbed her backpack and bolted out of the room.

"Goodbye, see you, too!" Ifes waved back at her sister despite knowing Udochi couldn't see her.

In no time, she was done dressing, she took out her mathematical set and the other exam materials she would need, and quietly stepped out of the room.

She went straight to the food her mother had kept for breakfast on the centre table in their living room.

A tea mug sat beside a covered ceramic plate. They both had the same fading design of Jasmine flowers etched on their outer surface and edges, like a pair of overused twin sets. She opened the plate and sighed when she saw four thin slices of bread. She needed no soothsayer to tell her before she knew the cup contained tea.

She rotated her head back and forth looking for a little stool. She sat down on the wooden one closest to her, munched on the bread and slurped the watery tea. Soon after she was done, she thanked her mum.

She stood, scooped her plate up to wash them in the kitchen. Her intent was cut short when her mum told her not to worry, saying she would wash them herself. Ifes tried protesting but her mother insisted. Ifes finally gave in. When she was about to step out the door, her mother held one of Ifes hands between her soft, motherly ones. "I am proud of you," she said.

"Thank you, Mum," Ifes said and held her mother tight in a hug. Her mother smelt like their kitchen, a mixture of spicy and soapy scents.

It was difficult for Ifes but she broke the hug anyways. She wanted to be in school before the general assembly which was starting in twenty-eight minutes' time.

She walked through the alley, intermittently greeting the neighbours she came in contact with. She hadn't gotten the chance to greet her dad that morning because he had long left for work before she woke up. He was a commercial driver, plying the bumpy Awka to Onitsha roads, in his bus, everyday.

Dike street was like any other typical Nigerian street, littered with junk and debris here and there, ragged by the numerous potholes and dotted by the jam packed buildings, housing angry families. Ifes scrunched up her nose to block off the horrible stink of garbage. She let out a sigh when she finally passed the eyesore.

She navigated the streets to get to the main road. As she hastened her pace, her heart, ringing with thanksgiving, echoed, "Thank you, Jesus! Thank you, Jesus!"

She kept walking until she got to the Eke Awka market roundabout, which was where she was supposed to get either a bus or a motorcycle, popularly known as Keke or Okada in these parts, that would convey her to her school, Heritage Comprehensive High School.

The roundabout was crowded, as usual, with loud and rough hawkers who boldly shoved their wares in the face of the prospective buyers. Bus drivers and their conductors—Agberos were loading their empty buses to the brim, so much that passengers were squeezed like sardine in a can. Students moved around the market roundabout, either waiting for a conveyor to carry them to school, or walking down to the school themselves. Civil workers, labourers, and the self-employed were also seen at the roundabout. Some had entered the empty buses while some, who weren't very fortunate to get a vehicle in this early morning rush, trekked to their working place.

Ifes crossed over to the other side of the road opposite the roundabout. Not too long after, she heard and saw two drivers fighting and cursing, straining their voices in a frantic bid to be heard. The reasons were not far-fetched. It was obvious they were quarreling over a passenger.

The first time Ifes saw something like that, it startled her. With time she got used to it. Neither her nor the crowd at the market roundabout will bat an eyelash at such a thing any longer.

"Thunder fire you!"

"I say na you thunder go fire first!" The driver who was first insulted retorted.

"God punish your father, Onye Ara (mad man)!" The second driver hissed and spat on the floor.

"God go punish you o, and all una great great Grandpapa together!"

Their voices slowly faded away as she walked forward, away from the hullabaloo. Out of curiosity, she turned her head back in time to see the Agbero boys instigating the two drivers to keep fighting. Out of the five Agbero boys, three of their faces were familiar. She had reached out to them in one of her evangelism outreach. She remembered they didn't give their lives to Christ that day, rather they ended up making advances to her. She had walked away from them disappointed, and a bit embarrassed.

"O na aga? (Are you going?)" A Keke pulled in front of Ifes; its driver shone his kola-coloured teeth at her, prompting her to enter.

Ifes glanced inside the Keke to see that the back seat had already been occupied by three students who were also going to her school, then finally joined the driver in the front seat.

"Good morning senior," the three students at the back greeted almost simultaneously as the Keke driver scooted off.

As she tilted her head around to reply to their pleasantries, she saw smiles plastered on their smooth faces. The way the youngest among them shone his teeth also made her smile and forget her worries.

Ifes found herself conversing with the students happily. "Are you siblings?" Ifes asked the trio.

"Yes, we are," the one Ifes presumed to be the eldest replied, pointing at herself and the other two. "My name is Prisca. My sister's name is Joy, and he is Joseph. I am your brothers' classmate. Joy is in JSS3."

"And I am in JSS1, so I am your sister's classmate," Joseph chimed in.

Ifes grinned. From the way they spoke, it was obvious they knew her very well. Who wouldn't know her in the school, since she was the only art student that broke the school record by becoming the school's Senior Prefect? Up until this time, that position was always given to science students.

"Mmm! Senior Ifes, your brothers are so intelligent!" Prisca giggled.

"Really?" Ifes asked amusedly, beaming with a smile that spoke, 'I know and I'm so proud of my brothers.'

The driver pulled over in front of the school gate. The students paid the driver and alighted from the Keke.

"Goodbye, senior!" Prisca and her siblings waved at Ifes as they bolted to the assembly ground as it was almost assembly time.

"See you later!" Ifes waved back, and this time, they saw her.

Ifes stood and watched till the students were out of sight. She raised up her left hand and glanced at her wrist watch. Four more minutes to go. She decided to do one or two things in the class before the students started filing out of their classrooms to the assembly ground.

"Look who we have here! Our bookworm is around," one of the SS3 students, Chibuike, said when he sighted Ifes walking into the classroom. Some of the other students glanced briefly at the door.

"Ike! I don't have time for your jokes this morning," Ifes said as she removed her backpack and slung it over the arm of her seat.

"Enhen na! Abi I lie?" Ike said as he looked around, trying to get confirmation from his fellow classmates.

"No pidgin English inside the classroom," one of the students who was called Amaka said.

"Abeg leave me jor! Am I still a student of the school?" Ike asked, in a questioning pose.

"Yes, you are. Till you graduate," another student said.

"That's a lie oo! As far as I'm concerned, we are writing our last paper today," another student spoke in support of what Ike said.

The class divided into two as the students bantered among themselves, creating a mini-courtroom atmosphere.

One of the students who was called Azubuike hit his hand repeatedly on the locker to stop the bantering and draw attention to himself.

"Na wetin sef? Why the noise? You all better get ready and go to the assembly ground."

"Zubi!" Ifes called out to him. "Don't mind them jare. Please let's go."

Ifes and Zubi walked to the class door but halted abruptly and did a complete 360° turn.

"The principal is coming!" They told their other classmates simultaneously and quickly walked down to the assembly ground. The other students followed suit to avoid the wrath of the principal whose name was Mr John.

Mr John Amadi was a man in his early fifties. He was strict and never failed to mete out disciplinary action on any student who went against the school rules. The students, and even the teachers, feared him. He always worked with his wire-rimmed spectacles on and a long whip in his left hand.

Ifes and other prefects were called up to the platform by the school principal to officially hand over their prefect positions to their successors who had been acting in their capacity ever since they started their exams a month back. She and the other prefects got a clapping ovation as they stepped up to the platform. She delivered a short speech and officially handed over to the next school Senior Prefect girl. The new Head Girl assumed full duties after the assembly.

The brigade band played a harmonious beat-tune as the students marched into their various classes. Obinna and Uchenna, who were also brigade members, bolted towards Ifes with their own band drums still strapped to their shoulder and waist respectively.

"Hi!" They both winked at her. Almost spontaneously, like they had been programmed, they started mimicking the way she gave her speech, gesticulating and copying her intonation almost to precision. Ifes doubled up in hysterical laughter. Her brothers, being the clowns they were, always found the slightest opportunity to taunt her. Nevertheless, it was evident

that they both loved their sister so much. No one in the entire school would miss her absence as much as her brothers would.

"It is almost 8:00am," Ifes said, pointing to the drums they carried.

"All the best on your exams, sis. We'll see you during recess." The duo ran off, their drums thumping on their skin.

At exactly 9:00am, the school bell rang, indicating that it was time for the SS3 students to go into the exam hall for their final WAEC paper. The students walked in according to their allocated seat numbers. There was the usual stop-and-search by the invigilators before the students were finally allowed to go into the exam hall. As the students entered the hall, some were obviously tense – fear was boldly written on some of their faces, while some of the categories of the students walked freely like they were about to enter a live concert, not an exam hall.

The students were done with their exams in three hours. They shot out of the exam hall like cannon balls, squealing at the top of their voices. Ifesinachi and all the SS3 students practically ran around the school, breaking their pens and all the exam materials they used.

"Goodbye to secondary school forever!"

"Goodbye to WAEC!"

The SS3 students kept screaming and chanting these words as they continued running around, distracting other students who are learning in their various classes.

Normally, the school didn't allow other students to act out such disruptive behaviour; this was one of those exceptions. It had been like a tradition in Nigerian secondary schools, so the principal and the teachers knew better than disrupting whatever activities these overexcited students were carrying out. Because of too much noise from the jubilant SS3 students, the school was forced to go on a short break.

The SS3 students' results were out a week before the close of the third term. Ifes and the other SS3 students used their scratch cards to check their results online. Some of their results were outstanding, while the rest of them were just average. No one got below the average mark.



Ifesinachi's result stood out, tall and shiny like a beacon upon a hill, among the rest. Out of nine written subjects, she got seven A1's and two B2's. Another student that came close was a female science student who got six A1's, two B2's and one C5.

"Mummy! Mummy! Mum, where are you?" Ifes excitedly called out to her mum as she entered the compound gate.

Ifes saw her father coming out as she approached the door of her living room.

"Come and give Daddy the good news!" Ifesinachi's father, Mr Ifaeanyi smiled, spreading out his hands, inviting his daughter for a hug.

"Daddy!" Ifes happily ran into her father's arms.

Her father whirled her around before dropping her gently. He glanced at the white envelope she was holding in her right hand. "Let's see what my baby has inside that envelope."

"Not yet," she said, dangling the envelope away from his curious grasp. "Why are you back early today from work?" Ifes looked at her dad questioningly.

"Because I want to share in my baby's joy." Ifeanyi tipped his daughter's chin with his index finger.

Ifes blushed shyly. "But you haven't even seen the results and you're saying you want to share in my joy."

"Well, in case you have forgotten, let me remind you that I am your father, and I know what my Princess can do." Ifeanyi put his arm around his daughter's shoulders. "So, can I see what is inside that white envelope?"

"No way!" Ifes jerked away, hiding the envelope behind her. "Mum will see it first!" Ifes said jokingly.

"But I saw you first," Ifeanyi said, pointing to himself. "I should also see the result first as well."

"No! Catch me first." Ifes gave a sly smile and started running away from her dad.

"You children nowadays. I will show you that I can run faster than Usain Bolt!" Mr Ifeanyi said with laughter in his voice as he flexed his muscles in preparation for running.

Ifes and Ifeanyi started running around the compound, panting and laughing. They practically ran around the compound building, the trees and even her father's commercial bus. She increased her speed when her dad got close to grabbing her.

Before she challenged her father to the race, she believed that her dad would get tired and quit running after her at some point, then she would emerge as the winner.

Unfortunately, things weren't working as planned. She was the one getting tired, but she still didn't want to quit so her dad wouldn't be the winner. She had started it, and she would end it anyhow.

"Hey! Hey! Do you want to kill my daughter?" Mrs Oluebube bellowed when she saw them through the open window.

"Oh, God! God! Thank you!" Ifes exclaimed happily in her heart and winked at her dad.

Ifeanyi smiled as his gaze met his wife who was now coming towards them.

"What is happening here?" Oluebube asked, her eyes flickering from her daughter to her husband. As she came closer, her eyes glanced down at the envelope in Ifesinachi's hand then she got the message.

"I told Daddy I was going to show you the results first. I love you so much Dad." Ifes went close to her dad handing him the envelope. "You and Mum should take a look at it together, I love you two so much!" Ifes beamed with so much passion in her eyes, then turned around and walked into the house.

On the graduation day, there were several performances by the students and even the graduates weren't left out. Cultural dance performance, drama, choreography and mime, song presentations, lots of speeches, both the boring and the lively, garnished the occasion.

The dress code for the graduates was a black suit and complementary navy blue tie. The other students were given the liberty to wear any cloth of their choice. The students took the advantage of wearing mufti to the graduation party to show off the best they had in their closets. Shoes like Balenciaga, Louboutin, Phyllis, Nike and Alexander McQueen shoes were all on display, though most of them were not straight out of the manufacturing line of these designer labels.

Ifes and three other SS3 students received most of the awards. She was the youngest graduating student among her set, having graduated at the age of fifteen. The other award-winning students were seventeen and eighteen years old respectively. Ifesinachi's six years in secondary school was indeed a success.

The SS3 students exchanged contacts after the graduation party. Ifes didn't have a phone at that time, so she wrote down all the contact numbers in her diary. They said emotional goodbyes to each other since they were going to be scattered to different universities nationwide, and most of them would probably be seeing each other for the last time.

Ifes had 255 out of 400 as her jamb score, and she had chosen University of Port Harcourt as her first choice university.

Two weeks after Ifesinachi's graduation, her parents woke her up in the early hours of the morning. It wasn't a surprise to Ifes that her parents called her so early. The first child of Nigerian parents should always expect such calls once in a blue moon at least.

"Good morning Mum and Dad," Ifes greeted.

"Good morning dear. How was your night?" Ifesinachi's mother asked.

"My night was great, thanks."

"Sit down," her father said, gesturing towards a plastic chair.

She sat on the seat adjacent to her parents.

"Ifes, we want to discuss something important with you."

Ifeanyi leaned forward.

"First, let me start by saying that as your parents, we are proud of you and your siblings. Your mother and I appreciate God for bringing you our children into our lives."

Ifeanyi inhaled and exhaled slowly. She could already guess where this conversation was leading.

"We know you've been a great assistance to your mother in her paper business, but we would like you to consider taking up a job of your own, so you can save some money to add up for your university education."

Despite the fact that he earned low income out of his commercial driving work, Mr Ifeanyi made sure his children went to one of the most quality and expensive schools in Awka. He felt bad having such a conversation with his daughter but it was necessary, and Ifes understood.

"Please excuse me. I'll be back soon." Ifes stood from her seat, trotted to the room she shared with her sister. Soon after, her parents saw her coming out of the room with a small wooden box in hand.

Her parents were dumbfounded as they watched her bring out money from the box. She smiled when she saw the perplexed look on their faces.

"Don't be afraid. I didn't steal the money."

Her parents gave her the look that read, "Why should we not be afraid?"

Ifes went on to explain that she'd been saving from the pocket money they gave her in secondary school. Though they were amused that their daughter saved money without their notice, their minds were at peace after they gained knowledge of the source of her money. She decided to use the money to trade bottled and sachet water.

Around 7:00am that same day, Ifes bathed and got dressed for the market.

"All the best, my dear." Her mother held her emotionally and gave her a purse that she would use in keeping her money, and a medium sized transparent one with which she used to carry the bottled and sachet water on her head.

As she whirled around to leave for the market, her mother held her hands from the back. "You don't have to do this if you don't want to. I can talk to your father about this. We can look for other alternatives."

Ifes knew the emotional part of her mother was getting the best of her, so she flashed her mother a cherry smile. "I will not allow you to spoil my first day in business. Don't worry, I will buy Okpa for you when I come back and Abacha for myself."

Ifes looked straight into her mother's eyes. Mrs Oluebube quickly looked away to hide the tears that were now threatening to come out.

"Are you crying?" Ifes asked.

"N-no! I am not!" A sniff was heard.

Ifes gave her the look that read, "Are you sure?"

Her mother let out a bleak laugh. "Yes, of course!"

Oluebube watched as her daughter disappeared out of sight, then she buried her face in her hands and wept bitterly.

Ifesinachi's first day in her business came with its challenges, but she was successful. Market men, women and even people that came to buy patronized her. The wheelbarrow pushers patronized her the most since they were always working directly under the sun.

Despite knowing that the price of sachet water had increased to ten naira, some people still priced it for five naira. Nigerians could be very daring at times.

-----

The following week.

"Oga, no be like that I dey sell am oo," Ifes politely replied to the man who wanted to buy her bottled water for a lower price in Nigerian pidgin English.

"Oya, dey go na." The man hissed and looked away.

Ifes took up her pan of water and started to walk away from the rather rude man, but she abruptly stopped when something caught her attention. She tossed her pan on the ground, brushed her palm across her face and re-read the poster carefully.

To be sure her eyes weren't playing pranks on her, she went closer to read the poster again, eyes widening to a reasonably large radius for proper viewing.

A scholarship to study at the University of Pennsylvania in the United States of America!

Without giving it a second thought, Ifes took note of all the details on the poster and bolted to a cyber cafe to fill the form. She felt happy after filling the form because they were about to close the entry for the scholarship exam. As the exam date drew closer, Ifes studied frantically, with a determination in her heart to give it her best shot.

On the appointed day for the exam, Ifes got to the venue and was intimidated by the large number of students, some with thick glasses that made them look super intelligent and others with their heads buried in books, who came for the same purpose as her. The students started entering the exam hall according to their state's alphabets.

Starting from Abia, Adamawa, Akwa-Ibom and Ifesinachi's state, Anambra. Other states like Bauchi, Bayelsa Benue, Borno down to Zamfara state followed suit.

Ifes put in her best and prayed to God for favour. Exactly one month later, the result was released.

## CHAPTER ONE

Woodway Texas, United State of America.

"You're welcome Mr Harper, please take your seat. Dr Harry narrowed his eyes, gesturing to one of the seats adjacent to him.

Bradley nervously took his seat as instructed with the doctor's table situated between them. Seeing that Bradley had done as he asked, he carefully tossed his pen on the book he was writing on, closed it and looked up to Bradley, examining him carefully.

"So, how are you today, Mr. Harper?" the doctor asked as he steepled his fingers on his desk.

"The same as the last time you asked, or even worse." Bradley gazed sideways.

The doctor stood and walked carefully till he was directly in front of Bradley with nothing between them this time. He carried out his checkup on Bradley and shook his head when he was done.

"Are you sure you don't want your family to know about this?" The doctor looked at Bradley questioningly.

Bradley shook his head forlornly. "Cancer is not good news to share around. Even the media seldom carries out good news to the masses. And what good has it done to the masses? They only break other people's hearts for their own cynicism!"

Bradley gazed disdainfully. "Fools! They are all a bunch of fools, and I will not be like 'em.

Dr Harry perceived that Bradley was venting the anger of his sickness on the media so he quickly changed the topic. "Have you been following your prescriptions?"

"I'm trying."

"Okay, that's alright. I hope you remember our next schedule."

"I will always remember, as long as this d\*mn cancer lives with me."

"Hmm!" The doctor exclaimed, giving Bradley a look of concern. He wanted to hold Bradley as a son and give him some words of comfort. He wanted to look straight into his eyes and tell him all was going to be well.

Dr Harry knew his face expressed nothing but hopelessness, and Bradley had seen it too. He knew he had not been professional, but how could he when each time his gaze settled on Bradley, he would remember his brother who also died of the same illness. He swiftly turned his head away from Bradley to wipe away the lone tear that dropped from his hazel eyes.

He whirled around to see Bradley gazing at him in confusion. "See you in a fortnight, Mr. Harper," Dr Harry said with the voice of dismissal.

Bradley knew his time with the doctor was up. He decided to step out so the doctor could attend to other patients. "Thank you, Doctor, for having me."

"My pleasure," Dr Harry said and they both shook hands.

Bradley walked to the door, held the doorknob, and was about to yank it open. He paused when he heard the doctor calling out to him.

"Yes, Doctor." He tilted his head slightly to gaze at the doctor from his side eye with one of his hands still on the doorknob.

"Please, I would like you to go over your decision again. You can still change your mind if you want."

The doctor spoke calmly, but Bradley could still sense the worry from the way he spoke.

"Thank you, Doctor." Bradley walked out of his office, uncertain if he would heed the doctor's advice. He walked briskly across the hallway. When he got to the receptionist, he flashed her a smile and continued walking till he was out of the hospital door. How did this start? and when will it end? Nausea swept over Bradley, his vision blurred slightly. He staggered.

Bradley pondered on what it would be like when he died, leaving his only brother and parents behind. The imagination sent a cold chill down his spine. He stared, watching as the hospital's door opened and closed in sequence. Patients were either coming in or going out of the hospital.

He was so engrossed in his thoughts that he jerked when he felt a hand tapping him on his shoulders.



"Umm! Sir, are you in pain?"

"Huh! Me?"

"Yes." The nurse's eyes narrowed on his own. "You are crying."

The nurse was telling the truth. Tears streamed down his eyes. He had subconsciously sat down on one of the stairs. He quickly wiped the tears on his eyes with his white handkerchief. He raised his head to look at the nurse.

When his puffy eyes looked into her concerned ones, she knew something other than his illness troubled him. She saw that he was trying to get up, then she held his hands, helping him to his feet.

"Thank you," he said, almost whispering.

She flashed him a soothing smile. "You're welcome. I pray God will help you."

She had spoken those words sincerely. Praying for him was the only thing she could think of doing at that time.

"Thank you," was the only reply he could think of giving her as he wondered why a professional nurse had spoken religious words to him.

He stepped down from the stairs and walked to the parking lot, his car keys dangling in his hand. He got to his car, opened the door and slid into the driver's seat.

The nurse's gaze followed him till he was covered by his car tinted glass, then she mumbled a prayer.

"Oh, Lord! Please help..." She paused. She didn't ask what his name was.

"Oh, Lord! Please help that young man." She pointed to his car. "Let him find you and accept you as his Lord and Savior if he hasn't. And if he has, please be with him. Open his eyes to see your purpose for him."

"Fiona, beloved! I've heard your prayers, I'll reach out my love to him," the still small voice spoke and she recognised him. She raised her hands and gave thanks to God, then turned around and entered the hospital.

Bradley slid his keys into the car's ignition and the engine roared to life. His phone chimed, causing him to step on the brakes. He scooped up his phone and glanced at the caller ID.

"Yes, Mandy! What is it?"

The caller at the other end ignored the harshness in his tone and cheerfully broke the good news to him.

"Hello, cowboy, We've been accepted into college!" she exclaimed happily.

"We?!" He said the word, not sure if he was exclaiming or asking.

"Yes! I mean, you, Hunter, Ryan, Anne-Marie, Skylar, Megan, Avery and I have been offered admission to study at the University of Pennsylvania."

The news of their admission made his eyes glitter.

"We'll be throwing a party in Ryan's house, make sure you come early," she said and disconnected the call.

"Oh my G—!" He paused quickly when he realized he wanted to call God. Was there any God? He and his friends were atheists; they had never believed in the existence of any sky daddy, and he wasn't sure they would ever believe. He remembered the way the nurse called God and it stirred up something inside him. Confusion everywhere. *Which of the gods is real?* He gave a sardonic laugh. *And which one was she talking about?*

*She might be a Muslim, no!* He shook his head. *Buddhist, Catalyst, or even a Christian. Which one did she belong to?* Bradley stifled his curiosity, twisted the key in his ignition and drove out of the parking lot.

Bradley and his friends spent the whole night partying. He had returned to his normal happy self. Like he always did whenever he was with them.

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A woman stood in front of a mirror looking at her reflection over and over again. She let out a laugh that only expressed animosity and walked to her wine bar. She poured herself a glass of wine, then carefully gulped down its contents. Enjoying the way it burnt her throat, she poured herself another glass. She did this severally till her vision became blurry, and her feet heavy to carry her. But she was thankful that her senses were still intact.

She staggered to one of her sofas, and plopped down on the seat. She belched loudly. "It is time to have my pound of flesh, Mister William Miller." She glared at the photo in her hand.

"It is good your son, Ryan, has been offered admission to the University of Pennsylvania. Let me see what you will do now that he's gonna be far from you."

She looked at the man in the photo disdainfully as anger radiated through her body.

"Ryan will never graduate from that college alive, I swear it. I will watch you grieve over your son, suffer slowly till you commit suicide. I'll spread out my venom and destroy you till there's nothing that is left of you again!"

She held the picture in both hands and tore it into shreds, telling herself that this was how she would destroy him and everything he held sacred.

## CHAPTER TWO

Nigeria.

Ifes and her family prepared for her departure to the US. She had passed the scholarship exam and had her name on the merit list.

"Ifesinachi! Ifesinachi! Ifes!" Oluebube called out, peering into the room from the passage.

"Ma!" Ifesinachi's voice echoed from the living room.

"I am ready. Come out, let's go to the market."

Nodding her head, Ifes quickly stood and made for the door. "I am here, let's go."

They both stepped out, walking through the alleyway under the shadow of their compound trees as they reached for the gate.

"Where are your brothers?" Oluebube asked, her right hand on the gate's iron lock.

"They're preparing to go watch a match in one of the viewing centres." Ifes pointed over her shoulder to the house.

Oluebube let out a sigh of relief. "Okay, let's go."

*Now I can finally spend time with my daughter alone as I had always wanted*, she thought silently. Ebube knew how much her sons love watching football. She knew she was in for another banter between her boys and husband after the match, but what did it matter? God had spared her some time with her daughter and that was all that mattered to her.

Ifeanyi would always ask and discuss the match with his sons when he came back from work. They would talk about the Nigerian professional football league, the English Premier League, Spanish la Liga, Italian serie a a, French League 1, German Bundesliga, even the Champions League and the UEFA Europa League.

Ebube was happy that she would finally have some nice discussion, especially that little women-secret-talk which her sons had denied her. Her brothers never failed to exploit any opportunity they had to spend time with Ifes.

There were two roads from their Street that led to the Eke Awka market, but Ebube chose to follow the long road to have more time with her daughter. Walking along their street's pedestrian, Ifes and her mom got talking.

Ifes said something and it made her mother laugh, but her laughter was abruptly cut short when she heard the last thing she desired to hear.

"No! We are following our mother and sister to the market."

Ifes and her mother turned sharply and saw Uchenna and Obinna coming behind them, after they said those words to the person who had asked them a question. Ifes and her mother had been so engrossed in their discussion that they didn't notice the duo coming behind them.

Her mother gave her the look that read, "You said they were going to the viewing centre?"

Reading her mother's expression, she replied with a confused gaze.

Her mother glared at the duo in frustration. "And where are you two going to?"

"We saw you two going to the market, so we decided to come along," Obinna said, pointing to himself and his twin brother, grinning.

"Are you all done with your house chores?" Ebube asked, arms on her hips, looking for an excuse to send them back.

"Yes, ma," Uche said.

"But I thought you guys usually went to the viewing centres during weekends?" Ebube asked.

"Mmm! Tomorrow is Sunday. We shall go after church."

Ebube wanted to ask another question when Obinna uttered the sentence that made her speechless.

"Hay! This sun is too much. Let's go to the market now ooo!"

Ebube wanted to cry out in frustration, but decided to let it be. She walked far ahead as her children followed behind her, talking and laughing excitedly oblivious to their mother's frustration.

They got to the market and entered the line where clothes, shoes, handbags and jewelry were sold. They navigated some of the shops but finally settled in the one Uchenna suggested they enter. They entered, and like other customers, they walked around the clothing line, selecting clothes.

"Ifes, try this one out. I think it will fit you." Obinna handed the Jean skirts he had picked to her.

She liked the ones her brother chose for her, and tried it on as he said. Seeing that it fit snugly, they decided to ask the shop attendant for the price since it had no price tag.

"The three of them cost 7,500 naira," the attendant said, looking up from his account book.

Their mother's face turned pale. "That is quite expensive!" she exclaimed.

"Madam, it's because I like your face oo, that's why I'm selling it to you at that price. If not, I sell each of them at N4000," the attendant lied through his teeth.

Knowing how business people lied, her mother insisted on getting the Jean skirts at a lower price. "I will buy each of them at the price of—"

"N2000," one of the twins cut in.

Their mother shot him a glare. "Keep quiet, Uchenna!"

"I am buying each of them at N1000," their mother spilled out to the attendant.

"Aah! Madam, that is too cruel of you." The attendant's facial expression was livid.

"That is what I have to pay for the skirts."

"But that's not true. Your son said you have two thousand."

Their mother's face went hot. "So who is buying the clothes from you? Me?" Ebube pointed to herself. "Or my son?"

The attendant gazed in confusion. "But you came together."

"Okay, let my son buy the clothes and give you the money." Turning to her daughter she said, "Ifes, let's go."

Their mother started walking out of the shop, her children behind her when the attendant called them back.

"I will sell it to you for N1200. Nothing more, nothing less."

Their mother made to protest against the price, but was hushed by her children. She gave in to her children's persuasion. They stepped back inside selecting other clothes to the ones they picked earlier.

Ebube watched as the twins were selecting clothes, skirts, shoes, and other accessories, and was close to tears. She was appalled at the way the boys were selecting it like they had come to buy the whole shop. *Uchenna and Obinna will not kill me!*

Obinna scooped up an expensive handbag, and tossed it to his sister, grinning. Ebube felt like scooping him up, the way he did to the expensive handbag, and flinging him out the door of the shop.

Loving the handbag her brother gave to her, Ifes averted her gaze to her mother to share her excitement. Her mother forced a smile, but not before Ifes noticed the worried look on her face.

Ifes glanced down at the stuff her brothers had selected for her, then it dawned on her that they had selected too much and it might be out of her mother's budget. She had been so excited that she didn't notice how it bothered her mother. She glanced up to give her mother a reassuring smile but noticed that even the little smile her mother forced had evaporated.

Ifes shifted her gaze from her mother to her brothers, and saw the duo walking towards her with more items in hand. She quickly flashed the duo a grin. "I think I have more than enough."

They didn't relent till they tossed her their items. "We still think you should add these ones."

"But these are too much for me," Ifes said, not wanting to tell them that the main reason was because of money.

Although she didn't tell them, Ifes and her mother's facial expression gave them away.

Obinna put his arms around his sister's shoulder, and Uchenna did likewise to his mother.

"We are paying for those items," Uchenna said as Obinna beamed.

"W-what! What do you mean 'we'?" Ebube stammered.

"Obinna and I." Uche pointed to himself and his brother.

Their mother gave them the look that read, "What are you saying?"

Reading their mothers facial expression, they explained that they got the money from the menial jobs they did after school hours and during weekends.

Their mother stared at them, reminiscing how they went out after school hours. Trusting her children, she believed they went to one of their classmates' houses for school assignments, and weekends for the viewing centres.

*God! What kind of children have you given me?*, she pondered in her heart, staring into space. First, it was Ifes saving up some money, and now her sons. She wondered about the surprise that was waiting for her from her last daughter, Udochi.

"Don't cry. You are in a public place and people are watching." Uchenna wiped the tears that welled up in his mother's eyes.

"I wasn't crying," their mother laughed sheepishly.

Seeing how weird their mother looked, the trio couldn't help but laugh out loud. That drew the attention of other customers and all the attendants towards them.

"There are other things to buy. You children should go and pay up. Let's leave here." Ebube beamed, nudging her children to the counter. After the payment, they stepped out with their mother to get other groceries before leaving the market.

The next day, Sunday.

Ifes and her brothers dressed up and attended the first service to the fifth and last service. They were all in the choir unit, and served in different capacities. Ifes was one of the church



choristers, Obinna was a keyboardist, while Uchenna was a lead guitarist, and he also knew how to play the bass guitar.

It was time to hear the sermon. The church connected to the headquarters in Port-harcourt in Rivers State, Nigeria, to hear the word of God from the presiding pastor. Pastor David finished preaching and made an altar call for those who wanted to give their lives to Christ.

Ifes was elated to seeing the people she reached out to during one of her evangelism coming out for the altar call.

There is joy in heaven over a soul that repents!

"I would like you to repeat after me," Pastor David said.

"Lord Jesus. Come into my life. I believe that you died, and rose from the dead to save me. Now, with my mouth, I confess you Lord over my life. Thank you, Father, for saving me. In Jesus' name. Amen."

Ifes and her family went home to make her final preparation to leave for Lagos the next day. They all retired to their rooms, but Ifes couldn't sleep, her family couldn't sleep because of the glee they felt. They wanted to give their gratitude to God in praise and worship.

Ifes thought of her life from childhood to her teenage years and concluded that it had been by the grace of God. Just then, Solomon Lange's song titled 'Grace' poured into her heart. She raised up her hands to the heavens and started singing, swaying in rhythm to the melody of her heart.

*Amazing Grace is the sweetest sound that saved my life.*

"You know you are definitely not singing that song without me."

Ifes dropped her hands to her side, whirled around and saw Uchenna standing at the door post. She bowed her head, smiling slightly. "I'm sorry, sir. Where is your guitar?" She raised her head to look at her brother.

"Over here." He revealed the guitar that hung on his back. "So, shall we?"

"Not yet, not without me."

Uchenna frowned slightly seeing Obinna coming to their sisters' room with his keyboard in hand. "Why do you always interrupt my sister and I every time?"

"And why do you always disturb them with every opportunity you have?" Obinna replied.

Ifes and Udochi laughed.

"Because they are my sisters." Uchenna pointed to himself.

"They are also my sisters." Obinna did likewise.

"Enough!" Ifes stood between her brothers, placing her hands on their chest. "I think with the addition of the keyboard and guitar, we will make more melodies, or what do you think?" Her gaze flickered from Obinna to Uchenna.

"You are right!" Udochi chimed in, turning her siblings' attention to her. "Since this is Uchenna's favorite song, I think he should lead as he plays the guitar. Ifes and I will do the backup, while Obinna will play the keyboard."

"Perfect!" Ifes and her brothers said simultaneously. As they sang, they felt the glory of God encompassing them.

Morning came so fast. Ifes, her father and brother took off to the nearest bus station. As she was about to enter the bus that would convey her to Lagos, one of her twin brothers, Obinna held her by the hand from behind. "Wait, we have something for you."

Ifes tilted her head to look at her brother.

"Please manage this. This is what our money could afford." Obinna stretched a box-shaped parcel towards his sister.

Amused, dumbfounded, perplexed, bewildered: these were the words that could best describe the expression on Ifesinachi's face when she saw the Nokia C5 her brother handed over to her. She embraced her brothers, buried her face in their shoulders and wept.

"We love you; you know we love you, right?" Uche said.

"Yes, and I'll miss you two so much!" Ifes looked into their eyes while their father watched in amusement.

She gave her brothers another hug, then pushed past them all to her father and did likewise before entering the eighteen-seater bus.

As the bus pulled out from the station, the twins and their father felt their hearts tearing apart. They stood and watched till the bus was out of sight.

Ifes was going to Lagos for the first time in her life. She couldn't sleep when other passengers slept. She decided to witness everything that she was told about Lagos, and the journey, with her very own eyes. She saw the River Niger in Onitsha that demarcated Anambra and Delta state. Still moving, they entered Edo state from Delta. They finally got to Ore where the driver stopped for the passengers to eat before continuing.

The place was noisy and crowded just as she had been told. She couldn't eat the food from the restaurant as she wasn't used to eating in a public place, so she bought herself a bottle of Pepsi and meat pie.

Before the bus took off again, she walked to a less noisy environment and called her family to inform them of her progress. She ended the call and used her white handkerchief to dab the perspiration on her face. It sure was hot.

Ifes and other passengers who were done eating their food or didn't eat started entering the bus to escape the heat of the scorching sun.

"Driver, wait! A passenger is not here," one of the passengers called out to the driver as he was about to take off.

Another passenger said something funny about the missing passenger, and everyone laughed. The missing passenger came back and saw everyone laughing. He quickly noticed that it was related to him from the way they all diverted their gaze to him. Ignoring them, he entered the bus without uttering a word.

The driver slid his key into the ignition and drove off. The driver didn't stop again till they got to the Lagos-Ibadan Express road.

She watched, fascinated as she saw a big sign board that read, "This is Lagos. Shine your eyes." Then, she smiled happily.



### CHAPTER THREE

Woodway Texas, United States of America.

Mandy and her friends made preparations to leave for Pennsylvania. They discussed how they'd blend into college life.

Bradley went back to Dr Harry to inform him of his admission to the University of Pennsylvania. Doctor Harry wished him luck, and referred him to one of the specialists in Philadelphia.

As Bradley walked out of Dr Harry's office, his gaze fell on the nurse who had helped him the last time he was there.

"Pleased to see you again, Nurse." Bradley said, stretching out his hand for a handshake.

The nurse received the handshake. "It's Fiona." She beamed.

"Bradley. I'm Bradley Harper. I've gained admission into the University of Pennsylvania. I came to tell the doctor."

"This means the doctor will be referring you to another hospital over there in Pennsylvania?"

"He has already transferred me." Bradley grimaced.

The nurse placed one of her hands on his. "Don't worry, it is well."

"Can it ever be well with cancer?"

The nurse winced upon hearing that he was diagnosed with cancer.

"Not cancer. It's you I'm referring to. It is well with you."

"Which god were you talking about the last time we spoke?" Bradley asked, unable to stifle his curiosity.

"There is only one true God, and he is the one I was talking about."

Bradley shot her a confused look. "Which religion do you belong to?"

"I am not a religionist, but I am proud to say I'm a Christian!" The nurse was unable to stifle her glee as she made that affirmation.

Becoming more confused than he was, Bradley asked the nurse. "Is Christianity not listed as one of the religions in the world?"

"That's how the world sees it, but in the Bible, the people who were called Christians were those whom they said lived like Jesus."

Bradley swore under his breath. He asked a series of questions but wasn't persuaded with the answers the nurse gave him.

"I really don't believe you, I don't think there is any difference from your sky daddy and other gods. There is no peace in the world, everyone suffers regardless of their religion. People get sick. People die. You know what else?" Bradley's blue eyes stared right into the nurse's brown eyes. "I think you are weird. I should be on my way."

Bradley proceeded to walk away when the nurse said something that made the hairs at the back of his head stand as though he had stepped on a live wire.

"You said there is no peace in the world. Yes, I agree with you, but I have peace because I am in Christ and I am not of this world."

Peace! The same peace he was looking for? Was the nurse telling the truth or she was pretending like he did to his friends? Should he turn and listen to her? Why should he? As far as he was concerned, there was no peace in the world. The nurse was just lying and pretending. That was what they were. Religious people. All pretenders. Bradley hurriedly walked out of the hospital without looking back.

"Oh Father! You said you've answered my prayers. When I saw him today, I thought it was the opportunity you gave me to lead him to Christ, but I didn't make good use of it," the nurse prayed.

"Yes, Fiona, beloved, I answered your prayers. Leave him to me. Be still and know that I am God." Nurse Fiona gave thanks to God and went about her duties.

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The Parker's mansion.

Mandy sat on one of the couches adjacent to her father, buried her face in her palms as she cried

Her father, Mr Jonathan Parker stood and walked across the living room to where his daughter sat, and began to pat her back gently. "Oh, my baby! Don't cry."

Mandy looked up from her palm to her father's moist eyes. "Father, please, I don't want to go to school in this session"

Jonathan drew back a little perplexed. "But it hasn't gotten to that."

"I can't leave Mother and Jason!" Mandy spoke through a choked voice.

Jonathan hunkered down in front of Mandy, and gently took two of her hands in his. "What of your friends? What will they say or think of us?"

"I'll tell them anything, anything, Father. Just please don't let me go to college." Mandy turned her face from her father and kept wailing.

Looking at his daughter's emotional state, Jonathan felt his heart being clutched by an invisible, icy hand.

"I wish I was never born. I wish we were never born. I wish we didn't do the terrible things we did!" Mandy's words cut deeper into her father's emotional wound.

Jonathan stood and dropped his hands on his sides, still staring at his daughter. He felt his world crashing in front of him, and the thoughts flowed into his mind. *Suicide! Suicide! End it now. Let me just kill my family and kill myself!*

He remembered the words of the religious priest who said that karma was taking its course, and they were paying for the evil they did. One of his friends who belonged to the religion referred him to the priest. Trusting his friend, Mr Jonathan and his family had taken the priest's words seriously, despite being atheists. What other explanations could be given to the tragedy that had befallen them? No, there was no hope for him or his family again.

The dark voice in his mind kept giving suicidal suggestions, but why couldn't he do it? Why?

Jonathan perched on the edge of the sofa with his daughter's head on his laps, rubbing small circles on her back, soothing her.

"Don't you want to respect your mother's wish?"

Mandy's body froze at the question from her dad.

"You know she will be disappointed to hear you say you don't want to go to college." Jonathan paused for a while and continued. "She'll feel guilty that you did not go to college because of her. I'm sure you don't want that?"

"And what about you?" Mandy raised her head from her father's laps and looked straight into his eyes.

Jonathan placed his right hand on Mandys left shoulder. "You know it has always been my desire to see you and your brother go to college."

Mandy wiped her eyes with the back of her palm. "That's not what I'm talking about, dad. How will you take care of Mother and Jason? Will you be able to do that all by yourself?"

"Your mother is my wife." Jonathan pointed to himself. "Jason is my son. I love my wife and son so much, including you, my baby." Jonathan stroked his daughter's cheek.

Mandy smiled slightly, shifting away from her father.

"Yes, that's my baby," Jonathan said when he saw the smile that perched on his daughter's face.

"I love you, Father."

"I love you, too, my baby." Jonathan nudged her forward. "Now go upstairs, and prepare for college."

Mandy grinned from ear-to-ear and without another word did as her father asked.

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Harper's mansion.



Hunter stood from his big-sized bed, and walked around his room aimlessly. Who could ever understand him? Who would he tell of his struggle, his addictions, that won't think it was his fault?

Hunter went to the window of his room and moved the curtain so he could see the front of the big compound.

Looking down at the compound beautified with various ornamental plants, trees and garden flowers, he remembered his innocent childhood. He pulled back some strands of his unkempt, blonde hair from his face. His gaze flickered to the swing he and his brother played with as children, and his eyes grew moist. He was such a sweet, little, innocent child, loved by his mother, adored by his father.

Not until he stumbled on the devil himself, who had come in disguise of a friend. He was still loved by his parents and twin brother. That was because they didn't know what he did.

Hunter remembered the day he asked his parents and twin brother what they thought of a person with his kind of addiction. Their response had been cataclysmic.

"People like that should bury their heads in shame!" his mother had said with a look of disgust.

"I wouldn't hesitate to call the cops when I see people like that!" His father's words filled him with dread.

"People like that are animals, or even worse than an animal!" Bradley's words made him shudder.

Hunter hit his fist hard on the window protector and groaned loudly! "Curse you, Alfred. Curse you for doing this to me!"

Oh! Megan, Megan his love! How he wished she understood. The day he asked her, and said it was one of his friends, he remembered that look on her face, the look of disdain.

"Please, don't tell me that this friend you speak of is someone from our circle. I'll be very heartbroken and disappointed!"

Megan's words shattered any twinge of hope and made him close his mouth forever. Even at that, did he still get what he wanted? He remembered the day he asked her out, telling her how much he loved and cared for her.

"I don't love you, Hunter. I have someone who I believe is far better than you. I can't date you no matter what," she had said.

Hunter pressed his hands tight on his chest as though the memories were too painful to think of.

"But I love you Megan! I swear, I loved you! I still do. I always will."

Hunter backed away from the window, and leaned back, slowly sitting on the floor. He heard the prolonged honk of a car and knew his brother was back. Back from where? Wherever he went, he didn't care.

Bradley entered the apartment building and headed straight to his twin brother's room for a brief discussion. They were busy wallowing in their own frustrations and worries that none of them noticed the dark circles beneath each other's eyes.

Hunter, Bradley and Mandy weren't the only ones who were frustrated and worried about life and family issues. Megan, Skylar, Anne-Marie, Ryan, and Avery also were.

## CHAPTER FOUR

Lagos, Nigeria.

Ifes got to the last bus station and took a cab to the hotel at Ikeja where she and the other student who was offered a scholarship were to lodge while they waited for their flight to Philadelphia. She had been informed that only two of them were from Nigeria, and each West African country had only two slots for the scholarship program.

Indeed, Lagos was too crowded, just as she had been told and had once read in an article. With their little landmark, Lagos still had the highest population in Nigeria. It was no wonder that during elections, their votes were usually the highest. Approximately eighteen million in number.

Ifes saw everything. Almost everything. The yellow and black Danfo buses, those who were walking on the road, students who were coming back from school, the rich, the poor, and many more.

The driver drove through some parts of Lagos before getting to Ikeja. Of all the things she read and was told about Lagos, only places like Lekki, Victoria IslAnd Ikeja and Banana Island fit into the descriptions. Or so she thought.

The driver pulled over in front of the hotel gate. She alighted from the cab and opened the trunk, brought out her box and closed it back before the driver sped off. She stood for a while and took in the exquisiteness of this grand hotel. Everything was primp and sparkly. She felt out of place, clad in her simple top and skirt, her hands gripping the handle of her fading travel bag. Summoning up courage, she went inside the building and straight to the receptionist as she was directed.

"You are welcome, Miss Ifesinachi." The receptionist smiled cheerfully. She introduced Ifes to the other scholarship benefactor, who was a nice-looking male, handed them the keys to their separate hotel rooms, and directed them to the elevator. Following the direction the receptionist gave, they found the elevator and entered with their luggages.

Ifes didn't know how to use the elevator as it was her first time, but the other student knew how. He pushed the button and the elevator moved up quickly.

She staggered, thrown off balance by the sudden uplift of the elevator. The other student caught her by the waist, preventing her from falling. He pressed his lips tight to restrain himself from laughing as he felt that she might feel embarrassed.

"Thank you," Ifes said shyly, avoiding his gaze as she released herself out of his firm grip.

"You are welcome," he replied, letting go of her. "By the way, I am Ayomide Alex Balogun. And you?"

"Ifesinachi Uzundu."

"Pleased to meet you, Ifesinachi." He brought out his hand for a handshake.

"Likewise." She accepted the handshake.

The elevator stopped at the seventh floor. Ifes and the other student took out their luggage, said goodbye to each other and entered their separate rooms. Ifes dropped her luggage in the proper positions, refreshed herself, and did all the necessary things before it was time to sleep.

Before she slept, she said her prayers and brought out her Bible to read.

Opening the Bible, she flipped over to the book of St Luke.

"Luke 4:16. And he came to Nazareth, where he had been brought up: And as his custom was, he went into the synagogue on the sabbath day, and stood to read. And there was delivered unto him the book of the prophet Esaias. And when he had opened the book, he found the place where it was written. The Spirit of the Lord is upon me, because he hath anointed me to preach the gospel to the poor; he hath sent me to heal the brokenhearted, to preach deliverance to the captives, and recovering of sight to the blind, to set at liberty them that are bruised. To preach the acceptable year of the Lord. And he closed the book, and he gave it again to the minister, and sat down. And the eyes of all them that were in the synagogue were fastened on him. And he began to say unto them, This day is this scripture fulfilled in your ears."

When she finished reading that chapter of the Bible, she knew she was not just going to Pennsylvania for studies alone, but she knew God was sending her for a special purpose. She went on her knees and raised her hands towards heaven.

"I am yours Lord. I am honoured to be your vessel. Just use me the way it pleases you." She didn't know what lay ahead of her, but she gave thanks to God that night and slept peacefully.

Ifes and Ayomide came out of their separate rooms opposite each other, almost the same time in the morning of the next day. "Good morning." Ayomide greeted, Ifes replied as they both made their way out of the hotel. They tossed their keys to the receptionist, and thanked her cheerfully.

The receptionist grinned. "Have a safe trip to the States."

"Yes, Ma'am ," Ayomide said.

"Thank you so much, Ma'am," Ifes said.

The receptionist nodded and waved her hands as they walked out of the hotel building.

Ifes and Ayomide flagged down one of the cabs that drove them to the Murtala Muhammed International Airport.

"Welcome on board. Thank you for flying with us," a voice spoke through the intercom when Ifes, Ayomide and other passengers were already seated inside the plane.

With every passing second, Ifes felt closer to the US. The hostess gave some instructions. Ifes felt her heart leaping for joy. The whole thing was a new experience for her.

Ifes felt her heart melting inside her stomach because of the way the airplane shook as it started going airborne. "Jesus! Jesus! Jesus!" Ifes gripped her seat so tight her knuckles turned white, thinking the aeroplane would crash.

"Stop it. You are embarrassing us." Ayomide looked around, his gaze returned to Ifes and this time, he wasn't able to stop himself from laughing.

How much drama had he seen from the girl under twenty-four hours, and how many would he see in time to come?

She was beautiful and weird. What a combination!

Ifes bent her head, feeling embarrassed. "I am sorry. It's my first time flying in an airplane."

He leaned sideways, and held her right hand. "And yesterday was also your first time using an elevator?"

She hissed, jerking her hand away as heat poured into her body.

"You don't have to feel embarrassed. We are friends now, ain't we?"

Ifes didn't budge or say anything.

He took one of her hands between two of his. "I want you to see me as your brother. Be comfortable with me." He gave her a reassuring look as he smiled affirmatively.

"You know, this is also my first time traveling outside the country, but not my first time flying," Ayo said.

"You travel with the local flights?"

"Yep," Ayo replied.

"Umm! This means..."

Reading her facial expression, and knowing what she was driving at, he laughed. "No, I wasn't frightened when the aeroplane went airborne. I'm not one who is easily scared, and I had other friends who had travelled with the aeroplane, so it wasn't a new thing for me. Enough about me now, I'd like you to tell me about yourself," Ayo said.

Ifes stared out the window. "Nothing much to talk about me."

Ayo leaned forward and fixed his gaze on her. "But I'm sure it'll be interesting."

"How sure are you?" Ifes moved her gaze from the window and raised a brow at Ayo questioningly.

"Well, everyone has something interesting about them." Ayo tilted his head and leaned backward.

"Mmm! My dad is a commercial driver, and my mum is a pepper seller. I'm the first born of my parents. I have three siblings, two twin brothers and a sister. Umm! I am a Christian."

Ifes was almost certain that she saw him mutter, 'Thank you, Jesus', under his breath after she said she was a Christian.

"Oh! Twin Brothers. Can you tell me their names?"

Ifes wanted to ask what he needed their names for, but decided to keep quiet and answer him anyways.

"And your sister?" he asked.

"What about her?"

"What's her name?"

Ifes hesitated, but later told him.

"What about you? Tell me about yourself," Ifes asked, defying the silence that encompassed them.

"I thought you'd never ask." Ayo smirked.

Ifes looked away. "Never mind, I am not interested."

"Oh come on! You know I wasn't serious with that."

She didn't turn to look at him.

"Okay, I am sorry!"

When she didn't move or say anything, he started making fake sobs.

She gave him a sly look. "You better keep quiet, you are now the one embarrassing us."

"Not until you tell me you have forgiven me."

"Why should I? Did I tell you that you made me angry?"

"No, but your action says it all."

"Well, I am not angry."

"Yes, you are."

"No, I am not."

"Yes, you are."

"Okay, okay! I have forgiven you."

He glanced up at her, beamed and wiped his fake tears. "Thank you."

"My father is a police officer, DSP to be precise. My mother is an on-air personality, I have two siblings, a brother and a sister. My brother's name is Sola. My sister who is the last born of my parents is Bukola. I am also the first born of my parents and also a Christian. You know what else? I traveled a lot with my Dad when he got transferred."

Ayo went on to tell her the names of the states he'd lived in nationwide, and the languages he learnt.

After flying for eleven hours and twenty-three minutes, the aeroplane finally landed in Philadelphia which was the capital of the State, and also where the university resided.

After what an average Nigerian considered the 'initial gragra' by the immigration officers, Ifes and Ayomide were finally allowed into the country.

"You are welcome to America."

Ifes was grateful that Ayomide was with her as he understood the immigration officer's accent. All thanks to those days she refused to watch foreign movies with her brothers. Her brother's would have done better. But here she was, disgracing herself, her family, her country, Nigeria, and Africa. She wished she could go back in time to change some things, but what was done was already done.

Ifes heaved a sigh of relief as soon as they got out of the airport. They boarded a cab that drove them straight to the University of Pennsylvania.

"That was impressive." Ifes tilted her head to look at Ayo.

Ayomide grinned. "Well, thanks to my diction instructor back in secondary school, watching foreign movies and documentaries."



"So you like watching them?" Ifes asked, remembering her brothers.

"Ah! I watch them a lot, I've watched Black Panther, Avengers, Mortal Kombat, Acrimony and even..."

The driver pulled over in front of the school gate, letting them know they had arrived at their destination. They alighted from the cab, brought down their luggages from the trunk, paid the driver before he sped off.

## CHAPTER FIVE

University of Pennsylvania.

Ifes and other freshers had a successful matriculation. All the freshmen were handed over to old students to help show them around the college. Ifes was introduced to her roommate.

Ifesinachi's eyes were fascinated as a female student, who was tall and had beautiful, brown eyes, and long black hair bundled in a ponytail, walked into her dorm room.

"Hello!" Ifes greeted the student cheerfully as soon as she closed the door behind her.

"Hi, so you'll be my roommate?" the student replied.

Ifes nodded her head affirmatively.

The student stared at her for a while then tapped at her chin. "From your looks, I'm guessing you're an African?"

"That's right."

"Oh! I see, which country in particular?"

"Nigeria."

Ifes felt like she saw the student giving a soft gasp and her body freezing for a while before she relaxed again, but it happened so quickly that she couldn't fathom it.

"And you?" Ifes asked the student.

"My parents hail from Sacramento, California, but I've lived all my life down south Woodway, Texas."

Ifes grinned. "Now, you will be studying in another state?"

"Oh yeah, you can say that again."

"But I'm not alone. My squad of friends were also accepted into this college. We've been friends since high school." The student joined Ifes in arranging her luggages.

"You guys must really be close to each other," Ifes commented, still concentrating on her arrangements.

"Yes, we're close to each other." The student picked up a bag containing her cosmetics and placed it where she reckoned was a proper position. "You know what else?"

"Tell me." Ifes tilted her head to look at the student.

"We actually chose this college because one of us hailed from this state, and he said it was his dad's wish that he come over here to study. We didn't want to separate from each other, so we decided that wherever one goes, all go."

Unable to stifle her curiosity, Ifes asked, "Why was that?"

"Why what?" the student asked, a little tensed.

"Sorry! I mean, why did his dad insist on sending him to this college?" Ifes apologized, feeling embarrassed that she had asked too many questions.

"That's okay, you don't have to apologize." The student waived her right hand grinning. "Nothing much, his father and aunt just wanted him to attend the same college with his cousin. But she's not one of us." Her roommate continued after a low-key snort, "We actually don't like her, myself in particular."

Ifes smiled but didn't ask why.

"Oh! I forgot to tell you my name. Please pardon my manners. My name is Mandy Parker. And you're?"

"Ifesinachi Uzundu."

"Oh dear! That pronunciation is too long. I'm sure it will take me a whole year to memorize before I get used to it. Is there any other name I can call you?" Mandy asked.

Ifes beamed. "You can call me Ifes."

Mandy let out a sigh of relief. "That's fair enough. I can try that. Pleased to meet you." Mandy stretched out her hand for a handshake.

"Likewise," Ifes replied.

"Umm! Ifes, I would love to introduce you to my friends. I promised 'em I'd introduce my assigned roommate to 'em. I'm sure they would love to meet you. Please don't say no!"

Ifes grinned. "I don't mind."

"Aww! Thank you." Mandy hugged Ifes excitedly.

They went on to discuss other things about each other and their families. But the one topic Ifes waited to hear Mandy discuss, she didn't even broach it. Mandy did not speak of her friends' spiritual lives or hers. When she finally asked, Mandy said she was an atheist. Ifes was shocked that her sweet roommate wasn't a Christian.

Later that day, Mandy introduced Ifes to her squad of friends.

"Hey, guys, meet my roommate, Ifes, and guess what? She is also my coursemate."

They all exchanged pleasantries before Mandy continued the introduction.

"This is Skylar Ford." Mandy gestured with her hands towards a redhead girl. Mandy went on to introduce the other female students as Megan Ace, Avery Reed, Anne-Marie Carter.

And the boys were Ryan Miller, Hunter Harper, and Bradley Harper. The trio had the same striking resemblance. Tall, blue eyes, blonde hair.

Anne-Marie and Skylar were studying Forensic Science. Megan's discipline was Music. Ifes, Mandy, Ryan, Bradley and Hunter were studying Peace and Conflict Resolution. Avery was offered Medical Science with Ayomide, and they both went along well in their freshman year.

Ifes first lecture day was cool, although, there were times she didn't understand the lecturer's accent. She was thankful Mandy was there to help her out. As expected, with time she began to catch up with the lecturers.

Saturday of the same week.

Ifes was inside her dorm room, thinking. The next day, which was Sunday, was church service. She would have hooked up with her church back in Nigeria online but the little Nokia C5 she had could not do live streaming. She had been so busy with college activities that she couldn't ponder over it all week long, and now she couldn't afford to miss a church service.

An idea came to her mind and she dressed up and stepped out of her dorm room. Before Ifes stepped out of her dorm room, she decided to send Mandy a text so she wouldn't worry about her when she came back to meet her absence.

"I'm going out for a while, to look for a church where I can attend service tomorrow."

"Alright, I'm out here with my friends but will soon be back to the dorm room. Don't stay out for long, okay," Mandy replied to the text message.

Ifes shoved her phone into her side pocket and reached for the doorknob. She yanked open and slammed the door behind her. She walked in the pedestrian path, occasionally staring at the fascinating eye colors of the other students who were outside as well.

She felt the vibration of her phone against her thigh in her pocket. The sides of her mouth curved upwards as she saw the caller. She tapped the green button and brought the phone to her left ear.

"Hello, good afternoon Ayo," she greeted.

"Good afternoon yourself," Ayo replied. "So what's up with you?"

"I'm alright, just walking around looking for where I can attend church service tomorrow."

"Wait, I've been thinking about that too. Where are you?"

She told him.

"Wait up, I would like to come along."

"Okay, I'll be waiting." Ifes pressed the end button and shoved the phone back into her side pocket.

It didn't take long before Ayo joined her and they walked through the alleyways, praying that God would show them the one to attend.

"Hello!" someone called from behind, causing them to pause in their tracks.

They whirled around to see a gentleman smiling as he walked towards them. Ifes recognised him. He was the 200 level student who was asked to show her around the college.

As he came close, he stretched out his hands for a handshake. "Do you remember me?" His eyes narrowed towards Ifes.

"Why not? Ian Melvin," Ifes said.

"Oh! I see you have a nice memory," Ian joked. They all laughed.

"Oh come on! Who would forget the student that helped show her around the college in such a short while?" Ian blushed.

"Ayo, meet Ian Melvin. Ian, meet my friend, Ayo," Ifes said.

"Pleased to meet you, dude," Ian said.

"Pleased to meet you, too," Ayo replied.

"So, where are you guys off to?" Ian's eyes flickered from Ifes to Ayo.

"Nowhere in particular. We are just looking for a church where we can worship tomorrow."

"Oh! I see. If so, then I think I've got a place for you."

"Where?" Ifes and Ayo chorused at the same time.

"It's good to know that you two are Christians." Ian grinned. "Could you make it to where I worship? I promise the service will be lovely."

Ifes and Ayo both stared at each other to seek each other's consent, before giving their approval to Ian.

"It's a campus fellowship. I will like you to pray about it," Ian said.

"Okay, we will do that," Ifes said.

"This means I'll be seeing you in church tomorrow?"

"Yes. Unless God says otherwise."

Ian grinned. "I'll be praying for you."

"Thanks, Ian," Ayo said.

"Anytime," Ian replied. "So, see you guys tomorrow." They waved at each other before going their separate ways.

"So what do you think?" Ayo asked on their way back to their dorm rooms.

"About what?"

"Ian's invitation to church."

"Oh, that? Nothing! We will just pray about it and if the Holy Spirit approves, then we'll go tomorrow morning."

"I think the guy is cool," Ayo said.

"Yeah! I think so too. He speaks gently and has a sweet voice."

"Yes, you can say that again, and that's what I like about him."

Ifes and Ayo went on to discuss other matters before they separated to their dorm rooms.

Ifes entered her dorm room and saw Mandy lying sprawled across her bed. She went close and breathed in the smell of alcohol.

"Don't look at me like that, I'm not drunk. I only drank a little."

Ifes couldn't stifle her trepidation as she stared at Mandy pitifully. She looked away. "I found a place to worship tomorrow, I would like you to come along with me to church. Will you be able to make it?"

When she didn't get a response, she moved closer to Mandy's bed. Mandy was already sleeping, eyes shut, mouth agape. Ifes knelt down beside Mandy's bed and held Mandy's hands gently not to interrupt her sleep. She prayed for her salvation, and kissed her hand when she was done praying. She stood back on her feet, glanced down at Mandy, then walked to her own space.

The next day, Ian was delighted to see Ifes and Ayo in the campus church. Ian was the music director of the church choir unit.

They exchanged pleasantries after the church service and Ian encouraged them to join any service unit of their choice. But that was after they had a foundation class with Ifes, Ayo and all the first timers to confirm if they had truly given their lives to Christ, and done the Holy Ghost and water baptism. Those who had not given their lives to Christ were encouraged to do so and get baptised.

"I will join the choir unit," Ifes said.

Ian grinned. "It will be nice working with you."

"I would love to be in the technical unit," Ayo chimed in.

"Awww! That's lovely because we need more hands in the technicals."



## CHAPTER SIX

"Can you help hold this? I'd like to get some project materials from my project mate." Mandy tossed her handbag towards Ifes after their last lecture for the day. They had had series upon series of lectures and now Mandy was feigning fatigue.

"No! I'm not helping you with that."

"Like you have a choice." Mandy stuck out her tongue playfully and bolted to another direction.

Ifes shrugged and returned her gaze to her desk as she continued packing up her course materials. She felt someone staring at her, then tilted her head to see Ryan's gaze fixed on her. She was supposed to be happy to see him, but there was something about the way he looked at her. He was staring, no, glaring at her with so much disdain.

*Oh, God, what is happening here? Why is he glaring at me like that?*

She flashed him a grin; he only narrowed his eyes, shooting lasers from his eyes at her.

"Hi!" Her smile slowly faded away as he still didn't respond. She was perplexed to see what was unveiling before her. Why was he glaring at her like that?

Wasn't he one of Mandy's squad of friends? For all she knew and remembered, she wasn't having any issues with either Mandy or her friends. What did she do to get such a disdainful look from him?

She went close to him and held one of his hands. "What is the—?"

"Take your filthy hands off me!" Ryan barked, cutting her short mid-sentence as he slapped her hands away sharply.

She gasped and drew back in fright.

"Don't you dare come close to me in your \*\*\*\*ing life or I'll kill you!" He was fuming, hailstone and thunder.

She stood dumbfounded as Ryan poured out his threats and walked away.

"Ifes!" She jerked when she felt a tap on her shoulders.

She whirled around to see Mandy giving her a concerned look. "Oh! It's you?"

"Yes, it's me."

"You are back so soon?"

Mandy gave her the look that read, "What are you saying?"

"Umm! Never mind. Let's go."

"Are you okay?" Mandy raised a brow questioningly.

How was she supposed to answer that question? Should she go ahead and tell Mandy what she just experienced from one of her friends? With the way Mandy spoke of them, was it possible that she was going to hear and believe anything she told her?

"Ifes!"

"Y- yes?" Ifes stuttered.

"What happened to you in my absence?"

Ifes forced a smile. "Nothing, let's go. The hall is almost empty."

One look into her eyes and she knew Ifes was hiding something from her. Mandy grabbed her handbag and walked ahead of Ifes so Ifes could not see the look of disappointment on her face.

*I'm not good enough. I'm not good enough for her, so why should she trust me?* Mandy thought.

Just when she was beginning to see Ifes as a sister, Ifes clearly showed her that she was not welcomed. She was a fool to think that even a Christian would give her a chance. As far as she knew, karma would continue to haunt her family and her for the rest of their lives. She used her handkerchief to quickly dab the moisture that collected in a film that glazed her brown eyes as they walked back to their dorm room in total silence. She swore never to go past her boundaries with Ifes or anyone else.

*She wants me to stay away from her. Then, so be it!*

Ifes was perplexed, seeing the distance that was growing between herself and Mandy. Mandy seldom spoke to her, she went to school without her, and did everything they usually did together on her own.

*First, it was Ryan, now Mandy. Oh, Lord, have I missed it in any way? Where am I getting it wrong?"*

When Ifes couldn't take the silent treatment Mandy was giving her, she decided to ask Mandy to make peace no matter what.

"Here, these are your clothes," Ifes said as she thrust Mandy's clothes that she helped to wash, towards her.

Mandy glanced up from her reading table. "You shouldn't have washed those clothes. Just drop 'em on the ground." She returned her gaze to her reading table.

"Mandy," Ifes called out. She held Mandy's hands and felt her body stiffened. "Did I offend you in any way?"

Mandy was quiet for a while then jerked her hands free from Ifes. "Stay away from me. You hate me."

"What? What are you saying?" Ifes asked, appalled by what she heard Mandy utter. "Who said so? Who said I hate you?" Several questions kept pouring from her mouth.

"You don't need to say it. It's quite obvious."

"Can you tell me what is happening here?" Ifes gave Mandy a confused look.

"I should have known better, I'm supposed to know better." Mandy covered her face with her palm and sobbed.

Ifes hunkered down in front of Mandy. "What were you supposed to know?"

"I knew it already. It's just that I followed my heart instead of my head."

Ifes stared at her bewildered. "What did you know, Mandy?"

"That I was the least to ever get any chance of friendship with a Christian."

Ifes abruptly stood, mouth agape as she glanced down at Mandy.

"Karma will continue to take its course for the rest of my life."

Ifes removed Mandy's palm from her face and stared directly into her eyes. "Look at me, Mandy. Who is telling you all this?"

Mandy hesitated but later told Ifes everything that was happening in her family, and the evil her parents did in the past.

"So, you see why God would never want to have anything to do with my family and I?"

"What if I tell you that it is not true?"

Mandy gave the African a shocked expression.

"What if I tell you that God loves you more than you could ever imagine, and what the priest told your parents was not exactly as God sees it?"

Mandy pointed her right index finger at Ifes, glowering. "You! How could you of all people say this to me? You feel telling me a lie would make me feel better, right?"

"I won't gain anything by lying to you." Ifes brought out her Bible, opened it, and flipped over to the book of Romans 3:23.

"Romans 3:23. For all have sinned, and come short of the glory of God. being justified freely by his grace through the redemption that is in Christ Jesus. Whom God hath set forth to be a propitiation through faith in his blood, to declare his righteousness for the remission of sins that are past, through the forbearance of God. To declare, I say, at this time his righteousness: that he might be just, and the justifier of him which believeth in Jesus."

Ifes looked up from her Bible to Mandy. "So you see now that I'm not lying? You only need to believe in Jesus and confess him as your Lord and Savior. That is all."

Ifes beamed, unable to contain her glee as she shared the good news that God has given to the world. All the excitement inside her died as soon as Mandy finally spoke up.

"This is the reason why I will never forgive myself for hurting a God that is so soft-hearted, and easily forgives by a small confession. My family and I deserve to suffer. This is the only way we can show God how sorry we are."

"W- what!" Ifes felt like grabbing Mandy and shaking her if that was what it took to get the message clear into her head and her heart. Did Mandy listen to her at all? Ifes wanted to tell her again that Christ had already paid for her sins and no amount of suffering or self-imposed punishment would show how remorseful she was or save her. She opened her mouth to speak, but Mandy waved her hands in dismissal.

Ifes quietly walked back to her bed, faced the wall in turmoil .

"Oh, God! I spoke to her. I gave her your good news."

Oh! If only Mandy knew what she was doing? Ifes had never seen such an emotionally wounded person in her life.

"Oh, God! Please tell me, how can I help her?"

"Mandy is emotionally wounded and I don't know what to do. Help me to get to her Lord, help me."

The still small voice spoke and she understood. She had sown the seed, it was time to water it. She would start praising God on behalf of Mandy, her family and friends, believing that God is committed to his word.

Mandy and Ifes became good friends again, and this time around, they did almost everything together. Ryan continued showing his animosity towards Ifes. When she couldn't take more of his hostility towards her, she decided to inform Mandy if she could help ask him what the problem was.

Mandy didn't believe what Ifes told her.

"I know Ryan too well. He wouldn't do such a terrible thing."

"Why don't you ask him yourself if you think I'm lying." That was Ifesinachi's response when she got tired of bantering with Mandy.

Mandy looked at her friend's eyes and felt bad, knowing she had hurt her with her unbelief. But how was it not possible that she should have her own doubts? Ryan had been her friend since forever, but Ifes had been her friend for barely a year now. She couldn't just believe her new friend without giving Ryan the benefit of doubt. Besides, in their squad, everyone knew him as one who had always been against bullying, hostility, animosity or anything like that towards others. Despite how honest she knew Ifes was, she still couldn't bring herself to believe her.

"I'm sorry, Ifes. I will go ask Ryan."

Ifes whirled around without uttering another word.

Mandy went close to Ifes and held her hand from the back. "You're angry, right? But I've said I'm sorry!"

Ifes recognised the tone of voice Mandy was using on her. If there was anything she had learnt about her friend, it was that she was perfect in emotionally getting to people. How many times had Mandy used it on her and got away with it?

"Alright, Mandy. We'll go together tomorrow so you can ask him."

"Yes! I knew you wouldn't be angry at me for long." Mandy pecked Ifes on her cheek and walked off excitedly. She would settle the misconception between her friends without having issues with any of them, and every form of antipathy that was raising its ugly head would be crushed. At the end of everything, it would be a win-win situation. Mandy smiled at her thoughts.

"Did you do it?" Mandy asked Ryan again expecting a no for an answer.

Ifes was going to see how wrong she had been about Ryan, and she would make her apologize to him.

Mandy stared right into Ryan's blue eyes and thought how innocent they looked. How could Ifes misunderstand Ryan? Why could she not see how innocent he was? Ifes was going to feel sorry for having a misconception about Ryan.

*Just wait, Ifes, she thought. Just wait till I get my answer from Ryan.*

As Mandy was ready to vouch for Ryan, a terrible incident that occurred between herself and Ryan replayed in her memory, and she winced at the memory.

"Did you do it?" she asked for the second time with a shaky voice.

Ryan let out a sardonic laugh. "Yes, I did, and you know why, so just forget her."

"Ryan!" Mandy hollered as Ryan walked out on Ifes and her. She bent her head in shame, unable to look at Ifes.

Ifes had been right all along. How could she? How could she not understand her friend's uncompromising honesty? How many times would she tempt her friend and always expect her to forgive? She was sure of one thing now: she had lost a friend who was like a sister to her.

A part of her wanted to start apologizing so that she won't lose her friendship to Ifes, but another part of her disapproved.

"You know you have lost her, there's no amount of begging that will make her forgive you, so just let her be," voices spoke in Mandy's head.

Ifes stood perplexed after hearing what Ryan said. "What did I do? What did Mandy know?" Confused, mystified, baffled, puzzled were understatement to explain the way she felt at that time. Ifes looked at her friend and noticed her struggling with emotions.

*Why is Mandy behaving like this? Ryan said she knows why, so why is she acting like that? Should I ask her now?*

"Mandy! Mandy!" Ifes called out.

"Yes, Ifes." Mandy slightly raised her head, not to meet Ifesinachi's gaze.

"What was Ryan talking about? What do you know?"

"Please, can we go back to our dorm room? I'll tell you everything there." Mandy's voice didn't show that of emotional blackmail, but that of an appeal.

"Are you sure?" Ifes asked.

"Yes."

"You promise?"

"Yes, I promise."

Ifes and Mandy went back to their dorm room in total silence, and Mandy told her everything.

"But please, Ifes, don't hate him because of that." Mandy apologised on Ryan's behalf. "He's not a bad person I swear. Trust me when I say it's not intentional, and hopefully one day, he will realise his mistakes. I promise you I will talk to him."

As time passed, Mandy was perplexed to see that Ifes treated her the same way she did before the meeting with Ryan.

*After a week, she will stop,* Mandy thought in her heart.

A week went by and Ifes didn't change.

*After this second week, she will stop.*

Ifes didn't change after the second week. Another week passed, and a month, then Mandy felt so guilty that she decided to talk to Ifes about it. They got to talking and Ifes told her that it was a long time ago and she didn't remember it again.



## CHAPTER SEVEN

Skylar's dorm room.

Skylar groaned in frustration after pressing the end button on her phone. She had just received a call from her sister, Joy. As usual, it was another bad news. Could her sister ever call to say something nice?

Everyone had agreed to come all the way from Texas to study in Pennsylvania, they all thought they did it for Ryan, but no one knew she was running away from all the predicaments that befell her family. If her friends knew about it, were they going to continue seeing her as one of them?

What of that wicked devil she had known as her dad? She had asked her mum to report him to the human rights agency and also get a divorce.

"No, honey, don't say such things. He's still your father."

"No, Mum! That son of a \*\*\*\*\* is not, and can never be, my father."

Her mother was hurt hearing the names she had called her father. Skylar wanted to apologize, but gave it a second thought if that was what would make her mother's eyes open and do the right thing.

"Your father's my life. I'll die if I lose him."

"Tell you what, Mum, you have already lost him and that's the reality whether you like it or not." Skylar pointed to her mother, glaring.

Skylar didn't argue with her mum from that day, and since then, things had gone from bad to worse. Skylar thought of her life and cursed the day she was born, the air she breathed and everything about herself.

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*I give myself away, so you can use me. I give myself away...*

These were the lyrics from Ifesinachi's alarm tune by 5:00am on Sunday morning. Pressing the snooze button, Ifes yanked off her cover, got up, and made for the bathroom. After a while she came out, dressed up, and left for church service with Ayo.

"Did you invite any of Mandy's friends to church today?" Ayo asked on their way to church.

Ifes shrugged. "Yes, I did."

"So, what did they say?"

"Not interested as usual."

"What of Mandy?"

"She's also saying the same thing, even worse."

Ifes didn't tell Ayo what Mandy had told her two months ago. She wondered if she should go ahead to tell him if she could get any form of help from him, but decided against it since it was a secret Mandy told her in confidence. She promised never to leak out the secret until Mandy was ready to say it herself.

In the church, other activities were carried out before the choir ministration.

The choir received a thunderous clapping ovation from the student church after the coordinator announced that it was time to get a rendition from them.

Just before Kimberly, the assistant music director was about to take the second verse of the song, Ifesinachi's gaze flickered to someone she never expected to see.

Anne-Marie. It was Anne-Marie!

Ifes wanted to walk out of the choir stand to go give Anne-Marie a hug, but quickly composed herself as she remembered that the choir ministration wasn't over yet.

She made a mental note to do that when it was time to welcome the first timers, or after the church service. After the service, Ifes went to Anne-Marie.

"I'm sorry if this sounds disappointing, but I didn't come because of your invitation. Plus, I am not a Christian, and I don't think I will ever be," Anne-Marie said after the exchange of pleasantries.

Those words had sounded like a blow to Ifes. Anne-Marie didn't care about the effects her words had on Ifes as she went on to tell Ifes her aim of attending the Sunday church service. Ifes walked away, feeling hurt and disappointed.

"Wow! Congratulations, Ifes!" Ayo said on their way back from church.

"For what?"

"One of Mandy's friends finally honoured your invitation, I spotted Anne-Marie through the cameras." Ayo grinned.

*Oh! He doesn't know. Should I even tell him?* Ifes cried in her heart.

"Ifes, Ifes," Ayo called. "You don't look excited about it. What happened? Is something wrong with her?" He gave her a concerned gaze.

"She didn't honour my invitation."

"What! What did you just say? But I saw her in the church today!"

"Yes, but she didn't come because I invited her."

"Hmm! Did she tell you her reason for coming?"

"Yes, she did."

"Which was?"

"She said she came for Ian, the music director."

"Wait! Let me get this straight. She came because Ian invited her, or she came for Ian?" Ayo furrowed his brow.

"Anne-Marie told me that Ian barely knows her."

"So, why did she come for Ian if he barely knows her?"

"She said she had a huge crush on him since the first day she set her eyes on him. She had done everything to get his attention. He seldom spoke to her but often walked with other Christians. So, she had decided to be a church person if that was what it took to get to him. She said she wished he was her guide and not me. She even asked for my help since I am also a member of the choir."

"Jesus ooo! Help for what?"

"To help her get to Ian."

Ayo hissed and muttered a foul word Ifes had never heard from him before. "Nahim you no come slap am (And you didn't slap her)?"

Ifes laughed. Ayo fumed.

"It's not funny." Ayo gave her a rueful look.

"No one said it is, but is that reason enough to slap her?"

"More than enough," Ayo said and Ifes laughed louder.

"Abeg leave the girl matter jor. Na her know as e take dey be her for body (please forget her. That's her business)."

"Oya na, no wahala (Alright, no problem)," Ifes replied and both walked in silence till Ayo broke it off again.

"Enhen! Wetin Mandy talk say be why Ryan dey find your trouble sef? (What did Mandy said was Ryan's reason for being hostile to you?)"

Ifes shrugged. "Oh, that..."

"Talk of the devil." Ayo's words interrupted Ifes.

She gave him the look that read, "That was rude," then followed his gaze to see Ryan and some college students playing on the school pedestrian and driveway like it was their father's playground.

Ifes didn't want to continue. She wanted to either take another route, or walk back to the church until Ryan and his friends were done using the road, but she knew Ayo wouldn't let her take that option. But still, she stood, arms crossed.

Ayo placed his hand on her shoulders, squeezing it gently as he gave her a reassuring look. "I'm here, let's go. He won't hurt you."

Ifes hesitated before she continued walking with Ayo.

"Ayo, see!" Ifes bellowed, pointing to Ryan. In a twinkling of an eye, she bolted towards Ryan, and pushed him out of the way of an oncoming vehicle. As a result of saving herself, Ifes dived and fell on Ryan as he dropped to the ground. Ifes managed to gaze up to the car and saw the driver glaring at her from his side mirror as he sped off.

"Get off my body you \*\*\*\*\*!" Ryan pushed her so hard that she bonked her head on the pavement before she could gain control of herself.

"Ryan! Ryan! How dare you, Ryan?" Ayo shouted at Ryan who was dusting his body.

"How dare ya say my name out of your mouth you \*\*\*\*\*?" Ryan fired back.

"She saved you, and you had the guts to do this to her!"

Ryan laughed sardonically and his friends chorused after him. "She can only save a devil like her."

"Oh, Jesus! Oh, Jesus!" Ifes placed both hands on her head; the noise from the bantering guys was pounding in her head.

Ryan whirled around to face his friends. "Guys, can ya believe this? He said she wanted to save me and what did she do?"

"She fell on your body," his friend's chorus, laughing louder.

"Yeah, say that again!" Ryan's voice echoed and they did as he said.

"Louder!"

"She fell on your body!"

"Louder!"

Ayo was fuming hard, trying to restrain himself by clenching his fists.

"She fell on your body!"

"Oh, ha ha ha! Louder!"

"She fell on your body!"

"Hey hey hey! Louder!" Ryan gestured with his hands. "She fell on your..."

Ayo gave Ryan an uppercut punch that lifted him and dropped him to the ground with a thud. Ryan gasped for breath as Ayo ran towards him, continuously punching him. "How dare you say such things about Ifes? How dare you?"

Ryan managed to glance up and was disappointed to see that all his friends had fled away. "P-please, let me go, I'm so sorry!" Ryan spoke, struggling for breath.

"Ayo! Ayo! Stop it now. Leave him be. Let's go," Ifes called out.

Ayo heard Ifesinachi's voice and all the anger inside him evaporated. He ran and hunkered down close to where Ifes laid on the ground. "Are you hurt? I should have listened to you, Ifes, I should have. I'm so sorry this happened to you."

"It's okay, let's just go!" Those were Ifesinachi's last words before she fell unconscious.

Ayo gently scooped Ifes up in his arms, but the school ambulance arrived before he could walk away.

"We were called by some caring students. Please hand her over to us, she'll be safe," one of the emergency attendants said as they rolled the stretcher towards Ayo.

Two stretchers were used to carry Ryan and Ifes into the car. They were rushed to the College clinic.



## CHAPTER EIGHT

UPenn College Clinic.

Ifes opened her eyes and found herself lying on the hospital bed, with a band-aid plastered to the spot at the back of her head where she was hurt.

Mandy, Megan and Ayo sat with some school officials on the seat adjacent to her bed.

"Oh, Ifes, thank goodness you are awake." Mandy rushed to Ifesinachi's bed and hugged her. "Don't you ever do this again, you hear?" Mandy said, eyes moist.

One look at Ayo and Ifes knew he had spilled the beans. Only one prayer was in her mind now, that he had not told the officials anything about it yet.

Megan stood, walked to Ifesinachi's bed and sat down beside Mandy. "I'm sorry this happened to you." Megan placed her hands gently on Ifes to feel her pulse.

Ifes smiled bleakly. "It's alright. Thank you so much."

One of the officials walked up to Ifes, standing close to her bed, he cleared his throat. "Mmm! If you ladies don't mind, we would like to ask her a few questions."

Mandy and Megan adjusted a little to allow Ifes and the officials enough space to interact.

One of the officials placed a recorder beside her and the other opened his book to jot down points.

"Good day Miss Uzundu. I believe you are doing better now."

"Yes, thanks for asking."

"My name is Mr Dimitri Collins." The official pointed to himself before gesturing to his colleague. "And he is Mr Todd Melbourne."

The official continued, "We got a report that you were attacked by Mr Ryan Miller after saving him from being hit by an oncoming vehicle. How true is this?"



Ifes moved her gaze from the officials to Ayo, and he replied with the look that read, "I didn't say anything."

"Well, it was just a trivial misunderstanding."

Mr Dimitri shot her a confused look. "Miss Uzongu, we understand that you're trying to protect the interest of a fellow student, but I think it will be just proper that you tell us the truth of what happened."

"And I just did."

"But we were told that you were under attack and he saved you," Mr Dimitri pointed to Ayo.

"Umm! I don't really know what you were told, but I would like to tell you that Ryan and I are friends and what happened between us was just a trivial misunderstanding. You know how students carry rumors around these days."

"Miss Uzongu, would you like Ryan to be summoned before the board for violence and indiscipline?" Mr Melbourne asked, unsatisfied with Ifesinachi's last reply.

"No, leave him be."

Ayo clenched his fist fuming at her response. This girl was stupid ooo!

"Alright, if you say so. But we'll keep an eye on him to be sure that this doesn't repeat itself again."

Ifes nodded and the officials stood, thanked her for her time and walked out of her hospital room.

Mandy and Megan heaved a sigh of relief after the officials slammed the door behind them, then turned to face Ifes. "Thank you for not testifying against Ryan."

Ayomide sharply turned towards Megan, fuming. "What did you just say?"

Megan was filled with dread with Ayo's angry tone.

"What did I just hear you say?" Ayo walked towards Megan like he wanted to continue from where he stopped with Ryan.

"Umm! Ayo, please calm down. She meant no harm," Ifes called out.

"W-what! I can't believe I'm hearing this from you. For heaven's sake that guy almost killed you!" Ayo clenched his fist. "What if you had a brain injury, a seizure, or something similar? This would have affected your education, and you're laying down there covering up for a heartless person like him?"

"No!" Mandy chimed in. "Please hear her out fir--"

"I don't want to hear anything!" Ayo faced Mandy. "And you, you better stay out of this. I wasn't talking to you!"

Mandy trembled violently at his cold words, afraid of Ayo doing something stupid to her and Megan.

Ayo swore. "I can't believe this. I'm outta here." Ayo walked towards the door, yanked it open and slammed it behind him, leaving the three ladies stunned.

The trio gazed at each other, speechless.

After a while, Ifes broke the silence. "Please, girls, don't see him like that. He was just a little over the edge."

"He reminds me of my brother Jason." Mandy smiled bleakly. "He would always do anything to protect me."

Megan remained speechless; dread still swept over her body.

Ifes was later discharged by evening time when the doctors confirmed that she was now stabilized.

"Thank you so much for your care and concern," Ifes thanked Mandy and Megan as soon as they entered the dorm room.

"My pleasure, dear. Anything for you." Mandy brushed her knuckles on Ifesinachi's cheek and smiled.

"I'll be on my way now," Megan said after a few minutes of chatting.

Before Megan got to the door, the trio heard a knock that made Megan stop in her tracks.

"Don't worry, I'll get that," Mandy said as she reached for the doorknob.

Mandy opened the door and saw Ayo standing in front. Her eyes widened by a fraction of an inch.

"Uh! Is Ifes around?" he asked, scratching the back of his neck. The act made him look like a remorseful little boy.

"Yes, she is." Mandy left the door ajar and stepped beside it to allow him entry into the dorm room.

"Hi!" Ayo waved at Megan cheerfully and she was perplexed by his change of gesture.

"It's good to see you again." Ayo stretched out his hands for a handshake.

"Likewise," Megan replied, returning his gesture.

"I'm sorry about the way I spoke to you ladies this afternoon," Ayo apologized in a low voice. "I'm not really good at getting angry, and when I do, I regret my actions afterwards."

"That's okay. Go and sin no more." Ifes beamed and they all laughed.

"Alright now, I have to run along." Megan stood, grabbed her purse and made for the door.

"So soon? I was just beginning to enjoy your company," Ayo said.

Megan blushed. "Thank you. Same here. We'll meet some other time."

Ayo also stood with his bag hung on his shoulders. "Wait up, I was also about to leave anyway, will just go together so I'll get to know more about you."

Megan's cheek blushed pink. "Alright, but there's not much to say about me."

"Leave me to worry about that," Ayo said. Ifes grinned, remembering that day on the plane to Philadelphia. Leave it to Ayo to make a good socialist out of you.

"alright, gals, see you later." Ayo waved as he stepped out behind Megan.

Mandy slammed the door behind them and Ifes couldn't decipher the look she saw on her face as she walked to her bed. Was it admiration or surprise or quizic?

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The driver who almost ran over Ryan the previous day sat in one of his sofas thinking of his failed mission. A call came into his phone from a woman in Texas, the same woman that gave him his mission. He glanced at the caller ID before pushing the answer button.

"Hello, Ma'am, good afternoon."

"Keep quiet you idiot! What is good about the afternoon?"

"I am sorry, Ma'am."

"I said keep quiet. You don't interrupt me when I'm talking!"

The driver wanted to apologize again but remembered the woman's warning.

The driver could hear her inhaling and exhaling deeply. He could imagine the scowl on her face, and the long strides she was probably taking, and her tight grip on the phone as if she would crush it into smithereens.

"I thought you were competent."

The driver wanted to reply to her. He opened his mouth but could barely get out a sentence.

"I thought you were a man but I never knew you could be worse than a jellyfish, Mr Black, or whatever you call yourself. You are not a man. You are a failure!"

At this point, Mr Black was almost in tears. How many times had his wife told him the same thing? "You are not a man! You are not man enough! You are a failure! You are not a man! You are not a man! You are not a man!"

Mr Black placed his left hand on his head as those words bellowed in his head and heart. His wife had been the reason why he decided to take up this dirty job. He wanted to show her that he was man enough, that he wasn't a failure. Now, another woman was calling him

names because of his wife, the same names she called him, the same words she tormented him with.

It was also a woman that destroyed his mission by pushing his prey out of his way. All women are the same. Curse be upon them!

His phone made a click sound in his ears, that was when he realized the call had been disconnected. It rang again, and this time it sounded to him like a dirge.

He hesitated at first when he discovered it was the same woman, and then heaved a long frustrating sigh before slowly tapping the green circle on the screen of his android phone and placing it back to his right ear.

"How dare you snub me when I'm asking you a question, Mr Black, huh?" the caller from the other side of the phone said.

"I am s-sorry."

"Why am I even wasting my time with you? I'll explore other alternatives to getting rid of that son of a \*\*\*\*\*. This is where our contract ends, and you are not getting your complete payment from me. You and your wretched family should go to hell!" The woman disconnected the call.

"What a failed mission!" The driver cursed. The driver stood from his couch, straightening his shirt. Today he was going to do what he knew how to do best, what he always did—drinking himself to stupor.

His phone chimed again, but he ignored it. He took up his car keys, walked out of his living room to where his car was parked. He opened the door of his rusty car, sunk heavily into the driver's seat and switched on the ignition. The engine roared to life, and he drove out to his favorite drinking spot.

"I'm coming for you, babes!" Mr Black grinned, speaking to his favorite drinks.

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Woodway Texas.

The woman disconnected the call and tossed her phone on the table close to her wine bar with a thud. She spat out a foul word. "The semester is almost over. I can't believe Ryan is still alive!"

She groaned and pushed the bottle and glass of wine before shattering it on the floor.

"Nonsense! You survived this session but you won't make it in the next session, I swear! I'll use you to avenge what your father did to me. You are my scapegoat." The woman laughed wickedly. "Did I just say you? You? Haha! I wouldn't be satisfied with only you."

## CHAPTER NINE

Anne-Marie's dorm room, UPenn.

Anne-Marie slowly paced up and down her dorm room. It was a good thing Megan and her roommate weren't around. If not, they would have tagged her crazy.

Who could ever believe that she would step her foot into a church in her life? Oh, how much she hated religion and their ridiculous ways of life! But today, she wasn't sure of what she felt again. She had fallen in love with a Christian.

Feeling uncomfortable, Anne-Marie sat on her bed. Still uncomfortable with that, she took a seat close to her reading table. Not feeling any better, she stood and went close to the window, staring out into space. She yanked out her phone from her side pocket, unlocked it, navigated to her phone's gallery, and opened his picture which she had taken secretly.

"I hate it! I hate that you are a Christian. I don't know why you are a Christian. You are too handsome to be a Christian," she said, staring at the picture that filled the face of her phone's screen.

Anne-Marie whirled around and walked to the front of the standing mirror in her dorm room to take a proper look at herself. She was fair. She was beautiful. She had all the nice shapes and curves, but had never attracted her dream man, had never found true love. The guys she fell in love with were either dating another or weren't interested.

Even Skylar, who was tagged the ugliest of her squad, had numerous dates, while she was struggling to get just one for herself. Skylar, with her red hair, flat nose And most of all, shapeless teeth! Anne-Marie gritted her teeth in frustration.

Anne-Marie walked back to the window and grabbed the protector tightly as she looked up to the sky through the window. "Oh, God of Ian! I'm talking to you for the first time in my life."

She paused for a while thinking if she was now praying to the God she never believed existed.

"If you truly exist, then hear me now!" Inhaling and exhaling sharply, she continued, "Don't take Ian away from me. I want you to make him love me as much as I love him or even more. Did you hear? Did you hear me at all?"

Anne-Marie found herself praying in Jesus' name for the first time in her life and broke down crying. "I need someone to love me! I need to be loved as well, if Ian doesn't work out, I'll die!"

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The next semester.

Ifes sat on one of the couches in her dorm room awaiting Mandy's arrival. She had gotten a call early that morning from Mandy informing her that she and her friends were returning to UPenn.

"Why didn't you tell me before now?" Ifes had asked Mandy over their phone conversation that morning.

"I wanted it to be a surprise."

Ifes laughed. "I don't get, what could be surprising about this whole thing?"

"You act like you weren't perplexed enough!" Mandy taunted. Ifes could imagine her pouting on the other end.

"Haha! You are funny, Mandy. I wonder what is surprising to know that my friend and roommate is arriving at college today."

"Oh yeah? But the fact that I didn't notify you earlier did the job for me. Can you imagine the way you sounded when I informed you of my arrival," Mandy replied, mimicking her.

Ifes laughed again. "Mandy, a little advice for you. Please, don't take up the acting profession. You ain't good at it."

The duo laughed simultaneously.

"Yeah! I know, right? I was just trying out my luck on you."

From Mandy's tone of voice, Ifes knew she was telling her the truth, but what she didn't know was why and who Mandy was planning a surprise for.



"Don't worry, we shall talk more when you get here. Say hi to your family."

"The same family you didn't want to see, right?"

"Not again!" Ifes exclaimed under her breath.

"Don't worry. I was only pulling your legs. I understand."

At the end of the previous session, Mandy had asked Ifes to come with her to Texas to spend the break.

"No! I insist, you are coming with me." Mandy had protested when Ifes politely declined her offer.

"Please, Mandy!"

"Why exactly would you not come with me? Is it because...?"

"No, no, Mandy, you know I barely have enough to sustain me, that is why I need to work and this won't be possible if I come with you to Texas. In our freshman year, I intentionally didn't take a job because I needed to get my educational ground first, and now that is achieved, I have to move on to other things if I will continue to sustain my stay in the US."

"So, money's the problem here, right?"

Before Ifes could open her mouth to give an explanatory answer, Mandy continued.

"We don't have any financial problems in my family. Why don't you come with me? I already told my dad about you and he likes you. I don't think he would have any problems footing your bills."

It was a nice and tempting offer, but that was the last thing Ifes was going to do in her life—depending on others for financial support when she could work it out herself. She wasn't a beggar. She didn't come to the US to depend on her roommate or take advantage of her financial buoyancy.

She stifled a slight exasperation. "The last thing I want to do is to be a burden to you and your family."

"And who says you are? Ain't I the one making the offer?"

Does it matter who was really making the offer? Both ladies protested before Mandy finally understood and resigned.

"I'll miss you," Mandy said as Ifes saw her off to the airport on the day of her departure to Texas.

"I'll miss you, too."

"The truth is, we'll miss each other, and every time, you act like I haven't been a special roommate."

Ifes beamed. "You better get going before you miss your flight."

"I'm just meeting you in this college for the first time in my life, but it's been like I've known you forever." Mandy held one of Ifesinachi's hands in two of her squeezing gently. "I don't really know how much I know about you. But one thing I know is, I feel this inexplicable peace when I'm around you."

Ifes wanted to tell her, 'Is it not written in the book of John 14:27. Peace I leave with you, my peace I give unto you: not as the world giveth, give I unto you. Let not your heart be troubled, neither let it be afraid.' These were the words of Jesus and Ifes wanted to share it with Mandy. But somehow, she didn't find the courage to say it.

Ifesinachi's phone chimed, driving her from her thoughts. Tapping the answer button, she placed it on her left ear. "Hello, Mandy."

"Hello, pretty one!" Mandy's voice echoed through Ifesinachi's phone speaker. "My friends and I just arrived in Pennsylvania. We are on our way to school as we speak."

"Good to hear that. I'll be expecting you," Ifes said and disconnected the call.

Few minutes later, Ifes heard a single knock and the muffled creak of the door as Mandy sauntered in and slammed the door behind her.

"Look who we have here!" Ifes said, getting up from her bed.

The duo embraced each other excitedly.

They broke the hug and Mandy drew Ifes at arm's length, studying her. "So how is our workaholic doing?"

Ifes jerked her hands away. "I'm not a workaholic."

"Says the workaholic herself." Mandy smirked and Ifes rolled her eyes.

"So, how have you been coping with your new job?" Mandy asked unpacking her things and Ifes joined her.

"Pretty well."

"You know what?" Mandy asked when the duo were done unpacking.

"Tell me."

"I'll just go shower now. I'm coming with you to your workplace today."

Ifesinachi's eyes glittered. "You're supposed to rest a bit before fluttering about."

"It doesn't matter. You said you're on the evening shift right?"

"That's right."

"What do you say we go before your work hours so we can have lunch. Sounds perfect, right?"

"Yeah! That would be just fine."

The duo got dressed and Mandy drove them to Baby Blues BBQ Philly where Ifes worked.

"A pretty place you've got here," Mandy said as she walked into the picturesque restaurant behind Ifes who led the way.

"You like it?" Ifes tilted her head slightly to look at Mandy from her side.

"Yeah!" Mandy said in delight as they picked a spot where Mandy could sit and have a full view of the restaurant and also be able to see who comes in and goes out the door. Since

gaining admission into UPenn, she had gone to other cafeterias and restaurants but had never tried Baby Blues BBQ Philly. Vernick food/drink, Townsend, Laurele were the previous ones she had gone to during her exam time last semester.

A waiter Ifes recognised strode towards their table, a menu in hand. "I see you came with someone." The waiter gazed down at Ifes, grinning.

"Yes, she's my roommate, coursemate, and friend, Mandy." Ifes took her gaze to Mandy smiling before diverting it back to the waiter. "Mandy, meet my friend and colleague, Emma. I'll be taking over from her this evening."

"Pleased to meet you, Emma."

"Pleased to meet you, too, Mandy." The ladies quickly exchanged pleasantries as Emma tossed the menu on their table to attend to other customers.

The duo gazed at the menu contemplating which meal to choose for lunch. Emma returned after a while and Mandy ordered for Brunswick stew and greens while Ifes ordered for drop biscuits and sausage gravy. Mandy also ordered Texas barbecue for herself, cornbread and chili for Ifes as takeaway for their dinner. Emma smiled as she walked out of their presence to go get their orders.

They ate in silence for a while as Ifes expected Mandy to talk about her mother and brother's health. She didn't say anything, so Ifes decided to broach the topic.

"So, how's everyone back in Texas?" Ifes asked, not wanting to show her that she meant to ask of her mother and brother in particular.

Mandy shrugged, a slight grim expression flickering across her face.

Ifes lowered her head, feeling sad about the abrupt unsettlement she had cost her friend. She didn't mean to arouse any unwanted emotions.

Mandy laughed to cheer up her friend when she noticed her reaction disturbed Ifes.

"Everyone's great, although my mum and brother are still in the same condition where I left them, but it's all good. We'll get over it." Mandy gave Ifes an encouraging smile.

They went on to discuss other irrelevant matters that didn't raise tension over the lunch as Ifes waited for her time to resume duty.

Ifes glanced down at her wrist watch, she moved her seat back and stood. "It's time. I have to work now."

Mandy groaned. "Must you start now?"

Ifes smirked, giving her a sardonic expression. "I've got to go now, else, my boss will come for my head, and I'm sure you don't want that."

"Come! I need to talk to that boss of yours. He needs to give us some time."

"And who do you think you are that my boss would want to talk to? The President's wife?"

"Hahaha! I'm bigger than that and he should listen to me when I talk."

"Such guts!" Ifes rolled her eyes and walked away to resume duty.

Ifes concentrated on her work believing Mandy would have gone back to their dorm room, but was perplexed when her eyes flickered to the position where she and Mandy sat and noticed Mandy was seated comfortably like other customers who were waiting for their orders to be served. Mandy noticed Ifes had seen her, then she flashed her a grin, waving. Other waiters attended to the customers as Ifes breezed towards Mandy.

"You're still here?" Ifes asked, giving Mandy a perplexed and solemn expression.

"Hey! You better not give me that look. We came here together, so I'm waiting for you, when you are done, we'll go." Mandy diverted her gaze to the door like she was expecting someone.

Ifes grinned, stroking Mandy's hair slightly. "I am the most fortunate person on earth to have a friend who is watching out for me."

"You better go back to work before your boss comes for you." Mandy rolled her eyes.

"Hahaha! You talk like you won't miss me when I'm gone from here."

"I won't dare!"

A banter was about to ensue between the duo but Ifesinachi's attention was called by one of the customers.

As usual, Ayo came to see Ifes off as he always did after her work hours and met Mandy. He was surprised and did try to suppress his shock at seeing her.

"Hey!" Ayo said softly, stretching out his hands to Mandy. "I wasn't expecting you here. I didn't know you're back."

"Yeah! I came back to college today." Mandy received his gesture, grinning.

Ayo glanced at Ifes. "And you didn't tell me she was coming back today."

"Mmm! She ca—"

Mandy cut her off. "Umm! It wasn't her fault. I just informed her this morning.

"Oh! I see." Ayo averted his eyes to Mandy, smiling. "Then I should formally tell you you're welcome back to college."

"Alright, since the pleasantries are over, I guess I'll go and change my uniform now." Ifes informed them both before exiting their presence.

"Yes, we'll wait for you." Ayo and Mandy stared at her as she disappeared into the dressing room.

Ifes came out after a while and saw the duo chatting and got a feeling of déjà vu. Then, she remembered seeing that enigmatic expression on Mandy's face the day Ayo came to their dorm room. She stared at them for a while. They were so engrossed in whatever they were discussing that they didn't even notice her presence.

Ayo said something and Mandy laughed, tilting her head. Her expression changed slightly when she sighted Ifes. Following her gaze, Ayo saw Ifes standing a couple inches away.

"You're back?" Mandy asked, a beautiful and charming smile still etched on her face.

"Yes, I'm back."

"So, shall we?" Ayo gestured to the exit door.

"Yes." Mandy grabbed her purse from the table. Ifes did the same, and the trio walked out of Baby Blues Barbecue.

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The following week.

In Hunter and Bradley's dorm room.

Hunter watched as his brother was getting dressed to go out. Bradley took so much time to dress and Hunter couldn't wait to have him out of the way. Bradley wore a white body-hug T-shirt, a black leather jacket, black pants and a white cap.

"Bradley should come out of that closet already!" Hunter muttered under his breath.

Becoming too impatient, Hunter wanted to lay his hands on something that could distract him. If he didn't, he was afraid he might just say out what he might regret later. He looked around for a distraction, but only his phone came to his rescue. He let out a mirthless laugh as he sat on a couch opposite Bradley's closet. He couldn't concentrate on what he was doing on his phone. His eyes were mostly on Bradley's closet door.

Bradley stepped out of his closet after a while, and went straight to his reading table. He grabbed his phone, credit card and car keys before turning to look at his twin brother.

"I'm going out to eat," Bradley said.

"And you forgot to add that you'd be staying there for a long time." Hunter shot his brother a sardonic smile.

Bradley scooped up one of his course materials from his reading table and stoned it at his brother. "You're such a douchebag."

His brother was telling the truth but he didn't want to admit it. He knew he had been spending so much time at his favorite restaurant.

Hunter dodged the book, chuckling. "You know, sometimes I can't help but feel you are crushing on one of the waiters."

Bradley's face flushed with embarrassment.

"You have been going there since our freshman year. Even when Ryan and I invite you for a change, you wouldn't budge.

"That was because I wasn't interested, twin bro."

Bradley's expression was enigmatic but Hunter was trying really hard to search his brother.

"Maybe I'll come with you some other time. I would like to meet her too, you know." Hunter smirked.

"Hmm!" Bradley shrugged. "I'm outta here."

Hunter watched as his brother walked to the door, yanked it open, and slammed it behind him. He exhaled deeply as he scooped up his phone from the couch he sat on.

His addiction was eating him deeply and he was grateful that Bradley was out of the way now. Each time he wanted to go out when his brother was around, Bradley would always want to know where he was going. It was always difficult for him anytime he lied about his whereabouts.

Hunter shook his head smiling sadly as he remembered their mother. Wasn't that what she told them to always do? Look out for each other. As far as he knew, Bradley was the only one perfectly keeping to that instruction.

He unlocked his phone and went straight to his contact list, scrolling until he found the number he was looking for, then punched the call button. The person picked after the third ring.

"Why, Hunter my boy. It's good to see your call. Hope I'm expecting you today?" the caller from the other end of the phone said in excitement.

Since their freshman year, Hunter had been one of his best patrons. Students who were into such addictions weren't hard to find in colleges. Mr. Master, as he asked his patrons to call him, knew how to keep his tracks clean, and that was why the college had been unable to discover him since the past decade.

"Yes, I'm about to leave my dorm room."



"Oh! That's good then, I'll be expecting you."

"See you in twenty minutes' time," Hunter said and disconnected the call.

He fingered through his blonde hair. Standing from the chair, he went to his closet. Hunter chose a shirt similar to Bradley's but it was lemon colored.

## CHAPTER TEN

Baby Blues BBQ.

Bradley was shocked as he saw a familiar figure darting through the restaurant's tinted door. He brushed his hands over his face, his eyes in particular, to be sure of who he was seeing.

Dang it! Bradley cursed under his breath. It was Ifes.

Since his freshman year, Bradley had been coming to Baby Blues Barbecue where none of his friends or anyone close to his friends came.

Bradley noticed the perplexed expression on Ifesinachi's face when her gaze fell on him. Composing herself, she grinned as she walked towards him.

He lowered his head, cursing. "Why is she walking towards me?" He groaned inwardly.

He wasn't in the mood to talk to anyone. He brought out his phone, unlocked it, and pretended to be busy doing something on it.

Ifes walked towards him and gently tapped him on his right shoulder. He glanced up and saw Ifes smiling down at him. She stared at Bradley smiling, while he gazed at her bleakly.

"Hi!" Ifes broke the silence that encompassed around them.

"Hey! What are you doing here?"

"This is where I work."

Bradley gave her an incredulous stare. "I don't believe you. This has been my favorite restaurant since our freshman year and I have never seen you here even once."

"I just started working. I've only worked for four months here."

A muscle in his face twitched. "This means we'll be seeing more of each other?"

"Yes," Ifes said.

Bradley cringed inwardly. "Hmm! For how long will you be working here?"

That was a weird question to ask someone who just started working and would probably work for the rest of her college years, but Ifes answered him though.

"I'll work here till I am either done with college or the management would have no need for my service."

Bradley swore under his breath, wincing at the thought of having to see her everyday, as if it wasn't enough that he attended the same lectures with her, Hunter, Ryan and Mandy.

She glanced down at his food, it was halfway eaten. One of her colleagues had told her that he had been there for an hour. The thought of Bradley not finishing his food in one hour filled her with concern.

Bradley abruptly stood from his seat, making her jerk from her thoughts. "I have to be on my way now," Bradley said, staring at her.

She grimaced. "Is there anything wrong with the food?"

"No, not the food, but you. Everything is wrong with you," Bradley wanted to say.

"No, the food is fine. I'm not hungry."

"Then, why are you lea-?"

"Take care of yourself," Bradley said as he stood making a scraping noise with the chair. He negotiated his movement around her and made for the exit door.

Ifes tilted her head, mouth half agape as she watched him amble out of the restaurant.

"Hay, missy," one of the customers who sat on another table a couple inches away from the table Bradley occupied called out. She turned in the direction of the voice and squinted her eyes to see the customer and his friend smirking at her.

One was a brunette and looked like a player. He was the one who called her. The other was a fidgety, freckle-faced guy that looked as if he was the other guy's shadow.

They had been served their orders, and they weren't done eating, so she wondered why they called her attention.

"Why, your boyfriend is really handsome, you know?"

Her face flushed in embarrassment as they cackled sardonically.

"I think she just confronted her boyfriend," the guy who had called out to her said.

Laughing, his friend replied. "I don't think so. Can't you read between the lines?"

The customer thoughtfully raised an eyebrow to his friend.

Reading his expression, his friend replied. "Yes! Exactly what I am talking about," the freckled guy said emphatically, snapping his fingers in synchrony. "Didn't you notice that she looks like a hungry lioness?"

"Oh Haha! You're actually correct. I guess I was too foolish to notice." The man tilted his head to look at her again from his side.

She gazed at the men, perplexed at their hideous thoughts.

"Unbelievable!" He shook his head grimly and sardonically.

His friend also tilted his head to stare at the standing waitress. "Why, I can't agree more."

"Missy, when last did you and your boyfriend ha-?"

Not wanting to hear the remaining part of his sentence, she shot him a glare giving him the look that read, "I don't have your time," then whirled around to walk away.

Laughing, the brunette called out, "Hey! Before you go, missy, remember to pick up your boyfriend's diary from that table."

She stopped in her tracks. Her mind was conflicted whether to believe him or not. Finally taking a decision, she summoned courage, turned around and walked straight to Bradley's table without giving them the benefit of a side glance.

"She couldn't even look at us, or say a simple thank you." They said it loud enough that she could hear them.

"Thank you," she said, approaching the table.

Ifesinachi's eyes popped out as she glanced down at the opened diary.

"Jesus! What is this?" She pointed to the open diary as though it was an abomination. She never intended to look at his diary, she just wanted to pick it up and give it back to him the next day. Terrible anguish struck her heart, she felt a dreadful ache tearing inside her at what she was seeing.

"What's the matter?" The customer asked as his friend gazed speechlessly.

Like seriously, were they expecting her to tell them? Tell them what exactly? That Bradley was writing of how he wanted his funeral to be? That he had used up his college reserve for chemotherapy and could no longer continue? That he had kept it a secret from his friends and family so as to not hurt their feelings?

"Nothing!" She yanked the book from the table and walked away, feeling sick on the inside.

She hadn't gone far when she heard the duo yelling. "It's not like we were expecting anything better!" They called her a foul name.

She kept walking till she could no longer hear their yelling voices. Coming out a while later to attend to new customers, she realized they had left the restaurant, and their table was now occupied by a young couple.

Ayo came at the end of her shift to see her off as usual and noticed the grim look on her face. As they walked back, Ayo talked but noticed she wasn't concentrating on what he was saying when she didn't reply to his question.

He held her hand pulling her to a halt, then tilted his head to look at her.

"What is the matter? Are you okay Ifes?"

Bradley's secret was meant for only his diary and she didn't have the right to tell even Mandy. But why should she not tell Ayo who was now asking her? And Mandy, or any of her squad of friends? Isn't this supposed to be a matter of necessity that needed not to be kept a secret? She folded her hands across her chest as the cold night breeze brushed her bare skin.

Ayo faced her, placing two of his hands on her shoulders studying her.

"You don't look okay, what is wrong?"

She shook her head. " No-nothing."

"Are you sick?"

"No."

"Have you eaten?"

"Yes ."

"Do you want us to go sit down somewhere and talk?"

She gave it a thought then shook her head. "No."

"Did work go well today?"

"Yes."

"Did anything or anyone make you angry?"

Probably. "No."

"Is all well with your family back in Nigeria?"

"Yes."

Ayo exhaled deeply, letting go of her shoulders. Dropping his hands to his side, he asked.  
"Then what is the matter?"

Seeing the worried look on his face, she released her hands and held one of his.

"I am sorry. I don't mean to hurt you. The issue is not about me, you know I would have told you if it was."

"Alright then. I reckon you want to keep it private."

"Yes, but please pray. Pray for Bradley and keep an eye on him. This is all I can say for now."

He brushed his knuckles on her cheek to cheer her up. "Don't worry, I understand. I'll definitely pray for him."

She looked at him and prayed that he didn't misunderstand like the way those jesters back in the restaurants did.

Ifes entered her dorm room and didn't say a word to her roommate as she walked straight to bed. The burden of the secret she was now carrying was weighing her down.

Her roommate watched as she laid on her bed, her face to the wall. "Ifes. Ifes!" Her roommate tapped her on her back.

"Yes, Mandy," she answered, not looking away from the wall.

Mandy was taken aback by her abrupt attitude. "You perplexed me with your sudden behavior. Are you alright?"

Looking up from the wall to her friend, she replied. "Yes, I am. Thanks for asking."

"I made grilled cheese sandwiches. May I get some for you?"

Ifes knew that declining her friend's request would arouse unwanted questions, so she did what she thought was best for her and Mandy. "Yes, you may. Thanks."

Mandy smiled. "You haven't even tasted it and you're thanking me already."

She laughed bleakly. "Why shouldn't I? We both know how great your sandwiches taste."

Ifes had no appetite, but knew she had to force herself to be normal and eat up the sandwich if she wanted to have some sleep that night.

The next day, Ifes went to work early and eagerly waited for Bradley's arrival.

"Oh! Holy Spirit, precious Holy Spirit! Thank you because I know you always hear me. As Bradley comes today, please come and take control of our conversation. Put the right words into my mouth. At the end of the day, let Jesus be glorified. In Jesus' name, Amen."

She prayed over and over again as her eyes were fastened on the door. No one noticed how distracted she was as she served the customers cheerfully. They finally did when she bumped into a couple whose backs were to her. She stained their dresses. At that time, she had seen Bradley come in and totally lost concentration.

"I'm so sorry!" she stammered.

Bradley saw what happened and knew it was definitely related to his diary. His heart stopped beating for a while. He shook himself hard to check if he was still alive. Then his heartbeat started again, drumming louder and faster in his ears.

His speculations were right, after all. She had seen the diary. Now, he could only hope his speculations weren't absolutely right. He hoped she had not said anything to Mandy.

He glared at her then mumbled under his breath, "You are a fool and a busybody going about poking your nose into other people's matters! Who does she think she is to read my diary? What gave her the right to? I'm going to walk straight to her and give her a piece of my mind. Nonsense!"

He walked close to the couple who were now yelling at Ifes for staining their dresses, and called for their attention.

"Please, forgive her, I promise you that it wasn't intentional."

The couple tilted their heads to look at the intruder.

"Hey, mister, who do you think you are to bring yourself into this \*\*\*\*ing issue?" the wife said, glaring at him.

"Judging from your looks, I can tell that you two ain't related in any way, so how is this any of your business?" the husband yelled at him.

"Yeah, we ain't related in the way you are thinking. She is my girlfriend," Bradley lied.

Ifes gazed at him dumbfounded. She opened her mouth to speak but he shot her the look that read, "You better keep quiet for your own good!" She gulped back her saliva.

The wife asked Bradley a question. "So you go about dating girls who don't have manners, right?"



"Ha ha ha! She is very sweet and respectful." He went close to her and firmly stood by her side taking her left hand into his right hand. "You know, I love her a lot. She means the world to me."

The couple blushed, remembering their own college days.

"She is the woman I plan to get married to after graduation. She is pregnant with my child and it makes her get tired a lot. That was why that mild accident happened."

*Pregnant with my child! Pregnant with my child! Pregnant with my child!*

Those words kept chiming like bells in Ifesinachi's head. Something was definitely going wrong. What was he up to?

She was too stunned to speak, whatever was happening now was happening too fast, and she couldn't fathom it.

Finally, she opened her mouth to speak, but Bradley cut her off again with his words.

"Since the pregnancy, I realised she easily gets tired." He tilted his head from the couple to look at her. "Hon, I told you to stop working, that this will stress you out, but you can be stubborn at times."

*Dear Lord, Ifes thought, Bradley will make a terrific actor.*

He gestured towards the counter. "I have to take you home now. Let's go meet your manager."

Addressing the couple, he said, "We are sorry, but we have to go now." And with a firm grip, he pulled her to follow him.

"What's happening here Bradley?" Ifes asked on their way to the manager's office.

"Keep quiet! Just shut up and let me do the talking," he spat at her in a cool voice.

His remark sent a little chill down her spine. Whatever it was he wanted to use in making up an excuse for her, she wasn't going to allow him to repeat that same lie. Bradley wasn't in a good state of mind now, and that was why he lied without considering the repercussions. What was the manager, and others, going to think of her when they saw her coming to work the next day, and in nine months to come?

They entered the office after a polite knock. Bradley slammed the door behind them. Bradley wanted to repeat his lies, but this time around, Ifes cut him off.

"Umm! Sir, I am not feeling too well."

"Sorry about that. How long do you plan to stay out?" The manager's secretary asked.

For nine months, Bradley wanted to say, but Ifes cut him off again. "Just today. I will be back by tomorrow."

The secretary gazed at the duo enigmatically. "Alright then. We'll be expecting you by tomorrow."

Coming out of the manager's office, the duo caught glimpses of the couple they had encountered, peering at them as they stepped out of the restaurant. Gratefully, the tinted door made their figures disappear out of sight.

Bradley held her hands as he walked her to the parking lot. He went to his passenger side and opened the door for her. He waited till she sat on the passenger's seat before slamming the door and walking over to the driver's side.

He slid into the driver's seat, fixed his seatbelt before giving Ifes a cursory glance. "You also don't know how to put on your seatbelt?"

"Huh! Where are you taking me Bradley?"

He gave her another cursory glance before seeing the same couple from his rear view mirror glancing at his car. He gave a forced smile, and helped her put on her seat belt. Without another word, he slid his car key into the ignition. The engine roared as he twisted the key and drove out of the parking lot into the driveway.

As he drove to an unknown destination, Ifes cried in her heart. *Oh, God, Oh, God! I don't know where he is taking me to, and I don't know how this meeting will go, but I am trusting you to be with us.*

Bradley's car came to a halt in a quiet street. Glaring at her, he yelled, "Who or what gave you the guts to open my diary, huh?"

Ifes cowered like a little child, frightened by the deathly tone of his voice.

"I'm asking you a question and you are looking at me like a dullard!" He was fuming. All that was left to complete his angry mood was a puff of fume coming out his nostrils and ears.

Composing herself, she yelled right back, "I didn't open your diary!" She was annoyed that he could conclude as such. It wasn't as if she stole the diary.

Bradley laughed sardonically. "But you read it, right?"

She darted her eyes gazing at him speechlessly. Looking at him, she noticed his blue eyes had gone dark. It was unable to cloak the pain and agony he was going through.

Ifes heart softened. *I am sorry, Lord. I am sorry I yelled at him. I shouldn't have gotten angry. Please help me to see through him, and let me not take any negative words he will spit at me to heart.*

Feeling frustrated at her silence, Bradley slammed his fist on his car steering and groaned.

She placed her hands on his. "Please take it easy Brad—"

"Don't ask me to take it easy! Don't you dare tell me what to do ever again in your life, you hear?" Bradley slapped her hands away.

"I can explain, Bradley!"

"Explain what, cowgirl?"

He tilted his head glaring as he pointed an accusing finger at her.

"You read my diary, didn't you?" he said, repeating his question.

Refusing to be intimidated by his rage, she replied as calmly as she could, "Yes."

She could swear that she saw his body jerk slightly.

"And you now know I have cancer?"

"Yes."

"You also know my days are numbered on earth because I can't continue with my chemotherapy?"

"Yes."

"Hmm! You know I have been writing about how I want my funeral to be?"

"Yes, and that is only what I know, but I can explain!"

Bradley's eyes grew moist. "I thought I could expect better from you!"

"Please, listen to me first before drawing any conclusions!"

"What do you want me to hear you for? I never expected this kind of behaviour from a person like you! Mandy! Mandy spoke a lot of nice things about you, but today, I can see that you have shown your true color!"

Ifes clasped her hands tightly on her knees, fighting back the unwanted emotions that welled up inside her. She knew she had to calculate her words now, any wrong word will confirm whatever wrong perception he had about her.

*Oh, God! Oh Father! What do I say now that will make him not misunderstand me? What do I say or do to clear his misperception?*

Bradley broke down, wailing profusely. He couldn't remember the last time he cried openly, in front of a girl who was more like a mere stranger to him.

"You know, I have kept this a secret from everyone for so long. I'm afraid, very scared. Scared that I am drawing closer to my grave with each passing day."

He buried his face in his palm, wailing uncontrollably. It was unfortunate that in one of his vulnerable moments he wasn't alone.

Life is such a jerk!

This was the height of it. He wasn't sure he would ever be able to put up his strong walls again. He was going to end it by himself before death came calling. Yes! Suicide still worked.

"Yesterday, one of our customers called my attention to your table after you left and asked me to pick up your diary." She did not tell him of the jest they made of her.

"So, what does that have to do with you reading my diary?" Bradley asked through a choked voice and a blur of tears.

"My eyes almost popped out of their sockets as soon as I glanced down at your opened diary."

Realization filled Bradley upon hearing those words. He remembered he had been so much in a haste to leave as soon as his eyes spotted her. He could not even remember if he closed the diary; but he was sure of one thing which was, of a truth, he forgot his diary on his table at the restaurant.

"So how many pages did you read?" Bradley laughed bleakly.

"I am telling you the truth that I did not flip either to the right or the left of your diary. I only read the open page."

Bradley's eyes flashed. "And you expect me to believe you? Fat chance."

"I will be honest with you. After seeing the open page, I was so curious to find out what's written on the previous pages, but I have respect for people's privacy. If you had not left your diary open, I wouldn't have done that myself, because I know that I don't have the right to. I remember fighting back the urge and curiosity that aroused inside me to flip through your diary."

"Hmm! And Mandy... Is she aware of this?"

Ifes looked straight into his eyes and noticed that he didn't give her a questioning look. It was rather an accusing gaze.

"You are in the right position to tell your secrets to your friends."

Bradley exhaled deeply. That was when he realized he had been holding his breath as he awaited her answer. Thank goodness! It brought him a temporary relief.

"That's one of the last things I'll ever do in my life."

*Oh, God! He is so stubborn. Please, open his heart.*

Then, this scripture filtered into her mind, "The king's heart is in the hand of the LORD; as the rivers of water, he turneth it whithersoever he will. Every way of a man is right in his own eyes; but the LORD pondereth the hearts."

"What are you thinking of?" Bradley asked when he saw the distant look that was etched on her face.

"Nothing. I was praying."

"Praying!" He said the word like a curse, narrowing his eyes.

Ifes shook her head affirmatively.

"Praying about what?" Bradley asked, wondering why he kept hearing about God or prayer. He remembered Nurse Fiona back in Texas.

"I pray that God will heal you," Fiona had said.

"I am praying that your heart will be open to receive the salvation and healing Jesus is offering you."

"Now, wait a minute!" Bradley glared at her. "Don't make this look like I am suffering from cancer because I'm not a Christian. I know a lot of so-called Christians who go through this, and even worse!"

"Why do you easily misunderstand me? I never said you are going through this situation because you ain't a Christian. I was only trying to let you know that you don't have to die like that. You have a better life in Christ; you will have peace in Christ."

Peace, again! The same word from Nurse Fiona.

Giving her a cursory glance, he yelled, "I know I can have all those things without being a Christian. The fact is, I used to. It's only that one of the facts you Christians have not been able to accept is that life is not fair." He inhaled and exhaled deeply.

"You've all been deluded into believing that life just becomes a bed of roses when one becomes a Christian."

"No! We are only belie--"

Raking his fingers through his now disheveled blonde hair, he narrowed his eyes to the passenger's door. "You know what I think? You have overstayed your welcome. Please, get out of my car!"

Ifes felt like someone had slapped her across the face; no, punched her on her stomach; no, rolled her on a dirty mud; no, there was no word that could describe how she felt. Bradley had just sent her away, rejecting what she saw as his only lifeline.

Bradley pointed at the passenger's door fuming. "Get out of my car before I do something stupid!"

She opened the door with her gaze fixed on him pleadingly.

"Get out of my car before I do something I might regret!"

She stepped out of the car with her gaze still fixed on him.

Without waiting for her to slam the door, he turned on the ignition and the car engine came to life, then he zoomed off.

She watched on as he drove off until he was out of sight.

Bradley pulled his car to a halt when he could no longer see Ifes, when he had driven away from the street he left her. He leaned on his side and stretched out his hand to close his car door.

Leaning back on his seat, he exhaled slowly and heaved a sigh of relief. He was relieved that he had left Ifesinachi's accusing gaze, but was more relieved that she did not say a word to Mandy about him. "That's if she is capable of keeping to her words," he muttered under his breath. He fumed, remembering his conversation with her a while ago.

*What nonsense!* He glared at the passenger's seat as though she were still seated there. He had saved her today from the couple she collided with, and all she could do was to accuse him, to call him a liar. She was an ingrate. If not for the excuse he made up for her, the management would have paid for the couple's stained dress with her salary.

He pushed the thought of her to the back of his mind as it was beginning to suffocate him. He slipped his car keys into the ignition and drove away.





## CHAPTER ELEVEN

Ifes felt a hand gently tapping her and her body jerked slightly. She tilted her head around to see who it was but couldn't see anyone.

*Run back to your dorm room now!*

Recognising the still small voice, she bolted to her dorm room. She was thankful that Bradley didn't take her out of the college. She got to the front of her dorm room, placed her hand on the doorknob and yanked it open.

Stepping inside, she looked around and saw that everywhere was in order. She began to wonder why she had gotten an instruction to run to her dorm room. Unable to figure out why she had come back, she made for the kitchen to get herself a glass of water.

"Go and check Mandy's bathroom," the still small voice stopped her in her tracks.

She whirled around and did as she was told. As she got closer to Mandy's bathroom, she heard her muffled sobs. Worried that something terrible had happened, she fumbled with the knob and opened the door. Her roommate was perched on the edge of her bathtub, wailing.

"Mandy! Why are you crying?"

Mandy raised her head slightly to look at Ifes, and brought it down again to her laps without uttering a word.

Ifes moved close to her roommate, then hunkered down before her.

"Please Mandy, tell me, why are you crying?"

Mandy raised her head again to look at her. "My, my mama. My mum!"

Panic rose in Ifes. "Yes, tell me. What happened to her? What's wrong with your mother?" she urged on.

Mandy buried her face in her palm, wailing without answering.

"Mandy, talk to me. Crying will not solve whatever it is that is wrong with your mum."

Mandy abruptly raised her head, making Ifes jerk slightly. "My mother has been given up to die!"

Her body went cold upon hearing those words from her roommate. She felt like someone had pulled both cold and hot water on her at the same time. The bathroom fell dead silent such that only the sound of their beating hearts could be heard.

Her dad, Mr Jonathan, called her that afternoon, wailing like a little child. She had never seen her dad weep like that and the sound of it tugged at her heart.

"Oh! Mandy, my baby. Your mum is leaving us. She's going. She's finally going!"

"W-what do you mean leaving us?" Mandy had asked.

"The doctors said they've tried all they could, that her sickness is beyond medical treatment. As I speak to you now, they are about removing her life support. They are just waiting for me to sign some documents."

Mandy clutched her phone to her ears tightly, afraid it would slip off her hands to the floor.

"One of the doctors has handed me the documents to allow them to remove the life support, but how can I? I love your mother so much and I can't even start to imagine signing her death warrant with my own hands."

"Then don't sign it!" Mandy spoke and was taken aback with her tone of voice. It was as though a stranger had spoken and not her.

"Yes, Dad," she continued in that same vehement tone, "You can't sign those documents. They don't have the right to take her life. Give 'em money, give 'em more money, give them enough money, and let them stop complaining!"

Jonathan Parker wasn't so perplexed by the way his daughter spoke. She had been in college and he would be doing her some injustice if he expected her to understand and know the amount of money he had pumped into her mother's treatment, or all his efforts, which had apparently ended in no success.

"Money's not everything, Mandy."

Mr Jonathan expected his daughter to understand that better than anyone. The quest for money had landed them into the mess they found themselves in.

She'd fumed. "What are you saying, dad? I can't believe I'm hearing this from you. Do you mean you want to sign those documents and allow my mother to die? Listen here, Dad. I will not forgive you if anything happens to Mum!"

Mr Jonathan thought he could find solace in his daughter, but his expectations had been crushed. What had he been thinking before placing a call to her? Was he expecting her to embrace the news lightly and nod an approval?

Inhaling and exhaling sharply, Mandy spoke through her phone's mouthpiece. "Hello, dad, did you hear what I said?"

Mr Jonathan Parker paused for a while and wanted to raise an objection, but finally resigned to his fate. "Yes, Mandy. I heard you clearly!"

The soft tone of her father's voice broke her heart. She knew she had hurt him with her words. She'd wanted to apologize to him for speaking to him the way she did, but he disconnected the call before she could open her mouth.

Ifes tried to stifle her anger as Mandy narrated her ordeal with her father but her facial expression gave her away.

"Why are you looking at me like that? Did I do anything wrong?"

"No, Mandy. This time around, you've done everything wrong. I have to admit that to you now before it is too late!"

Mandy tilted her head to gaze at her. "What do you mean, Ifes?"

"Oh, don't give me that look, Mandy. You know exactly what I'm talking about?"

Mandy gazed at her, perplexed. "Are you also saying I should allow my Dad to sign those documents?"

"Will it give you a sense of satisfaction?"

Mandy jerked up from her bathtub and moved away from Ifes. "But how could you ask me such a question?"

Looking at her friend's facial expression, she felt bad raising her voice at her emotionally-wounded roommate.

*Take a deep breath, girl, this is not what you were called here for.*

She stood from where she hunkered down, and walked towards her roommate.

"I'm sorry, Mandy! I can understand the love you have for your mum. I will do the same for my own mother and even more if I were to be in your position. I just want to let you know that all hope is not lost. There is a solution waiting for her to grasp."

Her roommate gazed at her anxiously. "Please tell me because I'm ready to do anything for her!"

"Are you sure you are ready to do anything?"

"Yes."

"Anything?"

She nodded her head affirmatively. "Yes, anything! Just tell me, let me get started already!" she said, almost impatiently.

"The solution to your mother's illness is Jesus."

Her friend's eyes popped open as she gave her the look that read, "Not again!"

"I'm serious, Mandy!"

"I thought we had already discussed this."

"Yes, we have and I remembered what you said, but have you been able to consider if this is what your family wants? Have you been able to consider if they share your concept? Have you thought it over that they would reject Jesus as you are doing right now? Why don't you allow them to make their own choice as you have made yours?"

The room fell silent as Ifes waited for an answer from her friend.

"If your mother dies today, do you think she would be happy that you didn't get to let her meet the one who could save her? I'm sorry I'm speaking to you in this manner, but why don't you give me that benefit of doubt and see if Jesus will reject your mum as you have been thinking?"

"Yes, she's right, Mandy, I think you should listen to her."

"No, don't listen to her."

Voices in her head bantered and drew her to a state of turmoil.

"Please, can you get dressed and come with me to Texas? Let's go and meet my mum so you can pray for her," Mandy said, after finally making a decision.

"Anything for you."

She whispered a "thank you" as she stepped out of the bathroom so Ifes could have her bath.

"How could you agree to follow this girl to Texas? Have you forgotten that you are expected to report back to work tomorrow?" a voice in Ifesinachi's head bellowed.

Her body went numb for a while. Comporting herself, she went straight to her reading table and tore out a sheet of paper from her notebook. She yanked out her pen from her handbag and drafted a handwritten resignation letter.

Her roommate saw her writing on her reading table, then went close to see. "What are you doing?"

She hid it from her friend, but Mandy yanked it from her hand.

"You want to turn in your resignation because of me?" she asked, looking up from the paper, perplexed to her marrow.

"Jesus would do more for you if he were here in flesh." and blood."

Mandy was dumbfounded. "Did you mean Jesus would leave his source of livelihood for me even when he and I both know that I don't deserve it?"

"Yes, and even much more."

"And is he the one who asked you to do this for me?"

"I haven't seen him face to face, but his character and lifestyle in the Bible and even in the present day in heaven makes me take him as my role model. We can love like Christ."

Mandy broke down crying. "Please tell Jesus I'm sorry! Tell him I'm sorry for rejecting him and I'm ready to accept him now as my Savior and Lord!"

Ifes almost jumped in glee. Was this a dream or not? Was her friend truly asking to give her life to Christ or was it just a fluke? She wanted to ask her friend to pinch her to be sure it was a reality but quickly composed herself so she could lead her to Christ before she changed her mind.

She held both of her roommate's hands in hers. "Anything I ask, if you agree, just say, 'yes I do'."

"Alright, I will."

"Do you accept Jesus as your Lord and Savior, Mandy Parker?"

"Yes, I do."

"And you believe that he died and rose from the dead to save you?"

"Yes, I do."

Ifes embraced her friend excitedly as though her life depended on it. "Congratulations, Mandy! Welcome to God's family!"

Ifes wasn't the only one who felt the joy and peace that encompassed around them; her roommate Mandy felt it as well.

"Don't turn in your resignation. We'll explain to your manager when we come back. I'm sure he would understand it was a matter of urgency."

Ifes whirled around to look at her friend who was basking in the wave of the moment. "But you know it's not proper that I disappear without any notification? My boss is a man of protocols and I have to follow it."

"Alright then, why don't you write a letter asking for permission to be absent for some time?"

She wanted to tell her that Bradley had made her do that today but decided against it when she knew what would come after that. She had asked for permission to report back to work the next day. Going to ask for another one will not make her manager smile at her.

"Umm! Mandy, please don't worry about me, I can always find another job when we come back."

Her roommate wanted to say something but she hushed her.

"Please trust me, I'm happy doing this. Your mother is a million times better than my job."

Mandy succumbed. "Alright, if you say so."

Letting go of her friend's hand she stepped out of their dorm room with her resignation letter in hand while her friend sat on a couch, booking their flight to Texas online.

Ifesinachi's manager was perplexed to see her return to the restaurant the same day.

"I thought you were to report back to work tomorrow?"

"Yes, sir. I am here for a different reason."

The manager pulled off his spectacle and tossed it on his table. "Alright, let's hear it."

She stretched out her hands with a white envelope. "I'm here to turn in my resignation."

The manager leaned forward bewildered. She went on to explain why she was resigning and the manager understood.

"I'm quite perplexed at your level of honesty. We'll reserve your position for you till you're back."

"But, sir..."

"No buts. You are an honest staff and I would rather lose ten of my current staff than to lose you."

A lot of his workers always gave flimsy excuses just to stay out of work. Only a few, like Ifes, were devoted and took the work seriously like their own personal business.

"I still insist that you receive my resignation letter. When I return, if no one has occupied my position, I'll reapply."

The manager protested but she insisted and he finally gave in.



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Woodway, Texas.

Mr Jonathan Parker perched on the edge of one of the sofas in his living room, anxiously waiting for the arrival of his daughter and her friend. He had been surprised at her tone of voice and the news she broke out to him. She had excitedly told him that she had found the solution to her mother's illness. Anxiety made him ask. "I will tell you everything when I arrive with my friend," was all she had said.

The doorbell chimed, pulling Mr Parker out of his thoughts. He stood, straightened his shirt and made for the door. He yanked the door open and his daughter jumped on his body, greeting him with a happy embrace, perplexing him the most. Dropping her back to her feet, he stepped aside, leaving the door open so she and her friend could move into the living room.

"Daddy, where's Mum?" Mandy asked as soon as Jonathan closed the door and whirled around to look at them.

"She's still in her room up stairs, still in the hospital bed that was arranged for her there." Mr Packer gestured to the staircase.

She looked at her dad and noticed the sorrowful expression on his face. She noticed her father had lost weight and his face was beginning to wrinkle and her brown eyes grew moist. She remembered what Ifes told her on their way coming to Texas then smiled at her Dad cheerfully.

"Dad, you know, my friend here told me that the Bible says there is no condemnation to those who are in Christ Jesus, and she also said if we are in Christ Jesus we are a new creature and old things have passed away."

Mr Parker was taken aback as he studied his daughter wondering if those words were truly coming out of her mouth.

"I have accepted Jesus as my Lord and saviour. I have come to give you, Mum and Jason the good news."

Her father wondered silently if she had also started going crazy like her brother who was currently in the mental asylum. He gave her the look that read, "What is happening here?"

"I swear I'm not crazy. I know what I'm talking about, dad!"

His surprise turned to anger as he glared at Ifes. "You are the one who has been deluding her right?"

She wanted to speak but Mandy spoke for her instead.

"No Dad, we have been deluded all this while. She only helped me open my eyes to see the truth."

Mr Parker let out a bleak laugh. "So what is the truth?"

"The truth is that Jesus has already atoned for our sins. He died and rose from the dead to save us, he..."

"Enough!" Mr Parker bellowed. His voice rang out with such fervor that startled both Mandy and Ifes.

"If he has atoned for our sins, then why is your brother currently in a mental asylum? Why is your mum critically ill and all efforts to revive them have proven abortive!"

"All these things are just tricks of the devil to make you not see the truth, which is that our sins are forgiven," Ifes finally spoke up after Mandy remained speechless at her father's question. Being a new believer, Mandy kept quiet as she didn't know the right answers to her father's questions.

Mr Parker pointed at Ifes, glowering. "And who called you into this family discussion?"

"I did," Mandy said.

Mr Packer diverted his gaze to his daughter. "I wasn't talking to you. And you," he returned his gaze back to Ifes, "stay out of this, you hear?"

Mandy looked at her dad and saw exactly who she was in him. She had also acted quite stubborn, just as he was doing now.

"Alright Dad, if you will not accept the truth, I would like to speak to Mum about it. If she also refuses, I will go back to college, I promise."

Her father let out a sardonic laugh. "Your mother can't even utter a word again. She just lays like a wilted vegetable on her bed."

Mandy was perplexed and hurt at her father's words. "No, I'll go and talk to her and I know she will hear and talk back to me."

"Good luck with that." Her father whirled away, his back to them as they walked up the staircase

They got to the front of her mother's door and Mandy opened the door leading the way as they walked inside the room.

All her father had said about her mother was true. She couldn't move or speak a word. She didn't even notice their presence.

Mandy fell with her face to the ground, crying as her friend consoled her.

"It's over, Ifes, it's over. We came too late. My mum won't be able to make it again!"

"No, Mandy, it is not over. She's still alive and even if she was dead, Jesus still gives life!"

"But what can we do now?"

"Trust in the Lord and believe that nothing is impossible with him."

"I believe, Ifes, I believe."

"If you do, then go close to her, speak into her ears and call her name. She'll answer you."

Mandy stood and did what her friend asked her to do.

"Mother, Mother, can you hear me?"

"Ye– Yes, I, I, I can hear you."

Mandy looked between her mother and her friend with eyes as wide as saucers, dumbfounded at what was unveiling before her. She had seen and would keep on seeing how much Jesus loved and was willing to go all the way for her.

Ifes touched her on her shoulder. "Her eyes are still closed. Ask her to open her eyes and look at you."

She knelt down beside her mother's bed to do as she was told.

"Can you recognise my voice, Mother?"

"Yes, I know it's you, Amanda, my baby!"

"Yes, it's me. Can you open your eyes to look at me?"

Her mother struggled for a couple of minutes before she finally opened her eyes after a long time.

"It's good to see you again, Amanda!"

Mandy embraced her mother crying. "I am so happy to see you are awake. I thought I had lost you!"

*"Ifes, pray the prayer of salvation with her. She's coming home to be with me."*

Ifesinachi's pulse skyrocketed. "Coming home! Coming home, kwa? But Lord, this will not go down well with Mandy. You have to keep her here on earth."

*"My grace is sufficient."*

*"All things work together for good to those that love God, to them who are called according to his purpose."*

"But how is taking someone's mother away working for her good?" Ifes began to question God.

She continued crying in her heart as Mandy kept embracing her Mum.

"Mother, did you know that it was Jesus that made you hear and recognise my voice and also made you open your eyes?"

Her mother was dumbfounded to hear those words. But she believed. The doctor could not help her. It had to be this Jesus that made this happen.

It wasn't difficult to convince Mandy's mother and get her to give her life to Christ.

"Congratulations, Mother. I'm so happy for you!"

Her mother took her hand and kissed it. "I'm also happy. Thank you for unveiling this truth to me!"

*"You have to baptise Mandy and her mother, Ifes,"* the still small voice spoke.

"Baptise? But Lord, you know I don't know how to do it."

"You can call any of your pastors."

"As you can see, her mother is still recuperating, she can't even walk on her own as it stands," Ifes argued.

Ifes waited to hear the still small voice reply to her, but felt ashamed of her unbelief when she didn't. She decided to move on with the instruction.

She tilted her head to look at mother and daughter who were engrossed in their chat and barely noticed her presence.

"Umm! Mandy, I think it's time you and your mother get baptised."

"Baptised?" they asked simultaneously.

It's not like they haven't heard the word baptism or didn't know what it meant, but they didn't know how it applied to Christianity.

"Yes," She replied, giving further elucidation.

"Oh, wow! Alright then, let's have it done, we have a pool adjacent to the garden at the east wing of the compound," Mrs Oretha, Mandy's mother said after Ifes asked if they could use the pool.

"Mother, my friend and I will help take you to the poolside." Mandy stroked her mother's hands gently.

Oretha smiled bleakly. "I remember how I used to scoop you up in my arms when you were still a toddler, but today, the reverse is..."

"Hush, Mother, I don't want to see that sad look on your face or I will cry."

Her mother touched her beautiful soft cheek. "You know how much I hate seeing you crying, my angel?"

Mandy blushed.

Ifes glanced at mother and daughter then winced inwardly.

*Are you sure you are the one doing this?* She wanted to ask God.

She called one of the pastors back in her church in Nigeria and got instructions on how to carry out the baptism before thanking him and disconnecting the call.

Oretha was made to put her arms around Ifes and Mandy's shoulders as they helped her out of her room to the poolside.

As they walked down the stairs, Ifes glanced at the living room and saw Mr Parker gazing at them, eyes and mouth agape in fright and shock.

Mandy didn't notice her father's presence as she was carried away with whatever she and her mother were discussing. They entered the living room and walked past Mr Parker as they made for the door leading to the garden.

"I am just so excited about this and I really can't say why!"

"Oh yeah! Me too, Mother. You can say that again."

This was the only sentence he could grasp as his wife and daughter walked past him without noticing his presence.

"Why should I be perplexed about this whole thing?" He frowned.

Whatever Mandy's crazy friend was doing to his wife and daughter, she was really succeeding at it. As far as he was concerned, he would always believe what his friend's priest told him. Nothing more, nothing less. If Mandy's friend was right, they wouldn't have gone through the difficulties they had.

It would cost him nothing to walk out that door and asked the girl to leave his house right away but he was afraid of hurting his daughter's feelings, so decided to sit back and watch how this soap opera would end.

He placed both of his hands on his head as he leaned back on his seat gazing and frowning at the door which the trio had walked out of.

Ridiculous! This was totally ludicrous!

He muttered a foul word under his breath as the door yanked open with Ifes leading the way as they walked back inside. He gave her a cursory glance that she didn't notice then diverted his gaze to his wife and daughter to see if they would notice him this time around. He couldn't stifle his disappointment as they walked past him to the stairs.

The duo helped Oretha lie down on her bed.

Mandy and her mother had felt an inexplicable joy as soon as they were baptised, joy that no words could elucidate, joy that could only come from one source, joy they had never felt before in their lives.

But Ifesinachi's joy was short-lived as she saw the change in Oretha's facial expression.

"Is it time Lord?" she groaned in her heart.

"Be still and know that I am God, beloved. My grace is sufficient!"

She tilted her head to look at Mandy who didn't notice what was happening to her mother as she was still basking in the euphoria of her mother's and her salvation and baptism. She looked away and shook her head in consternation.

"May I go make you something to eat now, Mother?" Mandy finally noticed the look on her mother's face and concluded she was famished.

"No dear, food is not what I need right now."

"Do you need anything now?"

Ifes and Mandy's eyes were fascinated by Oretha as her breath increased rapidly like someone who was excited about something.

Mr Packer watched impatiently and could no longer sit back and take the nonsense that was going on in his house. He stood in anger, straightened his shirt as he walked up the stairs, he swore. "This nonsense must stop!"

"What is it, Mother?" Mandy asked with the look of consternation.

"Oh, Amanda! Can't you see how beautiful this place looks?"

"Which place are you talking about?" Mandy held her mother's hands.

"I've never seen a place as beautiful as this! Oh! Look at these people singing, so melodious!"

"What are you talking about, Mother?"

"Amanda, Amanda, get your brother and father to come join me here. This place is great I tell you!"

Oretha heaved a long sigh and her body relaxed.

"You are now resting in peace." Ifes looked straight at Oretha's peaceful face.

Mandy called out to her friend. "What's wrong with my Mum? She ain't talking to me anymore."

Seeing that her friend did not answer, she continued asking more questions. "Did you understand anything she said a while back? Do you know the place and the people she was talking about?"

She averted her gaze from her friend to her mother who lay sprawled in her bed. "It looks like she is sleeping. If so, why are her eyes opened?"

"She was talking of heaven."



Mandy's body jerked upon hearing those words. "And what of the people she said were singing?"

"They might be other saints like her or angels."

What a way to pass a message of death about the person you cherish most in the world! Ifes couldn't find an easier way to send the news to her friend.

Saints like her! Those words sent a cold chill down Mandy's spine. "Are you saying...?" Her throat burned.

"No, No, Mandy. Your Mother is in a better place now. Didn't you hear how happy she sounded when she spoke to you? She's resting now."

Mandy's eyes grew moist but Ifes spoke comforting words to her. It was as if the Holy Spirit took over her as she said words which made Mandy praise God instead of weeping and regretting her mother's death.

"Oh! Praise the Lord, my mother is saved! Thank you, Lord, for not letting her die and go to hell! Your goodness and mercies are new every morning. Your compassion never fails."

"You give hope to the hopeless, help to the helpless, and life to the lifeless. Who can be compared to you? Is there any God like you? Could there be any God like you?"

Ifes lifted up her hands to the heavens as she joined her friend to praise the name of the Lord for his loving-kindness and tender mercies.

"Why don't you close her eyes, Mandy." Ifes said after they were done praising God.

Mandy glanced at her mother's peaceful figure and shook her head. "No, I'll let my dad do her the honors. You know, they both loved each other so much. This will be a terrible heart ache for my dad."

She glanced up to her friend. "But do you think my dad will believe us when I tell him what my mother said?"

"It is the Holy Spirit that convicts the world of their sins and I believe he would do the same with him."

Mandy smiled bleakly. "Alright then, let's go and see him now."

They whirled around and gasped as they drew back in fright on seeing Mr Parker at the door which was half ajar.

"D-Dad!" Mandy stammered.

"Yes, it's me, and I heard everything your mother said. If I had not heard it straight from her, I wouldn't have believed."

Mr Jonathan Parker gave his life to Christ and was baptized the same day. It was both a mournful and joyful day for the Parker family, a bitter-sweet day.

Mandy called her friends in Pennsylvania to inform them of her mother's demise, but didn't speak about the secrets she had kept from them. They came over for the funeral to support their friend.

All Ryan could do was to glower at innocent Ifes, like she was the one responsible for Oretha's death. Ifes chose to ignore him.

Two weeks later.

Ifes went with Mandy and Mr Parker to the mental asylum to visit Jason. Moved to compassion, she felt led to call her pastor, who prayed for him and he got his normal mind back, to the stiff surprise of the psychiatrists, rehab therapists and nurses who had known Jason as one of the worst and most violent mental patients they had.

Jason accepted Jesus, after a huge, teary reconciliation with his family.

Unfortunately, he had gotten an infection in an injury he incurred during one of his violent seizures. The doctors battled with the infection with strong antibiotics for days, without any sign of improvement. Jason was peaceful, content, despite the pain he felt, to be in the company of his sister and father.

Three days after his conversion, he went to meet the Lord and his mother in heaven.

The doctors attested that such a peaceful death was rare in that kind of case of infection he had.

Mandy and Ifes went back to college three weeks later after mourning the demise of Mandy's mother and brother.



## CHAPTER TWELVE

UPenn.

Mandy and Ifes went back to college and Mandy's squad of friends were perplexed seeing the sudden change of attitude in her.

"I'm now a Christian," she said when they inquired about the cause of the sudden change.

"What! What are you telling us?" Hunter asked.

"I'm saying I have given my life to Christ, and have gotten the peace of mind I never had throughout my whole life. I would like you guys to do the same."

Some of them laughed at her, some pretended like they didn't hear her and the rest walked away without a word.

"Ifes, do you think they would ever believe me?" Mandy asked her roommate as soon as she got back to her dorm room.

Ifes gulped down a glass of water then whirled around to look at her friend. "Just put them in your prayers."

"But I have."

"Continue," she advised, remembering how she had prayed for her roommate.

Mandy groaned. "I pray they wouldn't be as stubborn as I was, because I wouldn't mind shaking them silly and opening their heads to send in the message if it gets to that."

Ifes shrugged, giving her friend a smirk. "So you know say you be stubborn head before? (So you knew you were stubborn?)" She asked in Nigerian pidgin English.

"You know I didn't understand that."

"I wasn't saying it for you to understand either." She winked at her friend.

Her roommate stoned her with a pillow. "You are such a douchebag!"

She dodged the pillow, grinning. "Not more than you, Mandy."

"Okay, alright, I will show you how much of a douchebag I am. From what I can remember, you no longer work at the restaurant right?" This time around it was Mandy's turn to smirk.

Enjoying the expression on her face, Mandy grabbed her roommate's keys and her's, locked the kitchen and shoved the keys into her side pocket. "I am off to my friend's place. Don't wait for me because I will be eating over there, and will probably sleep there tonight."

Ifes quickly held Mandy's hand from the back before she reached for the doorknob. "You know I could never be serious with that."

Mandy tilted her head, smiling derisively. "But you said I am more of a douchebag than you?"

"It was a slip of tongue."

"Are you sure?"

"Yes."

"How do I know that?"

"Just tell me anything you want me to do to prove it to you."

Mandy's upper lip curled into a contemptuous smile. "I've read some African novels, so you would have to treat and respect me the way you respect your traditional rulers."

Ifes almost burst into hysterical laughter but knew the repercussions would make everything harder.

"Yes, my lady." She bowed slightly. "Anything for you, your highness."

"Anything I say, repeat after me. Did you hear me, Ifes?"

"Yes, my lady." Ifes pressed her lips tight, trying hard not to laugh.

"Good!" Mandy gave another derisive smile. "I feel on top of the world right now!"

"Pretty Mandy!" Ifes repeated after her.

"Beautiful queen!"

"The greatest African queen of all time."

Ifes couldn't hold back her laughter anymore as she fell on the floor, rolling and laughing. She laughed and laughed till tears rolled out from her eyes. By the time she was done laughing, Mandy was nowhere to be found. She had left the dorm room without her notice.

Ifes and Mandy used the next two weeks to cover up on the topics they missed out on.

Ifes went back to Baby Blues BBQ to discover that they had employed another student to take over her place.

"My sincere apologies, Ifes. We just hired a new waiter last week. We didn't see you for over a month, so we concluded that you didn't want to come back," the manager said.

"It's alright sir, I understand. I also apologize for keeping you waiting that long."

"But I can re-employ you and relieve the other waiter of the job," the manager said, not wanting to let her go.

"No, no, sir. I think it wouldn't be proper to do such. I will just go back and check the employment office."

"Alright, if you say so."

They bid each other goodbye before she walked out of his office.

She checked with the employment office and finally applied for a vacancy at the college library.

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A week later.

In the Lecture Hall.

Ifes stood in front of her desk packing up her course materials when she felt someone staring at her from the back. She tilted her head around and beheld the intense leer of the person she didn't desire to be looking at her, at least not in that way.

Ryan again!

They both gazed at each other, and this time around, Ryan didn't walk away. Instead, he stepped closer till he was a couple inches away from her. Seeing the expression on his face, she knew he wasn't coming closer to extend a hand of friendship.

"Yes, Ryan, what do you want?"

"I should be asking you."

"What do you mean you should be asking me?"

"I've heard and seen what you have done to Mandy. way to go!" Ryan clapped his hands. "Isn't it great that you've succeeded in deceiving my friend? Well, I'm not here to talk about Mandy. We'll sort that out when the time comes."

He glared at her. "Your CGPA happens to be the highest in our freshman year. I can see you are really good at doing what you know how to do best."

Ifes stared at him unbelievably. "Are you insinuating that I...?"

"Yes of course, malpractice. Isn't that what you know how to do best? Isn't that your true nature?"

"I don't know what you are talking about Ry--"

"Keep quiet, I'm not done talking!" Ryan barked. "For now I'll say, just enjoy it while it lasts and watch how I expose you in this college. Just watch it!"

Ryan whirled around and walked away leaving her astonished.

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Woodway Texas.

Mr. Jonathan Parker bought a fresh bouquet of Larkspur and Rose flowers and drove straight to his wife and son's grave to replace the old ones. The graveyard was quiet, the lush lawns mowed almost to ethereal perfection.

Even after two months of losing them, the pain was still there like the throbbing of a fresh wound. Holding the bouquet of flowers in both hands, he gently sat down on the edge of Oretha's grave.

Eyes moist, he glanced at her picture over the stone. "I've missed you so much, Oretha, I really have. All the special moments I had with you, all the times I gathered you up in my arms in bed as we slept. And how you'd reply to me with your sweet voice each time I said I loved you."

He touched her picture gently as though he was touching her in person. He cried at the memories it brought back, the tears cascading down unhindered.

"I know you're happy wherever you are now. You and I will meet again some day my love." Smiling through his tears, he took off his hands from her photo.

"I'm so proud of our daughter, Amanda. I'm perplexed at the way she's growing. Each time I look at her, I remember you because she looks exactly like you when we were younger and still dating."

He paused for a while, looked around then continued.

"Guess what?" He said it as though he was trying to surprise her. "I'm planning to do something to show my appreciation to God for visiting us with his salvation. I'm still thinking and praying about it though."

Mr Jonathan spoke for over half an hour before replacing the flower bouquet and walking over to his son's grave to repeat the same procedure.

"I've missed you, son. Amanda misses you too. Rest on."



## CHAPTER THIRTEEN

On Friday of the same week.

Mandy sat on a seat close to her reading table in her dorm room when she received a distress call from Avery.

"What is it, Avery? Why are you crying?"

"Come over to the college clinic now. Bradley's dying. He has cancer." Avery spoke rapidly, making it hard for Mandy to follow.

"What do you mean, "Bradley's dying? What do you mean, "he has cancer?"

"Come and see for yourself," Avery said and disconnected the call.

Grabbing her purse, Mandy bolted out of the dorm room with Ifes trailing behind her.

They entered the hospital—the antiseptic scent was so strong that Mandy almost gagged—and saw Avery pacing up and down as she waited for them at the reception. They walked up to her with hasty, long strides.

"It's good you are here!" Avery and Mandy embraced each other, sobbing.

"Where's Bradley? What happened to him?"

They broke the embrace. Avery gave Ifes an enigmatic look, then pulled Mandy into Bradley's hospital room. Mandy walked faster to keep up with Avery's pace as she called Ifes to come along.

As they entered, they saw Bradley lying in a hospital bed, with Hunter and Ryan sitting beside him.

"What's she doing here?" Ryan abruptly stood as soon as he saw Ifes.

Mandy was taken aback with the tone of his voice. "She's with me."

Ryan wiped the moisture in his eyes with the back of his palm furiously. "She is not welcome here. Get her outta here this minute!"

Avery and Mandy jerked. "What are you saying, Ryan? She's my friend and we came here together. And she is not the centre of concentration now, Bradley is."

"And what are we to you now? Your enemies, I guess." His puffy eyes looked puffier as he said this.

"I didn't say so, but it might interest you that I asked her to come along so we can pray for Bradley."

"You what?" Ryan let out a sardonic laugh. "I think this friend of yours should be given a purple heart for easily swaying people. She is really good at it, don't you think so?"

Hunter glared at Ryan. What did he think he was doing? Laughing when his brother was dying? Was this how much Ryan cared about his twin brother?

"How could you say such things about her?" Mandy glowered at him through tears. "In case you don't know, she was the one that pra..." She closed her mouth and looked away.

She still didn't know how to tell them about her late mother's illness that they would not ask questions about the secret she kept. No! Not yet. Not now.

The ward door slid open from outside. Anne-Marie, Skylar, Ian and Ayo dashed in, asking a series of questions.

Anne-Marie beckoned on Ifes, Ian, Mandy and Ayo.

"And what are you guys doing over there? Come here, I know you can do something about this."

It didn't surprise Mandy or any of the trio that Anne-Marie believed in miracles. She went to church for her own ulterior motives. She read the Bible forcefully, just to impress Ian.

"Get these two outta here now!" Ryan pointed to Ifes and Ayo.

"No, but you can't do that, Ryan!" Anne-Marie spoke through a choked voice appealing to Ryan's sense of reasoning.

Ryan turned towards her. "Don't tell me that you have also been deluded?"

Ian intercepted. "Please relax, let's settle this amicably, guys."

"Hey, mister, you better stay out of this. I didn't call you here."

Hunter got on his feet, and threw Ryan a punch that sent him to the ground, making everyone who was present in the room gasp in surprise.

"And who called ya here?" Hunter fumed.

"Hun-Hunter!" Ryan stammered.

"Shut the hell up. I'm not finished! My brother's dyin' and you're here doin' what? Sending away perhaps his only hope of survival. Now, you listen and listen well. I don't care about your antipathy with Ifes, but if anything happens to my brother, I swear, I'll kill ya, Ryan!"

Hunter shoved Ryan aside with his left leg as he walked towards Ifes. Taking her hands, he led her to Bradley's bed without uttering a word.

She hunkered beside his bed as she gently took his hands gazing at him speechlessly. Bradley tilted his head to look at her. "You kept your word, but they all know about it now. I couldn't hide it forever."

"What?" Everyone in the room besides Bradley said simultaneously.

Mandy pointed towards Ifes. "You knew all about this and you didn't tell me?" Mandy asked Ifes. Everyone gazed at her, perplexed.

Mandy couldn't fix the puzzle of all that was unraveling. The betrayal by her roommate and friend was really shocking.

Ifes quickly opened her mouth to clear the air, but Bradley spoke first before she could think up a word. He slowly explained all that happened in a weak voice, and Mandy was relaxed that her friend didn't betray her. It was time to face Bradley.

They each started asking him different questions that he couldn't afford to answer without some explanations.

"How could you, how could you do this to us, Bradley?"

"For how long have you had this?"

"We are your friends, almost like family, and you mean you could keep such a heavy secret from us?"

"Even I, your twin brother, didn't know about this, and you dared to keep me in the dark?"

"Who are you, Bradley? Do we even know you at all?"

Another question was about to come in when Ifes cut in. "Stop this now, stop it everyone!" she bellowed.

They looked at her, astonished. Since the first day they'd known her, she had never raised her voice at any of them, but seeing her do something like that, this new side of her was really something to watch.

"And what do you guys think you are doing?" she fired. "Probably asking him the last questions of your life that he will take to his grave, isn't it?"

The room fell silent for a while before she continued. Only the beeping of the monitors and the dripping sound of the IV drip could be heard.

"I'm sure you probably don't understand the pain he's passing through, else you wouldn't be standing here acting like a pack of wolves! The pain of having to see your reaction if he mustered courage to speak to you guys of his illness, or having to admit the reality which was that he would be separated from you. Instead of seeking a solution, you are doing exactly what? Asking him the question that you believe would make his death easier and send him faster to his grave, right?"

At that point, they all broke down, wailing profusely. Hunter cried the most. Ian and Ayo rushed towards him, whispering consoling words.

"I don't want to lose my brother. He means the world to me. If he dies, then he'll be dying with a vital part of me, don't you understand?"

Mandy and Anne-Marie joined the rest to cry, their faith ebbing away fast.

"You all better stop crying before we draw the attention of the nurses and doctors."

One of the hospital attendants heard the awful cry and was now making his way to one of the doctor's offices to call for his urgent attention.

Even after her remarks, Mandy and her friends didn't want to stop crying.

"God can heal him," Ifes said softly with conviction and the room grew silent again.

Mandy wanted to believe that and join Ifes to encourage her friends, but she remembered that her mother still died. She had no doubt that God could heal Bradley, but she wasn't sure if he would survive.

"Do not lose faith, guys," Ifes said as she called out to Mandy, Ian and Ayo.

They held each other's hands as they circled Bradley's bed, praying and commanding the ugly demon of cancer out of his life.

After a few minutes of their prayers over him, Bradley sat up without help from his bed, making his friends, even Mandy, draw back in surprise.

"Hey!" he said in a strong voice as he touched himself all over, "I don't feel the pain anymore. In fact, I feel light, like a day old baby!" Bradley spoke rapidly, still trying to take in what was happening to him. He moved his body in ways he couldn't since he stopped his chemotherapy, and realised he could do that without stress.

"Are you saying you are healed?" Hunter used Ifesinachi's words—'healed'.

His brother gazed at him. "Well, if that's the word, then I'd say yes!"

Words could not describe how much joy Bradley and his friends felt.

Mandy was ecstatic seeing that what she feared for him didn't happen. He survived! He was alive!

Bradley walked towards Ifes pulling her into a tight embrace, Mandy joined in and others followed suit. They all broke the hug, then Bradley held her by the hand.

"Thank you for healing me. I really do appreciate it!"

Ifes' face dropped as she removed her hands from his grip. "You are thanking the wrong person. I didn't heal you. God did."

His face flushed. "I'm sorry. I sure would like to thank him. How can I do that?"

"He only accepts the thanksgiving of those who are his children."

Hearing those words, he understood exactly what she meant by 'his children'. He had heard something like that before from other Christians who had approached him to talk about Jesus. He had also heard it from Ifes.

"Yes, I'm ready to be a Christian. I'm ready to be God's child and serve him with the life he has given me today."

His statement was a surprise to Mandy. She couldn't believe what was unveiled before her. It felt like a dream.

"Me too!"

Everyone whirled sharply to the voice that said those two words.

Avery!

"I also want to be a Christian. I now believe that God's real."

Ifes waited for the rest to also indicate interest but they didn't. It was either they still didn't believe in God's reality or they weren't sure if they were ready to give their lives to Jesus.

As they were about saying the prayer of salvation, the door flew open, and a doctor strode in with two nurses behind him.

The doctor and the nurses behind him almost ran out of the hospital room as soon as they spotted Bradley on his feet. It was either they were seeing his ghost or someone had performed magic to keep him standing for a while, but to what end? To terrify them?

"I don't know what these students here are up to, but someone better not be playing a prank on me," the doctor warned sternly in his heart.

The doctor and nurses regained their composure and walked back to Bradley.

"What do you think you are doing getting on your feet, Bradley? Do you want to die?"

The nurse held his hands to help him lie back on his bed, but he wriggled out of her grip, full of strength.

"I don't have to lie down on that bed again because nothing's wrong with me anymore." He gazed at the doctor as his hand gestured to the sickbed.

"What do you mean by that, Bradley?" The doctor's eyes were skeptical.

He went on to elucidate what happened to the doctor and nurses. The doctor and nurses heaved a sigh of relief.

"Well, if you say so, good for you, but I must conduct some necessary tests on you to certify you stage four stomach cancer free." The doctor stressed every word.

Bradley gave the doctor a mocking smile. "Doctor, do you believe in miracles?"

The doctor shrugged. "Well, in my twelve years of working in this profession, I have seen some stunts like the one you're pulling off now, but I have never believed in miracles or believed that there is a sky daddy behind them. All these are just coincidences or the patient's luck."

"The devil is a liar." Ifes didn't know that she had voiced out those words.

The boys laughed, the girls giggled, and then the doctor spoke up, slightly bemused. "You better come with me, Bradley Harper, before someone starts calling me the devil."

He grinned. "Very well, doctor. I'm prepared for any check up."

"Alright then, come with me."

"Right behind you, sir." Bradley didn't follow the doctor immediately until he gave his life to Christ.

After he made for the doctor's office, Ifes glanced around the room and discovered, much to her dismay, that Ryan was absent. Everyone had been so engrossed in what was happening that no one noticed when he walked out of the hospital room.

*When did he leave? and why did he leave? Did he witness Bradley's healing and salvation?* Ifes pondered silently.

Bradley got to the front of the doctor's office, yanked open and walked in. "I'm here, doctor."

"What kept you so long? I thought you'd never come."

"Well, I'm here now. So, shall we?"

After some minutes of rigorous tests, the doctor removed his gloves, dumped them into a tray and said, "We're done. See you in three days' time, Mr Harper."

Bradley thanked the doctor before walking out of his office to his friends who were already waiting for him in the lobby.

"Cowboys and cowgirls, I'm done. Let's go," Bradley said excitedly.

"So when are ya comin' back for the results?" Hunter asked.

"In three days' time."

They talked all the way to their dorm rooms, asking and confirming from Bradley what had really happened. Hunter, in particular, was relieved that his brother was now totally well. He didn't cease to emphasize that Bradley should never pull such a dangerous stunt as keeping a terminal illness a secret from them.

Ayo offered to see Mandy and Ifes off.

"So, how have your studies been so far? Ayo asked the duo on their way to their dormitory.

"It's fine, it's just that sometimes we..."

"Ayo! Ayo! Ayo!" They heard a voice calling from behind, stopping Mandy from completing her sentence.

Ifes stared at him and tried to guess his nationality. He looked nothing like an American. Ayo confirmed her thought when he called out to him. "Jidenna! Is that you?" He stared intently at the figure now running towards them.



"Yes! It's me. I can't believe I'm seeing you." They embraced each other.

"My guy, na wetin you dey do here na?" Jidenna asked in Nigerian pidgin English what Ayo was doing here, disengaging their hug.

"I for no know say na you oooo, if nobi say I remember how you dey waka (I wouldn't have recognised you if I hadn't remembered the way you walk)," he added. Ayo laughed.

Ifes grinned. Ayo truly had a peculiar way of walking. She noticed that several times when she walked with him. Once, they even joked about it.

"Na your sister be dis? (Is this your sister?)" Jidenna asked, pointing at Ifes.

"Sister ke? You no remember my sister, Bukola? (Sister? Don't you remember my sister, Bukola?)" He gave Jidenna a questioning look.

Mandy was lost in the conversation since she didn't understand the way they spoke.

"No, I meant if she was your cousin or something."

"No, she is not my sister or cousin. We aren't related in any way apart from the fact that we are Nigerians and we were both granted scholarships to study here."

"Yeah! That reminds me, I wanted to ask what brought you here but now you've hinted on it, you can just tell me at once."

"We were accepted to this college through a scholarship program. Her name is Ifesinachi."

"Hay! Nwannem nwanyi?" (Hay! My sister?)" Jidenna asked excitedly, recognising from her name that she was an Igbo girl, just like she knew the instant Ayo called his name that he was also an Igbo indigene.

"Please tell me you hail from Enugu State as well."

"I hail from Anambra State." She beamed. Ayo and Mandy laughed at the baby face he displayed.

They both hailed from the Eastern part of that West African country but different states.

"Meet her roommate, coursemate and our friend, Mandy Parker."

"Pleased to meet you." Jidenna stretched his hand for a handshake.

"Pleased to meet you, too."

While they exchanged pleasantries, Ifesinachi's eyes flickered to where Jidenna came out from. She saw a familiar face staring back at her as though she was trying to recognise her as well.

"Chini!"

"Ifes!" they both said simultaneously after thirty seconds of staring intently at each other. Her eyes widened as Chini ran to give her a hug.

"It's so good to see you, Ifes!"

"It's good to see you, too!" They excitedly ran into each other's arms. "I can't believe this!"

"Yeah, I know, right? It's like a dream. A good dream."

"You two know each other?" Jidenna asked.

"Yes, we were classmates in high school," Chinenye replied.

Her name was Chinenye Okafor but her classmates preferred calling her by the short form of her name, Chini, or her English name, Elena. She was the same science student who had gotten the second highest WAEC result just behind Ifes.

"Aw, dis be say God don answer my prayer ooo!" (This means that God has answered my prayers!) Jidenna exclaimed, grinning.

"What do you mean?" Ayo asked.

"Never mind," Jidenna said and Chini smirked. For a moment, Ayo, Mandy and Ifes were lost.

"Abeg make una no mind am jare (please don't mind him)." Chini smiled and changed the topic almost immediately.

"So, Ifes, what are you doing here? How did you get here?"

"They applied through a scholarship program." Jidenna winked at her.

"Before I forget, meet my friend, Ayo. He was my junior in high school. Ayo, meet my friend, Elena who coincidentally happens to be Ifes former high school classmate. We met here in the States a few months back when she was newly accepted to this college."

"You are a fresher? Ifes asked.

Again Jidenna answered before she could utter a word. "Yes, that's because she was denied admission the previous year."

"Big mouth!" Chini exclaimed.

"It's good, right?" Jidenna grinned and they all laughed.

"Hmm? I could pass for a comedian, you know? See as una just dey laugh! (See how you are all laughing!)"

"No, you are just a full-time douchebag, a big jerk. As a matter of fact, I lack words t—" Jidenna's phone rang, cutting Chini's sentence halfway.

Yanking out his phone from his side pocket, he looked at the screen, particularly at the caller ID.

"It's my twin brother," He announced, raising his eyes from his phone's screen.

They composed themselves and stopped speaking out loud as he tapped on his answer button.

"He has a twin brother?" Ifes asked, almost whispering.

"Yeah, and his twin brother is..."

"I'm sorry for that, guys." Jidenna said, cutting Chini's sentence halfway again.

"See, See, Guy leave these girls, make we talk jor (Guy ignore the girls, let's talk)," Ayo said when Jidenna and Chini were about to go into another banter.

They stood there chatting and laughing about their old high school days as Mandy and Ifes happily led Chini to their dorm.

"So tell me, what have I missed?" Chini asked, grinning.

"Don't worry, I will tell you. Let's get to my dorm room first." Ifes beamed. Getting to the front of their dorm room, Mandy brought out her keys from her side pocket and slid it into the keyhole. Then remembering they didn't lock the door on their way out, she opened the door and they walked inside making themselves at home.

## CHAPTER FOURTEEN

"You're welcome to our humble abode, Chini. Hope you like it here," Mandy gaily said.

Chini's eyes scanned the room. Ifes and Mandy did a nice job of ensuring their room was squeaky clean. The decor was beautiful too.

"It's absolutely my pleasure." Chini grinned.

Ifes harrumphed and glanced over her shoulders as she slipped her feet into her white and green flat slippers. "Like you have a choice."

Mandy slapped her on her back. "Be nice. Don't be rude to our guest."

"Ouch!" Ifes winced.

"Good for you." Chini smirked.

Ifes rolled her eyes. Chini rolled hers back at her, still smirking.

"Ok girls, let me go make us some sandwiches," Mandy said, breaking the duo's eyes-battle.

She changed into white shorts and a blue T-shirt that had 'I love you' boldly emblazoned on it with a white and red ink.

Slipping into her ash-colored slippers, she walked past Chini and Ifes into the kitchen, her feet giving off a muffled flop, flop sound as she moved.

"See you girls soon. And no fighting," Mandy said in a nanny or baby-sitter tone. She did a back wave, lifting her hands and waving it without turning to the girls.

They raised their hands in surrender, chuckling underneath their breaths. "Yes, Ma'am ," they replied. They sat on the sofa adjacent to the kitchen.

"Why didn't you contact me to inform me of your coming to the US?" Chini asked after they plopped down on their seats.

"You know I didn't have a phone at that time."

"Yes, I can recall that. But you wrote down our numbers in your diary, didn't you?"

"Uh-oh, that? I'm sorry. I somehow misplaced it and that was how I lost everyone's contacts." Ifes face-palmed and muttered, "Careless me!"

"And you didn't care to come over to my house?" Chini interlocked her arms over her chest, trying to build up guilt in Ifes.

"No, no! I did, but they said you weren't around."

"And it didn't occur to you to ask the gateman for my number?" she asked with one eyebrow raised.

"Please, do accept my sincere apologies. I was so carried away with everything."

Chini feigned annoyance and looked away. Ifes rendered the nicest apology that she could to pacify her friend. It only took a few seconds for Chini to smile again and exclaim that she was only pulling Ifes' legs, that she understood, and that she had forgiven her. They got to discussing other matters.

"So, are you still in touch with our classmates?"

"Yes I am, and we even follow each other up on social media."

"Hmm! I believe most of them have been accepted into the university."

"Yes!" Chini snapped her fingers as a memory flashed in her. "En-hen! Do you remember Chiamaka?"

"Yes, what about her?"

"She was also accepted into UNN the same year as you, but she dropped out when she discovered she was pregnant."

"What! Pregnant?" Ifes exclaimed, mouth agape.

"Yes, I even heard she was sent off by her parents to the boy's house."

"Which boy?" Ifes asked, her face contorted into surprise.

"Her boyfriend. I mean the one that got her pregnant."

Ifes remembered her ex-brilliant and jovial classmate. What happened to her? Why didn't she look straight ahead into her future? The story her friend just told her was quite touching so she decided to change the topic.

"How long have you been in the US?" Ifes asked, shifting to adjust her sitting position.

"I was here for four months before I was accepted into this college. I spent the summer here with my Brother, Onyekachi."

She shoved her phone into her handbag.

Ifes flinched upon hearing that name. Hoping Chini didn't see her, she quickly composed herself. "Yeah, what's up with him?"

"He's fine. He's done with his Bachelor's degree and currently in a medical school in Los Angeles."

The hairs at the back of Ifes' neck stood straight upon hearing that he studied in the States. "Wow! That's nice."

"I met Jidenna through him, although he's two years ahead of my brother and is currently undergoing his residency program."

"Wow! That's nice." Ifes subconsciously repeated the same sentence.

Chini smirked seeing that her brother still had some effects on her old time friend.

"Yeah, you know, he still asks of you once in a while," she said, fixing her gaze on Ifes.

Ifes blushed and it made her facial skin a tone darker. Feeling embarrassed, Ifes turned her face sideways. "Really?"

"Yeah." Chini leaned forward placing her left hand on her friend's right shoulder. "We clearly know you had a crush on my brother, Kachi, back in our Junior secondary school days." Chini grinned.

Ifes batted her eyelashes repeatedly. Well, she was right, but Ifes hadn't been the only student crushing on Kachi. Almost all the female students did; only that hers was overboard.

Chini and Ifes had been in JSS2 when Onyekachi was in SS3 and he was the school's Senior Prefect.

He was one of the brilliant students and the top striker in their school's soccer team, handsome, tall, brown-skinned like the tone of caramelized nuts, black-haired. He always dressed smart and neat. But the most interesting thing about him was that he was a Christian, and so was his sister, Chini.

I mean, who wouldn't fall for him? Who wouldn't fall for someone you could describe as almost complete and perfect?

Chini and Ifes were close friends. They became even closer when Ifes started crushing on her brother Kachi.

The day his set graduated, Chini cried that her brother wasn't going to be coming to school with her. Ifes also took advantage of the situation as her friend and cried with her, but that was because she wasn't going to be seeing him as often anymore.

Ifes smiled sheepishly, taking Chini's hand off her shoulder.

"And so? What about that? Were you not also crushing on his friend, Udoka?" She replied defensively.

Another banter ensued, but they abruptly stopped talking when they heard a sound from the kitchen. They smiled meekly, seeing Mandy coming out from the kitchen with a tray in hand.

"I made us a Monte Cristo sandwich. Hope you'll like it?" Mandy said as she set the tray before them.

"I love it. Thanks." Chini let out a smile of appreciation.

Mandy returned the smile and dusted specks of breadcrumbs from her cloth as she sat down.

"Chini, could you lead us in prayer before we start eating?" Mandy asked.

"Okay." Chini smiled, they slightly bent their heads for prayers. "Dear father, we thank you for this provision. We ask that you bless and continue to be with us in the name of Jesus."



"Amen," they replied simultaneously.

They raised their heads, opened their eyes, more than ready to dive in and devour the delicious-looking sandwiches.

"Now, to eat these babies," Chini said, rubbing her hands together and smacking her lips.

Chini's phone chimed. She groaned. It was a text message from Jidenna. "I will reply to him when I'm done eating." She tossed her phone on the table beside her plate.

"Talking of Jide, what were you telling me about his twin brother?" Ifes asked.

Chini muttered under her breath.

"Hello! No side talks." Ifes waved her hand in front of Chini's face.

"He recently started working with the FBI." Chini unlocked her phone, tapped on her gallery to show her his pictures.

"His name's Kasie." She shifted her phone's screen towards Ife. A young man in an FBI uniform was who Ifes saw.

"He's handsome." Ifes chuckled

"Yes, I can't agree more."

"But I thought the FBI is only eligible to American citizens?" Mandy chimed in.

"Yeah, the twin brothers were born in the US."

"Oh! I see. Citizens by birth."

"Yep!"

"Can I also take a look at his pics?"

"Go ahead."

With Chini's permission, Ifes handed Mandy the phone.

"He's handsome indeed. Omigosh! They are identical twins," Mandy commented as she flipped through the pictures.

Chini's phone chimed again. "You have a message from Jidenna." Mandy looked up from Chini's phone screen as she handed it back to her.

Chini muttered another word under her breath, retrieving her phone from Mandy. She replied to his message. Before she could send it, a call came in.

"It's Jidenna," she whispered to the girls seated near her, rolling her eyes.

"I'll see you in an hour's time," she told the caller on the other side of the phone.

"Jidenna said he wants to see me before going back to California today." She was obviously excusing herself.

"California? That's far!" Mandy said.

"Yes, he flew all the way from California to visit. Thank you so much, I really enjoyed your sandwich!" She drew back her seat grinning at Mandy as she got to her feet.

"My pleasure."

"We go dey talk na (We'll stay in touch)," Chini said to Ifes, and gave Mandy and Ifes a peck on their cheeks.

"No wahala (No problem)," Ifes replied and they both saw her off.

## CHAPTER FIFTEEN

4:00am, Sunday.

Ifes opened her eyes, and saw a figure standing in front of her bed. Her vision was blurry. She closed her eyes and opened it again to be doubly sure of who it was.

"You finally woke up, sleepy head. Good morning," Mandy said when she noticed Ifes recognised her.

Sitting straight in her bed, Ifes let out a yawn. "How long have you been standing here? When did you wake up?"

"Let's just say I remembered tellin' ya that you won't have to wake me up on Sunday mornings again."

"How long have you been standing here?"

"I've been trying to wake you up for the past six minutes. Thank God the alarm came to my rescue. I've been up since 4:00am, you know?"

Ifes rolled her eyes. "Even if you have been awake since 1:00am, so what?"

"I know you also roll your eyes even when you sleep."

Ifes smirked. "I wanna sleep some more."

"Isn't that your profession? Smirking and rolling your eyes."

Ifes ignored her roommate and laid back in her bed.

"Alright, let the cat and dog fight begin!" Mandy whirled around and walked towards the water dispenser. Mandy came back with a glass of water, but met her friend's absence. She smiled when she discovered Ifes had entered the bathroom. Her technique always worked every time.

"I've been able to iron your clothes and mine. You know what? I can't wait to take Avery and Bradley to church today!" Mandy spoke loud and excitedly, hurrying Ifes to dress for church that morning.

As Ifes continued having her bath, Mandy knocked on her bathroom door at three different intervals. "Hurry up please. Avery and Bradley cannot be late on their first day to church."

"Late? But I haven't stayed up to three minutes in the bathroom. Abeg wait make I bathe finish jor!" Ifes said.

"You know I didn't understand that last part."

"Who's fault? I wasn't saying it for you to understand." Ifes smirked at her despite knowing that she couldn't see her.

Mandy sparked. "I'm gonna kick ya out of that place myself, if ya don't come out in two minutes' time."

"Abeg comot for there!" Ifes said in Nigerian pidgin English when she heard the sound of Mandy's footsteps slowly fading. Ifes wasn't brave enough to say it to her hearing.

Mandy literally helped Ifes to select her handbag, shoes, clothes, makeup, and jewelry, telling her the ones that fit, and the ones that were just bleh.

After dressing up, Mandy and Ifes made straight for Avery's dorm room which was a couple inches away. They also went to Chini's dorm room, and finally left to catch up with Bradley and Ayo, who were already waiting for them.

Avery and Bradley felt nervous and skeptical about going to church for the first time.

"You don't know how happy I am that you are coming along with us to church!" Mandy held Bradley and Avery's hands and squeezed them gently.

Avery opened her mouth, but couldn't utter a word and closed it back.

"Umm! I, umm! I didn't buy any new clothes for church. I don't know if this is good to go?" Bradley stammered shifting his gaze to Ayo.

Bradley wore something similar to the outfit he wore the same day Ifes met him at the restaurant, while Ayo was all decked out in a three-piece suit.

Ifes followed Bradley's gaze and landed on Ayo, studying him from head to toe.

"You look like you are going to model for GQ. Hmm! I'll find out later if you have your eyes on any damsel in church."

Ian walked past them that morning in an almost similar get up with Ayo, but it definitely wasn't as glamorous as Ayo's.

Ayo beamed. "Don't you think it's still too early to joke?"

"She's right! You are indeed handsome!" Mandy almost spilled out but thought about it.

"You're perfect!" Mandy exclaimed when she understood the message Bradley was trying to pass across to her.

Bradley stared at Ayo, his eyes asking questions.

Ayo nodded, grinning as he gave him a reassuring look.

"What of me?" Avery asked in a low tone.

"You are beautiful!" Mandy said.

"And I think I like your gown," Ifes chimed in.

"I love it. I think you've got some eyes on you today," Chini said and they all beamed.

Ifes whirled around to face Mandy's car. "Oya, make we dey go church ooo (Alright, let's start going to church)."

"Not again!" Mandy groaned and slapped Ifesinachi's back.

"Ouch! That hurts, you know?"

"I said you should speak only English."

"But I was!"

"I meant that you should speak correct English; no, good English; no, American English!"

Ifes rubbed her hands at the spot where Mandy slapped on her back. "I'm sorry. I was just saying we should get going, so Avery and Bradley will not be late on their first day to church."

Seeing Mandy's reaction at the mention of Bradley and Avery's name, Ifes smiled that her words had the intended effect on her roommate.

Mandy and Ifes led the way to church in Mandy's car, Bradley and Ayo followed with Bradley's car while Avery and Chini drove in their separate cars.

At exactly 10:30am the church service started. It was a campus church and students coordinated most of the activities. Service units like the student choir, student ushers, student technical crew, student altar vessels, student crowd control, etc were coordinated by the Christian Quakers but didn't take the pastor's position. They had a visiting pastor and a presiding pastor who were both graduates of the College.

Mandy and Ifes sat on the choir seat, but ensured Bradley, Avery and Chini sat in the next row, close enough to keep an eye on them. Ayo was in the technical room, making sure the camera incessantly panned on their faces as he and other technical crew rolled the cameras around the auditorium.

After the opening prayers, the praise and worship was led by a male and female student respectively who were also members of the choir. Students wore their dancing shoes, praising and expressing their emotions via dance mode.

Still dancing, Ifesinachi's eyes spotted Chini, Avery and Bradley from the choir stand. Chini danced beautifully as she cheered up Bradley and Avery to dance as well.

Feeling satisfied with what she was seeing, Ifes shifted her gaze to Mandy who was so engrossed in praising God that she didn't notice the happenings behind her. The praise section ended with a joyful shout.

"It is time to hear the Word of God. But before that, let's put our hands together for the choir as they give us a special ministration," one of the coordinators said.

Following the coordinator's remark, the students ushered the choir to the stage with another clapping and shouting jamboree.

The instrumentalists started, harmoniously strumming the keys of their various instruments.

Kimberly, who was the assistant music director, sang the first solo.

*Worthy is the lamb, who seated on the throne,  
We worship and adore you, we lift your name on high,  
Glory to your name, you are worthy to be praised,  
You are awesome, awesome in this place, hallelujah!*

Ian, the music director, came up with the second verse.

*You are the mighty King, who saved us all from sins,  
His love never ever ends, Hallelujah,  
Worthy to the lamb, who saved us all from sins,  
Yes, His love, his kind tender mercy,  
They never never end!*

Ifes was about to take the third verse when her eyes peered into the crowd and saw Bradley and Avery's hands raised above their shoulders as they joined the other students who were also worshipping on the pew, after Ian sang the second verse. Her eyes glittered upon seeing how the Holy Spirit was working a miracle in their lives.

Was Mandy seeing this? Ifes could only hope and believe.

*Worthy, worthy is the Lamb, Who never gave up to death,  
Just to save us from all sins, Hallelujah,  
Worthy, worthy is the Lamb, Who never gave up to death,  
Oh, just to save us from our sins, Hallelujah!*

Mandy stepped forward to take the fourth and last verse. As she sang, her voice was filled with so much exuberance one could not deny.

*Glory to the Lord, the Alpha and Omega,  
The beginning, and the end,  
We give you glory, we give you glory,  
Amen, amen, amen, amen to the Lamb of God,  
We exalt you, we glorify you, we magnify you, glory to your name, Oh, God!*

Together, all in harmony, the choir sang the chorus, each part blending into one musical worship.

*Amen, you're seated on the throne,  
Holy is our God, Hallelujah,  
Amen, you reign forevermore, There is no one else like you, Hallelujah.*



## CHAPTER SIXTEEN

Second semester of the same academic session.

"I can't be late for Dr Adams' lecture," Mandy said as she hurried down to their lecture hall beside Ifes who was wondering why it had to be so far from their dorm. Mandy's car chose today, of all days, not to be of good use to the duo.

Ifes was jogging, running and walking all at once to catch up with Mandy's pace. Mandy seemed to have started working out to put her through this. Couldn't she even wait up? Perspiration had begun to form under their armpits as the blazing morning sun shone on them. So much for vitamin D!

"Thank you, Jesus!" they said when Dr Adams walked in a few seconds after their arrival.

Their eyes met and they started laughing as they reminisced about what happened back in the dorm room.

Ifes had poured liquid moisture on the floor, so that Mandy would slip off the ground when she walked on it, and get her dress stained.

That morning, Mandy had dressed up before her, and had wanted to start nagging like she did the previous day. Ifes had to do something to keep her quiet.

"You are responsible for this right?" Mandy had winced painfully. Knowing Ifes too well, she gave her a questioning look.

Ifes laughed so hard when she saw the expression on Mandy's face. Mischievous victory was the best.

Mandy was close to tears, but joined Ifes in laughing too. Her clothes were stained, she had to change the clothes before leaving for lectures. That gave Ifes enough time to dress up, and even finish before her.

Dr Adams was a no-nonsense man, strict and as straight as a rod. He was rude too. They knew better than to come late to his lectures.

"Okay students, this is where we will be drawing the curtain for today. But before I take my leave, I want to inform you that we will be having our test soon."

Dr Adams was as pale as a ghost, tall, green-eyed, and had a paunch. He would have been handsome for his age if not that he was always frowning. His husky voice always boomed as if he were an angry god ready to mete out his wrath upon his subjects. He was always in charge of his lecture; nobody dared to joke or have fun in his class.

Removing his recommended glasses from his eyes, he walked out of the hall.

Students stood to use the exit door. Mandy and Ifes did the same. They walked halfway to the door when they heard Bradley's voice calling from behind.

"Hi, gals!"

"Hi, Bradley," they said simultaneously.

"I see you girls are off to your dormitory?"

They nodded affirmatively.

"I saw you girls running into the lecture hall this morning, then I noticed that you didn't drive your car. So, let's go to my car. I'd like to drop you off."

"Okay, that'd be nice. But where's your brother, Hunter?"

"Over there." Bradley pointed in a direction.

Their gaze followed his fingers to see Hunter standing in a playboy stance, chatting and laughing with some of the female students in their department who flocked about him like bees about honey.

As they talked, he held one of them too close and fleetingly touched sensitive parts of her body. She would giggle each time he did that. Bradley looked on in disgust.

Hunter's eyes excitedly flickered around the lecture hall, probably scouting another pretty young thing. His gaze met them staring at him, but he quickly looked away. Mandy wanted to say something, but Ifes intercepted.

"Don't worry. God has heard our prayers. I believe he will be saved. Let's go."

Still on their way out, their eyes met Ryan's, but he also looked away.

After the last encounter with Bradley, Hunter had problems with Ryan. Anytime Mandy and Ifes had a conversation with him, Hunter would drop hints of dislike. He did not spare them his thoughts about how evil Ryan was.

"He did not even stay to celebrate with Bradley. He just went off sulking like a kid denied his candy, all because he did not like you." Hunter would say something along those lines.

"Thank you so much for saving my twin brother. If not for you ladies, I would have lost my only brother. But that dude, with a chip on his shoulder, would not even say a good word to you for what you did for his friend. Now we know what some people are truly like."

Mandy and Ifes would always feel hurt, and wish that he would take back those words. Bradley had been on good terms with Ryan, against Hunter's wishes. He never held what happened that day against Ryan. Also, as a child of God, he understood how important it was to forgive. And forgive freely, he did.

## CHAPTER SEVENTEEN

On the Saturday of the same week, the duo went out for their usual weekly evangelism. This time they decided to speak with Hunter. Mandy's knuckles banged on the door when they got to the front of Hunter's and Bradley's dorm room. The door knob twisted open. Hunter stood at the door post, which was now ajar, grinning.

"Hi, gals! Please come in." He adjusted behind the door so he could make way for them to go inside. He shut the door behind them as soon as they got into the dorm room.

"Mmm! I don't think I would like to give my life to Jesus for now." That was the response they got from Hunter when they started speaking with him about Jesus.

"B-but why?" Mandy leaned forward.

"That's because I don't see the need to." Hunter scratched the back of his neck.

"And why is that?" Ifes asked.

"I don't think I can cope with the Christian life. To tell the truth I think Christianity is a good religion, but I can't help but to feel that it's kind of, umm, boring."

"I mean, when you are a Christian, you don't go to nightclubs, you don't swear or use cuss words. There are a lot of dos and don'ts. What drives me crazy the most is the no sex thing! I mean, who does that? How possible is it in the 21st century? I can't imagine what you ladies and Bradley are passing through with this celibate stuff." His eyes scanned their bodies giving them a pitiful look.

"Besides, Bradley is already born again so I really don't see any reason to do the same. Bradley can be born again for the both of us. He is my twin brother."

Hunter gave countless reasons as to why he could not be a child of God.

They told him a lot of things about the scriptures that day to try clearing his misconception about Christianity. They told Hunter that Christianity was a personal race, and it was more than a religion. They told him that they were keeping their bodies as a living sacrifice to God, not by their power, but by the grace of God.

They opened their Bibles and flipped to 1 Samuel 2:9, read Zechariah 4:6, 1 Corinthians 15:10, Colossians 1:13.

After all was said and done, Hunter still couldn't be persuaded.

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A week later,

It was time to go to the school library to study and prepare for Dr. Adams test the following week. Students sat in groups, though few students sat on their own doing their individual reading.

Mandy and Ifes sat in their preferred positions, and pulled out their course materials from their respective bags to start reading. They must have read for about forty minutes when Ifes lifted up her eyes from her book and saw Ryan.

He looked confused, like he was lost and didn't know which topic to read. He scratched his forehead several times with his pen. She stared at him for a while before she continued reading, but felt a nudge to go and help him. At first, she wanted to ignore it, but she abruptly felt a deeper urge to go to Ryan.

"Ifes, get up, and go and meet him," she heard the voice in her heart say.

*But Lord, you know this is not funny!*

Ifes moved her gaze towards her roommate whose eyes were fixed on her book and felt like doing the same, but the nudging wouldn't stop.

"Mandy," Ifes called out hoping her friend would not allow her to leave.

Mandy looked up from her book. "Yes, Ifes, want something?"

From Mandy's facial expression, she knew she had really distracted her.

"Will you excuse me? I will be back soon." Ifes moved her seat backwards until she could get enough space to get up.

"Okay, don't be long," Mandy said, taking her eyes back to her book.

Ifes gazed at her friend whose eyes were back to her book and wondered, *"Just like that? She didn't even ask where I'm going, or what I am going to do."*

She concluded that this must be for a purpose after all, and whirled around to leave.

"Nope, I won't," she replied her roommate, walked away from her table to Ryan, praying that he would not make a scene

She got to the front of his reading table and waved her hands in the air.

"Hi!" she said, sounding cherry. He looked up and stared at her expressionlessly. She did not see the usual hate. She looked into his eyes, maybe she could get a clue of what he was feeling, but he was still enigmatic. She got nothing, nothing to use as an excuse to walk away from him, but why was she trying to walk away?

What was he thinking of her now? She knew he was not happy to see her, but was he sad or angry?

She was the Jesus girl that brought him word. She separated him from his clique of friends. Did seeing her just make his day go sour? She reasoned like a common third-party, not wanting to reason it from the stance of the girl that might be slapped in a few seconds.

What if he made a scene? What if he laughed at her? What if he called her names? What if? What if? What if? These questions ran through her mind like rapids. She started giving it a second thought if she should do what she came for or if she should turn around and just walk back to her seat without uttering another word. She wanted to choose the latter but kept hearing the still small voice telling her to talk to Ryan.

"You look like you need some help. I'll show you something, give it here." She grabbed his book before he could object or give his consent.

She flipped over the book, jotting down some topics she felt they were going to bring questions from. She gave a brief explanation on the topics, and when she was done, the look on Ryan's face was a little more than she expected.

She thanked him for giving her the opportunity to talk to him, then whirled around and walked back to her seat without looking back.

Taking her seat opposite Mandy at the round reading table, she looked up to see Ryan still staring at her astonishingly. Their eyes met and they locked eyes. She managed to break the staring contest between Ryan and her.

She gazed at Mandy, then back to Ryan and finally to her book. Ifes couldn't look towards Ryan's direction again to see if he was even going through the guidelines she gave him. She

also needed to study for Dr Adams' test. Looking at the lad instead of studying would do her no good.

She studied and studied without blinking her eyes or looking to her left or right.

"Ifes, Ifes..." Mandy's exhausted and sleepy voice drew her out of her knowledge quest as she tapped her on her shoulder. Ifes had been studying for about three hours now.

"I want to leave now. I am feeling sleepy. And you know me, any time I am like this, whatever I try to read just bounces off my head"

Ifes did not want to leave yet. In her own opinion, she still had much to cover. But of course, this sounded to Mandy like her usual overkill and needed to put in more work than was necessary.

Mandy sat back on her seat. Soon after she laid down her head on the desk and drifted off to sleep.

"I have to read to maintain a high GPA if I want to continue to sustain my scholarship," Ifes said despite knowing her sleeping roommate could not hear her.

Ifes finished reading and woke Mandy up. "I'm done reading, so shall we?" Mandy groaned, clearly sad that her sleep had been interrupted.

On their way out, Ifes glanced back at Ryan's direction only to spot his seat empty. She scanned the big library reading room to see if he had just changed position, and he didn't do what she was thinking he did. She already had the premonition that he had left and was not so shocked. But she was disappointed.

*I wonder why I am disappointed. It wasn't like I was expecting anything better.* She shook off the thought of Ryan from her head.

*"I think I have tried my best,"* Ifes concluded in her heart as they both walked back to their dorm room.

On Monday of the following week, Ifes said a customary short prayer before writing the test. It lasted for a duration of two hours.

The need to stretch made Ifes to look at her wristwatch. She discovered that one hour, twenty-five minutes had gone by without her stirring from her writing. At that point Ifes knew she had to raise up her head; she needed to stretch her neck a bit.

As she did, she saw him looking at her, eyes and mouth agape wide enough that flies could easily enter.

*"Ha! Na wetin dey do dis one? (What is wrong with him?)"* she asked silently in her heart. *"How long has he been staring at me like that?"* she wondered.

"You have thirty minutes more," Dr Adam's voice echoed. That was when she realised she had stared at Ryan for five minutes. She bent over to continue writing, she couldn't tell if he did the same.

The thirty remaining minutes breezed by, and the students filed out of the class, mostly in clusters, asking one another how the test went. Ifes waited for Mandy outside for another custom of theirs which was post-test analysis to determine how well they did. Some said what had been done is done, but not Ifes and Mandy.



## CHAPTER EIGHTEEN

Mandy walked past Ifes without noticing she was even there. Strange, she had never seen Mandy so engrossed in her thoughts like that, nor had she seen worry lines etched so deeply on her face that she seemed like a whole different person. Mandy was always carefree and happy. This was unusual.

"Earth to Mandy," Ifes said when she finally linked up with her friend.

"Haaa! Ifes, you almost scared the life outta me."

"A million for your thoughts."

"I'm fine. Let's just leave."

"Not until you tell me what is going on in that heart of yours."

"Ha ha ha! It's nothing. Let's go, I'm famished." Mandy started walking away before Ifes could utter another word. If she was not convinced before now, she was totally sure Mandy was hiding something from her, and she didn't want to push it. Ifes believed that whatever it was, she would tell her. They didn't keep secrets from each other.

They were still moving slowly when Ifes spotted Ryan's figure walking towards them, but she didn't turn to confirm if it was him. She kept on walking as she wasn't prepared for any drama.

The duo got back to their dorm room. For Ifes, it was good to be back in her room again after a whole day of intensive studying, But Mandy's sour mood was sapping the positive energy out of the room.

Ifes knew something was worrying her roommate. She had never seen her in such a mood, but she didn't want to pry.

*Maybe she will tell me in due time.*

As the day wore on, it seemed more and more like that was not going to happen any time soon.

Now that Ifes thought of it, she realised that this gloom had not fallen on Mandy all of a sudden. For sometime now, Ifes had noticed her gazing into space and losing herself in her own thoughts. Ifes had thought nothing of it because she felt, well, they all had to sober up for Dr Adams' test as it tended to possess the ability to draw one's blood.

But this was like nothing she had ever seen. In fact, it seemed like it was the test that kept Mandy's worrying at bay.

A few times, Ifes saw her mumbling incoherent words. She could guess it was most probably related to what was going on with her. Ifes decided to drop her former resolution and pry a little.

"Mandy, you are in need of someone to talk to. And hey! Don't you dare launch into that silly reply about how you are fine, and then give a dumb excuse to cover up the problem." Mandy let out a long sigh.

Ifes, encouraged that she might be getting somewhere, moved closer and held Mandy's shoulder.

"Please, be real with me. I might not be able to help but I know it's good to verbally process thoughts. Plus, we can pray about it, if it's something that words cannot solve." Ifes ended her speech, feeling talking to her wasn't so bad after all. Mandy's next action almost made her regret asking.

"You won't understand. I'm outta here," Mandy exhaled deeply and sped out of the room.

Ifes ran after her to stop her from leaving the dorm, but Mandy got to the door first. By the time Ifes got to the door and opened it, Mandy was gone.

She searched around the dorm building, asking students if they had seen which direction Mandy went. Her efforts were futile as all those she asked said they hadn't seen her.

Folding her arms across her chest, Ifes stood at a particular spot for close to ten minutes, looking forward to Mandy's return. She got tired of waiting, and resignedly dragged her feet back to her dorm room.

Upon entering the room, Ifes plonked down in her double-sized bed.

"Where's Mandy? Where did she go?"

She stared at the ceiling, folding her arms and crossing her legs, pondering over the possibility of her going to any of her squad of friends' dorm rooms.

Ifes decided to call her friends and find out if she was with any of them.

Stretching out her right hand towards her phone which was a couple inches from the right side of her bed, she remembered that she didn't have all their contact numbers. Bradley recently gave her his, and she had Mandy's, Anne-Marie's, and Avery's contacts. But Hunter, Ryan, Skylar and Megan did not exchange contacts with her for reasons best known to them.

"What to do now?" She tapped her forehead as she considered her options.

"Call her friends whose cell phone numbers you've got. If she is not with them, you can ask for the contact numbers of her other friends," a voice echoed in her head.

"Yeah!" she exclaimed, sitting up to start putting a call through.

## CHAPTER NINETEEN

Ifes stared at the screen of her phone that was tucked in her right hand after deciding to call and ask of Mandy's whereabouts.

She saw ten missed calls staring back at her from her phone's screen. Opening it, there were two missed calls from her Brother Obinna, five missed calls from her mother, and three from her father. Those calls came in during the period she was searching for Mandy.

Ifes knew that it wouldn't have been up to ten missed calls if her doting mother hadn't been worried sick over the fact that she wasn't picking her calls. Mother must have pressured her brother and father to try calling her with their own cell phones.

The first time Ifes was unable to take her calls because she was in the lecture hall, she got as many as twenty missed calls. She had gotten worried and so, decided to return the calls, only to hear her mother telling her that she was worried sick that she wasn't picking her calls and that she only wanted to speak to her daughter. Even the expensive international rate of making calls couldn't stop her from pestering.

"My dear, are you okay?" Ifes had heard her mother's voice asking from the other side of her phone,

"Yes, Mum, I'm fine."

"I was scared if you were probably in any sort of trouble that made you unable to pick my calls."

"Is that why you had to call me twenty times?" Ifes exhaled deeply.

"Yes ooo. Why shouldn't I? I am your mother."

Ifes had smiled. "I was actually in the lecture hall and lectures were going on."

"Thank God you are fine, dear. I just wanted to hear from you."

Ifes had to explain everything to her mother so as to stop her from being worried whenever she didn't answer her call.

Did it stop her? Well, no. It only made her reduce the number of calls, and this current ten missed calls was one of them.

"I have to return the calls. Who should I call first?" Ifes started contemplating. Mother? Father? Or Obinna? She was still contemplating when her phone chimed. It was a call from Obinna. Decision settled.

Pressing her answer button, she put her phone to her left ear.

"Hello, hello!" a female voice said from the other side of her phone. It was a voice she was already too familiar with—her mother's voice.

Ifes was elated with the news she got from her family that day. Her mother announced to her one of the best news of her life. Her brothers had gained admission into the University of Lagos. Her father was now gainfully employed by a multinational company, and he was one of their board members.

Ok, that last part startled Ifes. It was possible for her father to be employed by a multinational company, but how was it possible that he became one of their board members?

"It's a lie!" Ifes exclaimed in a high-pitched voice after her mother told her everything.

"Haaa! But you know I can't lie to you about this."

She slapped her forehead, giving herself a mental chide. This was her mother for God's sake. "Sorry, umm! I meant, how did it happen?"

"Your dad and I were no longer comfortable with our situation. We were worried, so we decided to pray about it, asking God to remember how faithful we have been in our tithes and offerings despite our low income. We reminded God that every time we gave, we didn't give grudgingly, we gave with all our hearts. We reminded him of his word in Isaiah 1: 19."

"Yeah." Ifes remembered that chapter of the Bible so well and nodded to what her mother was saying despite knowing she couldn't see her. "Isaiah 1:19, If ye be willing and obedient, ye shall eat the good of the land."

Mrs Ebube continued talking. "The next day, your father came back on a commercial bike. I stood at the door, watching him pay the bike man."

"When he came inside and didn't say anything about taking his bus to the mechanic, I suspected something was going on."

"Mmm!" Ifes exhaled. "So, what did you do about it?" she asked her mum.

"Out of curiosity, I decided to ask him about it, and his reply startled me to my bones!"

"Hmm!" she exclaimed, shifting uncomfortably in her bed.

"He said he was led to sell his bus which was his only source of income and sacrifice the money to God."

"Jesus! What?" Ifes sprang to her feet, her whole body vibrating in astonishment.

"I accepted what he told me, and we praised God that night before going to bed."

"Wow! This is unbelievable!" she exclaimed, sitting on the floor like one whose strength had been drained.

"On the night of the same day he made that sacrifice to God, the Holy Spirit gave him an idea worth millions and directed him to the company that needed the idea. He did as he was led by the Holy Spirit."

"En-hen?" She listened keenly to the part her mother was heading to, her ears seriously itching to hear what happened next.

"He drew up the proposal, called his lawyer friend and made contact with the company. They were interested."

"After the whole paperwork and contract signing, your dad's money was sent to him. I mean, your dad became a multi-millionaire by one act of faith!"

"Jesus oooo! Ewoo!" She placed her left hand on her head, her right hand still grasping her phone tightly.

"Your dad was retained by the company, so as to not just keep the idea, but also the source of the idea. Though he's starting as an intern, he will be going to the UK for an eighteen months' course."

Ifes could no longer hold back her glee as she disconnected the call. Rolling on the floor, she started giving thanks to God by doing what she knew how to do best—singing all the songs of

praise she knew how to sing. She literally jumped around her dorm room, scattering things and taking them out of their proper positions. If anyone had by chance entered her room at that time, the person would have concluded that she was literally running crazy.

"All the glory must be to the Lord,  
For he is worthy of our praise,  
No man on earth should give glory to himself,  
All the glory must be to the Lord."

Tears stream down her cheeks.

In the Book of Isaiah 1:19, it says that if we are willing and obedient, we will eat the good of the land. Ifes and her family obediently and willingly served God.

They won souls for Christ. They invested into the kingdom by praying for God's kingdom to be established on earth. They were faithful in their tithes, offerings and sacrifice. And God's words came to pass.

The book of Matthew 6:33 says to seek first the kingdom of God, and its righteousness, and all these shall be added unto those who do thus.

Solomon sacrificed one thousand sheep to God. Abraham almost sacrificed his son, Isaac, before God stopped him. David made a powerful statement in the Bible as regards sacrifice. He said in the book of 2nd Samuel 24:24 that he would not give God what will not cost him. And God blessed them with wealth, health and everything their heart desired.

## CHAPTER TWENTY

Ifes continued basking in worship for a very long time. She had even forgotten that other things existed.

Knock, knock!

Someone's knuckles banged on her door, bringing her back to her full conscious state. She looked around her dorm room, then it dawned on her the mess she had created during her over-excitement.

Uh-oh! Where should she begin the rearrangement from? It would take more than half an hour to arrange the mess she made in her room.

She was sure that by then, whoever was currently knocking on the door would have run out of patience.

"What do I do now? Where do I start from?" As she pondered in her state of turmoil, so many excuses popped up in her head to give the person who was now knocking on her door. But will this person be patient enough to listen? She hadn't even bothered to find out who was at the door before concluding if it was worth her headache. What if it was Mandy?

"Yes! That should be Mandy," she concluded. Ifes sprang to her feet, smiling as she reached for the doorknob. She yanked the door open, and drew back, gasping in surprise as her eyes greeted who was now in front of her open door. This was someone she never expected to see in front of her door, someone who never came to visit even her friend.

What was she doing here now? Perhaps she came to tell Mandy's whereabouts.

Ifes gazed at the red-haired girl and was a bit taken aback by her reaction. Her body was all tense up and she lowered her head like a child who was caught in a mischief.

*"But wait, why is she acting like that? Am I not the one who ought to be tensed here?"* Ifes reasoned in her heart as she stared at the visitor who looked as though her tension was increasing as the time went by.

"Is Mandy around?" Skylar asked, breaking the silence that encompassed around them.

Ifes was crestfallen to hearing Skylar ask about Mandy. Her high hopes of knowing her roommates had been dashed on the rocks of Skylar's question.

"No, she went out a while back." Ifes expected Skylar to spin around and walk away, but her next reaction almost threw her off guard.



Skylar's body relaxed and her facial expression spoke a language that she could interpret very well—a language of relief.

"Umm! I actually came to see you."

"Me?" Ifes asked, perplexed.

"Yes."

"All right, what's it for?"

"Mmm! May I come in?"

Ifes slapped herself mentally that it had not occurred to her to welcome her never-in-a-blue-moon guest. She wanted to move aside and open the door wide enough for Skylar to enter, but she did the opposite when she remembered the mess she made back inside her dorm room.

"No! I'm not sure if you should come in. My room's scattered," Ifes wanted to say but decided against it when she remembered the tensed look that was formerly etched on Skylar's face.

She could hear some voices at the back of her head laughing at her.

"Whatcha gonna do now?"

"Whatcha gonna do now?" "Whatcha gonna do now?"

After what seemed like a long time of waiting, she finally moved beside the door leaving the door ajar for Skylar to go in.

Skylar stepped in with so much anticipation which dropped a notch or two as soon as her eyes scanned the disheveled room. Ifes slammed the door before spinning around to see Skylar who was now looking around the room with a displeased expression.

"Is this how your room usually looks?" Skylar blurted out without weighing her words.

Ifes opened her mouth to give an explanatory answer, but Skylar waved her off, letting her know that she wasn't interested in whatever she had to say.

Ifes inhaled and exhaled as they both sat on the seat closest to them.

"So, what may I offer you."

"To be frank, I don't think I can take anything from you."

Ifes felt like someone had slapped her hard across her face.

*"Alright, this is the climax! What is this girl feeling like? First she refused to listen to my explanations and now this?"* she bellowed in her heart. The defensive part of her wanted to ask Skylar to use the door.

"And what do you think you want to do, Ifes?" a still small voice said.

"Okay Lord, I surrender myself to you, come be with us and make her talk."

"I'm always with you."

Ifes felt the peace that surged through her, making all seethings dissipate.

"Ehhn! You said you wanted to see me," Ifes asked as she started arranging her room.

With a sideways glance, she spotted Skylar looking ashamed for her brash words earlier.

"Give me that," she said as she took a black, low-heeled shoe Ifes had picked up from beneath the bed. She placed it on a rack, saying, "Let me help you."

Ifes was elated about her offer of assistance, but still felt that Skylar's change of reaction wasn't enough to explain everything, like her surprise visit and her initial, queer, jittery expression.

The duo remained silent as they both went to work, organizing the room back to its proper position. Even better, Skylar initiated some changes that made more sense. Ifes thought Skylar would make a great interior decorator.

"Do you care for a glass of water? I'm going to get one for myself," Ifes asked suddenly, breaking the wall of silence that stood between them. Ifes felt her throat was parched because she hasn't spoken for so long. Skylar sat heavily on the seat adjacent to Mandy's reading table.

"Oh yes please!" Skylar grinned.

Ifes smiled. "Alright then, I'll be back."

Ifes walked halfway towards the water dispenser before spinning around to look at Skylar who was now scanning one of Mandy's books. "Do you need anything else?"

Skylar nodded her head. "You can just get me a glass of juice instead of water."

"I'll be right back," Ifes said as her figure disappeared into the kitchen.

She returned with two glasses of orange juice and two packets of biscuits to serve Skylar and herself.

"Thank you!" Skylar said cheerfully.

"You're welcome."

The duo ate their snacks in silence before Ifes decided to ask Skylar her reason for visiting.

"So, what were you trying to tell me?"

Ifes noticed that tense look reappearing on Skylar's face. The grim expression was contoured into her features again.

"Ifes, please before I proceed, I want to tell you that I want this meeting to be our little secret. I do not want Mandy or any of my friends to hear what I'm about to tell you."

Ifes eyes and mouth dropped agape as she gazed at her, guessing astonishingly how grave the secret must be. For her to request that none of her friends should learn about it. *"Have I become that squad's bank or reservoir of secrets? I think I'm overdue for an award of the best secret keeper of the century,"* Ifes quipped in her mind.

To Skylar, she said, "If that's the way you want it, alright then."

Skylar leaned forward, smoothening her skirt with her palm. "You promise?"

"I promise." Ifes made the pinky sign. "Cross my heart."

Skylar let out a swift hiss and leaned back into the seat with a deep sigh. "Please, I urgently need your advice. I need someone to talk to but I don't know where to go. Ifes, I'm going crazy here, and I don't know what I'll do if someone doesn't speak to me!"

Ifes leaned forward in her seat. This was definitely serious. "Talk to me, Skylar. What is it about?"

Skylar lowered her head in her hands and raised it up after a while to look at Ifes, contemplating whether or not to open up to her. At last, she said, "It's about..."

Skylar's phone rang, drowning her sentence halfway. She retrieved her phone from her handbag, looked at the caller ID before tapping the green circle on her phone's screen. She gazed at Ifes pleadingly. "Please excuse me."

Ifes nodded, gesturing for her to go ahead with the call.

"Hello, Megan."

"I can't come now. I'm in the middle of something important."

"Can't it wait?"

"But is it really that important?"

"Alright then, I'll be there in half an hour."

Ifes felt bad hearing that last sentence from Skylar before she disconnected the call. A part of her wanted to ask Skylar to ignore her friend and pour out the burden in her heart. One look at Skylar made her know that would be futile.

Skylar gave her an apologetic look. "I'm so sorry our conversation is ending this way, but I have to go now. Megan seems to be in some sort of problem."

"No, no! You don't have to apologize. I understand."

Skylar gulped down the remaining content in her glass before standing from her seat. "It was nice talking to you. Hope to do this some other time."

"Same here."

Skylar walked to the door with Ifes trailing behind her. Slamming the door after Skylar, Ifes went back to the spot where they had sat together and picked up the tray. She tossed the

empty biscuit wrappers into the bin and washed the glasses. After taking the glasses back into the cabinet, she leaned on the kitchen counter, wondering what was troubling Skylar.

While she pondered over it, she got another knock on her door. Feeling thankful that the dorm room was now in its proper position, she stepped out of the kitchen, and walked across her room to the door. Reaching for the doorknob, she yanked the door open and almost slumped when her eyes fell on the tall, blondie that stood in front of her door.

Ryan!

## CHAPTER TWENTY-ONE

Ifes looked at Ryan and glanced down to her feet, looked up again to Ryan and back to the floor.

*"I must be hallucinating,"* she thought. She almost went to scoop sand and pour on this person, because she was fairly sure this was a ghost!

"Ryan!" Ifes said his name cautiously, soaking in the fact that he had not poofed into thin air. Ok, maybe it was actually Ryan standing before her in flesh and blood.

Why, for goodness's sake, was he here? Was he here to see Mandy? Or could it be that he had mistakenly knocked on her door? All these questions flowed through her mind in consecutive sequence.

While she stared at him blankly, he continued looking at her. He glanced down when his gaze met hers fixed on him. She stepped back to discard whatever tension or nervousness that was working its way between them, but of course, that seemed like an invitation to come in, which he did.

"Welco—" Further words ceased as her eyes widened in alarm at what she could now see more clearly on his face. For all the staredown that had occurred, she had missed some great details. His nose was bleeding. His left wrist was swollen.

"W-What? What happened to you, Ryan?" Ifes breezed towards Ryan, taking up his swollen wrist in her hands, inspecting the severity of the damage done.

"Ouch!" He winced in pain when she placed her right thumb on the swollen spots.

"And your eyes!" Ifes said diverting her gaze from his wrist to his eyes which was now close to tears.

He hissed and looked away. "I was attacked."

She looked at him with her eyebrows raised questioningly. "By whom? By what?"

"I don't know!"

"What? What do you mean, you don't know?"

"I don't know the people that attacked me, and why they did this to me," he said through clenched teeth.

"I never knew the bruises were quite obvious. I'm sorry!" He exhaled sharply.

"I never intended to come to you like this."

*"Come to me?! But I thought he wanted to see Mandy? Or was that a slip of tongue? Or a trick of my mind?"*

"Maybe I should be on my way now." He yanked his wrist free from her hands, whirled around and made for the door.

She quickly grabbed his hands from the back, careful not to cause him further pain.

"Not yet. Allow me to administer first aid."

He glanced over his shoulders. "Thanks, I'll go to the school clinic."

"Yes, you sure will, but you need to get your first aid treatment." She gave him a look that she could only hope was reassuring.

He sucked in a deep breath and exhaled slowly. "Okay, if you insist."

"Yes, I sure do." Ifes let go of his hands so he could sit on one of the seats.

Finding the first aid box didn't take long. She immediately went to work, cleaning his injury cautiously.

*"Ifes, why don't you find out why he's here?"* Ifes tilted her head around to check if someone had been there with them all this while as she didn't hear or see the door open.

"W-what's wrong?" Ryan asked when she abruptly stopped treating him to look around for the person with the voice.

"Nothing!" Ifes smiled, taking back her attention to what she was doing, but this time, not fully. She began to ask herself questions. *Was it that he was headed here then he was attacked. Why did he not just head to the clinic? What was so important he had to risk himself to say it?*

*Okay Lord, I will. Help me. Let him talk.*

"Umm! You said you wanted to see me?" she asked, her eyes still focused on Ryan's bloated wrist, her fingers dabbing the swellings with cold compress.

"I came to apologize for all the wrong I've done to you from our freshman year," Ryan said in one breath. One would think he had crammed the sentence and was afraid he would forget his line if he didn't spill it fast enough.

Gen-gen! Ifesinachi froze. Her heartbeat increased so fast, it could be used for a drumming and dancing competition. She felt like someone poured both hot and cold water on her. He should be the one feeling this way. But why exactly? She didn't know. Was it that she was so excited? Or astonished? Or was it that she suddenly felt apoplectic? Probably. But hey! Why should she? Wasn't this the opportunity she had been waiting for all this time? Was this not what she wanted? To reconcile one day with Ryan, to see him give his life to Christ like Mandy, Avery and Bradley did.

*Oh, Father! Just take control, I haven't heard it all but I'm so excited right now that my heart could jump out of my body. Oh, Lord, take all the glory.*

Seeing that she wouldn't let him go down on his knees while apologizing, he sat back and started sobbing.

"I am a fool, a big fool! I'm so stupid, very stupid for having a wrong perception about you. I am the biggest fool on planet earth!"

"Shush! She placed her index finger on his lips. "Don't ever say that again, Ryan. You are one of the most wonderful people I have ever met."

"B-but why would you say that? After all of my meanness!" Ryan buried his face in his palm and wept some more.

Ifes patted his shoulder. "We all have a reason for all our actions."

"Yes, it all started back in our high school."

Oh! She could already guess that he wanted to tell her how it happened. What if she asked him not to bother telling her since she had heard it all from Mandy. She wanted to do that but decided to let him speak if that would help release whatever guilt he felt at that time.



"A Nigerian worked for my dad as his financial secretary, and his son was my classmate in Woodway Prep. He worked diligently for fifteen years under my dad, so my dad thought he knew him well enough to trust him with his finances.

"Sometimes, my dad even sent him as a Representative in some of his business meetings. His son, whose name was Emeka, was a dummy. Because of our close relationship with his family, my dad would always ask me to assist him in some of his school assignments, and help teach him what he didn't understand. That was because my squad of friends and I were part of the most brilliant students in our high school."

"My dad loved him like the brother he never had! Sometimes I even envied my dad because I also don't have a brother; I'm the only child of my parents. So you see, he was more than just a secretary to my dad."

Ryan looked up from his palm and tilted his head towards Ifes.

"Do you know what happened next?"

Ifes shook her head, nudging him to continue.

Ryan gritted his teeth and balled his swollen fists on his knee before continuing.

"He started embezzling my dad's money. Dad trusted him so much that he couldn't probe him. Because of this, my dad almost ran bankrupt."

"This man kept it clean, and even promised to help my dad with the investigation. My dad believed him, not knowing that he was doing everything to cover up his tracks."

"When my dad could bear it no more, he brought in the cops to investigate and find out who was embezzling his money. My dad was dumbfounded when reality hit him. He was disoriented for weeks after discovering that the one he loved as a brother betrayed him!"

"What scared my dad the most was that when he was convicted he swore to get back at my dad for sending him to jail."

"So, Mr. Miller, you'll stay with your son when you've made my children fatherless by sending me to jail, huh? I'll get back at you, I swear! I will destroy you and your family for doing this to me, I'll show you the true nature of where I am coming from!" he had threatened as he was being cuffed and pulled by the cops into their van."

"My mum consoled my dad, telling him it was an empty threat, and he will never have the opportunity to do that since he'll be spending many years in jail. My dad believed my mum

but little did we know that he was capable of doing what he said. I mean, those words weren't empty threats. We severed all ties with his family, but of course his son, Emeka, was still my classmate."

"Emeka set me up by stuffing hard drugs into my locker, and reported to the school that I had illegal drugs in my possession. Knowing how close I was to him, the school authorities had so many reasons to take his words into consideration. I was about to be expelled, but my saving grace was that the school chose to investigate the allegations before making any final decision."

"At that time my dad's image was almost finished. His rivals, whose children were in my school, got the information. They used it against him so that their businesses could thrive more than his."

"The investigation was done and I was vindicated while Emeka was expelled, sued to court and sentenced to prison. He was eighteen years of age at the time."

"That was the genesis of my hatred towards Africans. I've never been able to forget his last statement, when he said he will show my dad the true nature of where he was coming from. I presumed all Africans had the same evil nature."

Inhaling and exhaling deeply, Ryan continued, "When Mandy introduced you as her roommate, her friend, and said she wanted you to be part of our squad, I vehemently disapproved. Some of my friends were skeptical about it, but Anne-Marie was ok with it as well. I tried all I could to make them stay away from you. I thought what I was doing was right. All I wanted to do was to expose your true nature. I mean, the wrong perceived nature I had about you and all Africans. But here I am today and you forgive me swiftly like nothing ever happened between us."

Ifes held his hands and spoke softly to him. "I can't speak in defence for that man or for all Africans. That's because I know that there are good and bad people around the world. Talking about forgiveness, I don't have to hold any grudge against you." She paused for a while and continued.

"Ryan, I love you, but I want you to know that God loves you more than you know. No one forgives as well as he does."

Ryan drew back shaking his head. "I don't think I am one of those God would want to forgive. The reality is that I'm not one of those God will ever forgive. Even if God forgives me, I can never forgive myself."

Perplexed, Ifes asked, "Why?"

"I have done things you could never imagine I'd do."

She told him about the story of Paul in the Bible, just when she thought he was getting persuaded, she got another knock on the door. Ryan shifted uncomfortably.

## CHAPTER TWENTY-TWO

"Oh, no! God! God! Surely you won't let this happen. First, it was Skylar getting interrupted with the call. Now, this knock on the door is trying to prevent Ryan from giving his life to Christ today."

Ifes kept praying that the person who was at the door would abruptly turn around and walk away. Alas, the knock became persistent. Louder and louder, it rattled.

Seeing the person would not stop, she slapped her forehead, asking whoever it was to come in as she remembered the door was not locked.

Ryan jerked from his seat when the door opened and Mandy stepped in.

Mandy drew back, gasping as she spotted Ryan. She gave Ifes a swift look, then to Ryan, and looked away. No one spoke. The room was so quiet you could hear their heartbeats.

"Umm! I'll be on my way now." Ryan tilted his head and spoke nervously gazing at Ifes. "Thanks for your time," he stammered, spinning around and making for the door.

Mandy's gaze followed him until he slammed the door on his way out. Realization dawned on her. Ifes could have been sharing the gospel with him! She faced her roommate, giving her an apologetic look for any distractions she caused.

"He was actually on his way out," Ifes said, not wanting her to feel guilty about anything.

"Ifes!" Mandy tugged Ifes' hand from her side. "I'm sorry for the way I behaved towards you earlier. I'm sorry for walking out on you!"

"I guess I was angry, but my worry overshadowed my anger. It's good you're back." Ifes looked away but not before she noticed the puppy face Mandy gave her.

Ifes had to tell her all the nicest things she knew in the world to convince her that she wasn't angry.

Feeling convinced, her look changed to that of curiosity. About why Ryan was here. Reading her expression, Ifes went straight to giving her the answers. Mandy was elated after she elucidated everything to her. "Why didn't you tell me? I would have given my friend the hug I've not given him for a long time!"

Her friend! When last did Ifes hear Mandy call Ryan her friend? This day was such an exciting day for Ifes. Excited for what was coming, the future was looking bright now.

"I told you, Ifes, I told you! I told you that someday he'll see the difference in you." Mandy held her friend's hands in hers, giving her the look of confirmation.

Ifes waited for her excitement to taper before giving her the big news. Mandy's heart leaped for joy after telling her about the good news she got from her family.

"I can't believe this! Am I dreaming or what?" Mandy whirled around the dorm room, bellowing excitedly. "Ifes, please pinch me, let me be sure I'm not dreaming!" Mandy came close, stretching out her hand.

"Ouch!" Mandy winced when Ifes pinched a particular spot on her outstretched arms. "Why did you pinch me?"

"I only did what you asked me to do." Ifes smirked and she rolled her eyes.

"You know I didn't mean it, but never mind, I won't let you spoil my joy today. Come on, Ifes, I think we should party!" Mandy spread her hands like a bird released from its nest to fly. "Get dressed. I'll take you out. The treat's all on me."

"Yes!" Ifes thrust a fist in the air, reaching for her closet.

"Not too soon, girl. You have to dance first."

Ifes whirled around to see if she had truly heard that from Mandy.

Mandy grinned. "I mean, let's dance and praise the Lord. Wait a minute, I think I know the right song to play. Where's your music player? We will be dancing to one of my favorite songs."

"Over there." Ifes pointed towards her bed.

She bolted to Ifesinachi's bed, scooped up her music player, pressed the button, navigating through her music playlist. Amused, Ifes watched as she navigated past those songs she expected her to play, then stopped at a particular song list. It was a chain of music, though the first song was sung in English: but it was sung in the Nigerian highlife genre.

Watching her dance, Ifes remembered the first day they met, the day she told her the things she loved—dancing was one of them.

Seeing Ifes wasn't dancing with her, she whirled around and yanked her over, compelling her to start dancing. Ifes danced like she was going to dance away her life! She didn't know where to start. This was one of the great days of her life! As she expressed her gladness in various moves and grooves, she paid attention to the song lyrics, believing the lyrics would express her gratitude and her praise to God.

*He's a miracle working God,  
He's a miracle working God,  
He's the alpha and Omega,  
He's a miracle working God.*

*Oh, Lord how great thou art,  
Oh, Lord how great thou art,  
Great God, great God, great God.*

## CHAPTER TWENTY-THREE

Ryan drove straight to the college clinic as soon as he got out of Ifes and Mandy's dorm room. After getting treated, he felt the urge to drive to Bradley and Hunter's room.

As he kept driving, he thought of the duo and their childhood together as friends. He hissed hopelessly as the present came to mind. Things had totally changed. Their conversations. Their play. The way they encouraged each other and helped each other in times of need. Even their laughter. All had changed. Now, they spoke to each other like aliens from planets in alternate universes.

"And because of what?" "Because of who?" a sly voice bellowed in Ryan's head, countering his first question. Because of religion? Because of the African? Because of what he did to Mandy in the past?

Talking about that, who else knew about it? Mandy had promised to keep it a secret, never to tell anyone about it. She was capable of keeping to her words. She had given him assurance, but was that enough to give his heart peace of mind? Was it enough to wash away the guilt as though it never happened?

"No! Blame it all on Ifes. Blame her for coming between first you and Mandy, and now your other friends. She did this. That \*\*\*\*ing African caused this!" the accusing voice kept bellowing in Ryan's head, muddling his mind into a jumbled mess.

"Oh! shut up, shut the \*\*\*\* up!" he retorted to that voice as he gripped his steering wheel tighter. With a resolve he never knew he possessed, he made up his mind, right there and then, never to listen to or agree with the accusing voice again. What good had it done him? He had previously listened to the voice and was now facing the awful outcome. He had accused Ifes for a reason he now thought wasn't justifiable.

This was the same girl that, despite his ill-treatment towards her, got up from her seat that day at the library and came to his rescue. He remembered the way he felt as he sighted her in front of his reading table. Perplexed. Astonished. Dumbfounded. No words could describe what he felt as she offered a helping hand. Funny enough, the pointers she had given him had helped him during Dr Adams' test.

The same girl whom he had accused of exam malpractice finally proved him wrong. She had helped him out with the course he dreaded the most. Ryan stared at his reflection at his rearview mirror and felt crestfallen at what had become of him.

"No! no! This is not you, Ryan." Ryan kept shaking his head as he mumbled to himself. He swore to study people individually and never to judge them by other people's actions again.

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The next day, Tuesday.  
In the lecture hall.

Dr. Connie Smith stood in front of the large lecture hall speaking in his Southern accent to the class of students before him.

"In our previous lecture, we discussed multipolarity. Today, we will be talking about bipolarity." He adjusted his specs and peered at a few students seated in the front row.

"From our previous class, I told you that multipolarity is the equal distribution of military and economic power between more than two nation states."

The students nodded in agreement.

"This was the system of government that was practiced before World War II, which changed afterwards when the world experienced a heavy economic meltdown." He gestured with his hands and his facial expression.

"Now that was just to refresh your brain, let's move over to our topic of the day which is bipolarity. Bipolarity is the equal distribution of military and economic power among two nation states."

The lecturer paused and gave his students a piercing look to be sure that his definitions were sinking into their brains. He continued walking in front of the lecture hall as he gestured with his hands, still talking. The students listened keenly and furiously jotted down the important points as fast as they could.

"This was the system of government that was practiced between the United States of America and the Soviet Union which is the present Russia at the global stage after WWII. These two nation states were the world power after the war, their system of governance opposed each other and this resulted in unrest in Europe. The Soviet Union initiated communalism while the US initiated capitalism, and this leads us to our next topic, which is, 'Imperialism' the highest level of capitalism."



He tapped his electronic notepad as he continued speaking. "We will be delving into this topic in our next lecture."

Before the lecture ended, doctor Connie Smith went on to tell the Quakers of the advantages and disadvantages of the bipolarity system of government. He elucidated how it led to the Cold war, the building of the Berlin Wall and the pulling down. How the Cold war ended in 1991, which led to the unipolarity system of government. That, he added, was after the Soviet Union was dissolved.

"Students, my time is up, but like I earlier said, we shall be studying VI Lennon's theory, imperialism, the highest stage of capitalism in our next lecture. Thank you." Dr. Connie waved his hands in the air and flashed the students a smile as he walked out of the lecture hall.

Dr. Connie was the opposite of Dr. Adams. He was in his mid-thirties, six feet and four inches tall. He had black hair, tinted gray in some edges, and hazel eyes which were a striking, almost golden, shade of brown. He was one of the most handsome lecturers, and it was no wonder some of the students tripped for him.

As usual, students stood to leave the hall after Dr. Connie,

"Hey, Mandy, wait up!" Ifes called out to Mandy who was far ahead of her as she tried to keep up with Mandy's pace. Mandy didn't stop, or even turn to look at her, instead she stormed out of the lecture hall.

Ifes increased her pace as she ran after Mandy. In no time, she was out of the lecture hall as well.

"Ryan! Ryan! Ryan! Hey, Ryan!" Mandy called out as she swept past students, who were standing at the doorway, to Ryan who had already unlocked his car and was about to enter.

Ryan whirled around to see the figure who was calling and was now running towards him.

Mandy threw herself on Ryan pulling him to a tight embrace! "I'm so happy for you, Ryan. I'm so happy you've finally realised the truth!" Mandy pulled away from the hug, but still held him close. By then, Ifes had gotten close enough to hear their conversation.

Ryan opened his mouth but couldn't utter a word. Mandy decided to continue talking.

"Tell you what, I am organising a party on Friday. I was supposed to take Ifes out yesterday, but we were unable to go because she had to go to work at the library. I have decided to make it better by organising a party on Friday which, thankfully, is her off day. I'll be inviting all our friends, and I'd like you to join us."

"Umm! Umm!" Ryan was about to give a reply when Bradley's voice chimed in.

"What's up, buddies?"

"Oh! Bradley. It's good you're here so I can just invite you two at once," Mandy said.

"Okay, so what's the occasion?" Bradley leaned on Ryan's car folding his hands across his chest and crossing his legs.

"Ifes received good news from her family yesterday, so I'm organising a party to celebrate with her, and I would like you guys to join us on Friday."

"Oh, wow! That's pretty cool. We will definitely be there." Bradley grinned.

"We'll be expecting you guys by 7:00pm on Friday."

"Venue please?"

"Okay, the venue's..."

"Y'all know it's not cool to have a meeting without me." Hunter's voice drowned Mandy's sentence halfway.

They all tilted their heads to look at Hunter who was already standing with them.

"And which venue are ya talking of?" Hunter asked, in a tone that spoke impatience

"Hey, Hunter, relax!" Bradley said.

Hunter narrowed his eyes, giving him the look that read, "don't tell me that!"

"The venue is for a party. I'm organising one on Friday." Mandy placed her left thumb on Hunter's right shoulder.

"Party? Organising one?" Hunter looked genuinely surprised.

"Mmm hmm!" Mandy nodded affirmatively.

"But I thought Christians don't party?" Hunter arched an eyebrow.

Mandy and Ifes grinned. "Well, why don't you attend one on Friday and see for yourself," Ifes said.

"Oh, definitely!" Hunter laughed. "I'd like to attend a Christian party, it could even change my mind and make me start going to church." Hunter gave a sardonic laugh.

"Alright, this means I'll be seeing you guys then?" Mandy chimed in, ignoring Hunter's sarcasm.

"Yes," Bradley replied while Ryan nodded his head.

"Wait! is he coming along?" Hunter glared at Ryan.

"Okay girls, Hunter and I have to run along, we have something to attend to before our next lecture." Bradley yanked Hunter as they walked away.

"Would you mind dropping us off?" Mandy asked Ryan when she probably noticed the change in Ryan's facial expression. She knew Ryan was obviously hurt by Hunter's question.

"No no! I wouldn't mind at all!"

"Alright then." The duo opened Ryan's car door and slammed it after they entered. Ryan slid in his key into the ignition and the car engine roared to life.

Mandy and Ifes did all they could to make Ryan cheer up to be free to talk to them. Mandy desperately wanted everything to return to normal; Ifes also wanted the same. They tried all they could, but their efforts yielded little or no success. They didn't give up. Instead decided to live to fight another day. Someday somehow, they believed Mandy and her squad of friends would reunite, and everything would become normal or better than it was.

## CHAPTER TWENTY-FOUR

Woodway, Texas.

"What? This is impossible, this can't be happening!" a woman bellowed at the top of her voice after receiving an unpleasant report from the caller at the other side of her phone.

"You mean Ryan is well and on his feet?" The woman bellowed again after a while. "Send me the pictures you said you secretly took of him."

The woman disconnected the call, let out a string of curses before scrolling to her Gmail. Seeing Ryan's pictures, her head began to pound. She quickly navigated to her contact list and put a call across to the thug she had given the job to.

The leader of the gang sat in his house anticipating his remaining balance when a call came through. He smiled derisively, eager to pick the call.

He knew they didn't do their job well but he would stick to his plans with the guys. After all, it wasn't their fault that they couldn't do their job as they were asked to. If anyone was to blame here, it was her.

She had insisted that they carry out the task inside the college even when they asked to do it outside. She should even be applauding them for a job well done because they had to risk their own lives to carry out such a hideous act in such a well secured environment.

He would stick to their plans and lie to the woman. By the time she discovered the truth, he would have gotten his money and fled.

"Hello," a woman's voice poured in from the other side of his phone.

"Hello, Ma'am," The thug replied cheerfully. The calmness in his voice enraged the woman.

She inhaled and exhaled slowly to help regulate her boiling blood. If that was how he wanted it, then she would match him toe to toe.

"Yeah, how are you?"

"Oh how could I not be great after yesterday's job was well done!" He laughed.

"Alright then, I'll send you your money as soon as I drop the call."

"Oh haha! I knew I could always rely on ya, Ma'am. Feel free to call me anytime."

He was expecting a reply from his client, but when she didn't say a word, he continued.

"It was nice doing' business with ya, Ma'am."

Okay," The woman said and disconnected the call.

Okay!" The thug said, mimicking her voice.

"Okay, that was only what she could say to me, hmm! She is so rude, not even a proper thank you." he continued saying a lot of awful things about her when he got a notification on his phone. Smiling, he scooped up his phone from his side. The dumb old hag had finally sent him his money.

He unlocked his phone and instead of the anticipated credit alert message, it was a new mail. He muttered a foul word and navigated to his email. He shot out of his seat as he saw the pictures his client had sent him with a short note.

The woman stared blankly at her empty cup of coffee and without a word, she stood and went straight to her windows, moving the curtains aside. It was nightfall already. The stars and the moon brightened the dark sky.

Staring at the sky through her window, she mumbled to herself, "I can see you really have a good star, Ryan."

She shook her head. "Or should I say your father now? Well, I hunt stars and destroy them no matter how lucky they are and that is what I'll do to you, Ryan!"

She dropped back the curtains in place, whirled around and walked back to her table. She sat down on a seat adjacent to the table and started reminiscing about all the misfortunes that had befallen her. Curse that Mr William Miller!

"It's all your fault. It's all your fault my life went out of trajectory. It's all your fault that I can't boast of a family of my own. It's all your fault that I am without a child or husband."

The woman took up her empty cup of coffee and smashed it to the wall, groaning angrily. The mug shattered into a thousand micropieces.

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7:00pm, Friday of the same week.

UPenn.

Mandy had invited the other guys who were in her clique. The party was to start in thirty minutes' time. Mandy had rented the entire second floor of one of the restaurants in the college and used it as the venue for the party she organised for Ifes and her squad of friends.

"Here. We. Are!" Mandy said with a musical flourish. "Hope you like my little surprise?" Mandy asked, wriggling her eyebrows as she untied the white handkerchief she used in blindfolding Ifesinachi's eyes.

Ifes fluttered her eyes, clearing the sparks of light that stunned her when the blindfold was removed.

The medium-sized hall was painted a shade of lemon green that almost looked yellow.

The curtains and drapes were hung in perfect harmony, showing their elegance, sparkling in the light glowing from the pristine chandeliers.

Flowers and curly ribbons were used to decorate the hall. Disco lights danced around in small dots of kaleidoscopic colors.

On the left side were round tables with drinks and other refreshments arranged on them.

On the right were tables for two, where each person could eat with their partners.

The dancing stage, where mini-speakers and other wired equipment were fixed, was very inviting for groove-lovers.

In the middle, there stretched out a lush, red carpet from the beginning to the end of the hall.

Ifes were awed. These looked so exquisite and expensive.

"Oh, wow! This is more than a surprise! This is epic!" Ifes exclaimed, eyes wide as she gaped the medium-sized hall.

"You like it?" Mandy asked with a sense of pride.

"What are you saying? I love it!" Ifes took Mandy's hands in hers and held it warmly. Her eyes were glassy, brimming with unshed tears of gratitude. "Thank you so much Mandy. I don't know how to appreciate this!"

"Shush! I should be the one appreciating you and not the other way around, you hear?"

"But for what?"

"You told me about Jesus. You gave me the greatest gift. I never dreamt of having such a blessing in my whole life."

"No way, Mandy, no way! I refused to take any glory or credit that belongs to God. Jesus gave you the gift of salvation. God is the legend here and not I."

"But he used you. What if I hadn't known you? What if you had not told me about him?"

"I was privileged to be the vessel he used to reach out his undying love towards you. I mean, he could have done it through anyone. Trust me Mandy, he would have."

"Yes, that's true. You know, I remember the first day I met you. I thought I was just having a regular roommate. I never knew God was bringing someone from the other side of my world just to show me how much he would go for me to know the extent of his love."

Mandy paused, looked straight in Ifes' eyes and said with sincerity, "Ifes, I want you to know that you are the sister I never had, and I love you!"

"I love you, too, Mandy!" Ifes replied, smiling.

"I must confess, your dress looks perfect on you."

Mandy and Ifes both wore a pink dinner gown and matching white hair scrunchie. Pink and white had always been Ifesinachi's favorite colour. Knowing how special that day was for her, Mandy had suggested they dressed in that twin outfit. They also wore dangling earrings and bracelets that matched the colour of their high-heeled shoes.

"Oh, really?" Mandy beamed. "You think he would like it?"

Perplexed at that question, Ifes asked, eyebrows furrowed, "Who exactly are you talking about?"

"No, No! No one in particular, I'm just asking if my friends would like it!" Mandy stammered.

From the way she stammered, Ifes knew she was lying, and she was getting suspicious. Who was the 'he' she was talking about? Was it Ryan? Or Hunter? It couldn't be Bradley because she had never noticed any current between them.

"Is that so?" Ifes gave Mandy a suspicious look.

Mandy laughed sheepishly, blushing as she did. "Sure, umm... Why not, let me go and see if the guys are downstairs. They should be on their way now," she said, gesticulating erratically. Mandy wanted to scurry away but halted when the door opened.

"No, I didn't!"

"Yes, you did!"

"I know I didn't!"

"Yes, you did!"

"I said no, I didn't!"

"Of course you know you did!"

Mandy stared, in trance-like mode, at the two figures who were arguing as they waltzed in. Avery and Ayo didn't even notice Mandy and Ifes as they were so engrossed in their raillery.

"Hahaha! I know you would eventually agree that you did," Avery said with a triumphant expression.

"It's not like I agreed with you. I just had to let the matter go," Ayo said jokingly, and their banter ensued again, this time with a higher tempo.

"Can you imagine?" Ifes cringed internally. She wanted to scream out loud if that was what it would take for these guys to notice Mandy's and her presence.

The reaction Mandy was displaying kept her at bay. Why was she gazing at them wide-eyed and mouth agape?

Seeing Mandy like that, Ifes wished it was a beach party so she could scoop sand and pour it into her mouth.

Like the switching on of the proverbial light bulb, a brilliant idea dropped into Ifes' head.



She carefully unzipped her handbag, smirking in mischief, she brought out her pen. Aiming, she threw it straight into Mandy's mouth. Mandy let out an ear-piercing sound that finally made Avery and Ayo notice their presence.

Avery and Ayo burst out laughing at Mandy when they got the knowledge of what happened.

"You jerk!" Mandy glared at her friend. "I am going to get back at you for doing this to me!" she said, spluttering as she pulled out the saliva-coated pen from her mouth.

Ifes ignored her, joining the duo to laugh out her guts, tears peeking out of the sides of her eyes.

After she recovered from her laughing frolic, she moved close and hunkered down beside her whispering to her ears, "Do you want me to tell them you were staring at them a while back, eyes and mouth agape?"

Mandy didn't say a word as her face became as white as a sheet. Mission accomplished, Ifes stood, smiled sardonically, and walked away.

The door flew open. Ian and Anne-Marie walked in side by side. Behind them, Skylar, Megan and Chini walked in. Ryan entered last of all.

Anne-Marie called out to Ian, "Oh! Ian, please come over here. Come take a look at this design. Isn't it beautiful? What do you think? I'm thinking of using it for my next birthday. Oh! This is lovely."

The door flung open again and closed with a thud as Hunter walked in behind Bradley. Everyone jumped, frightened at Hunter's display.

"Hey! Fear not. It's your boy, Hunter. Who missed me here?"

"Sometimes you act like a fool. I can't help but wonder if you are truly my brother!" Bradley playfully gave Hunter a punch in his stomach. Hunter winced as everyone laughed.

At exactly 7:30pm, Mandy climbed into the center stage. Her pink gown glimmered underneath the rays of the chandelier light. "Okay guys, it's time, so will we begin the party now?"

Hunter smirked as others replied cheerfully. "I know I am here for a boring party," he mumbled, but it was loud enough that Ifes could hear it.

"It looks like you are a fool indeed."

Perplexed, Hunter whirled around to see Ifes walking away to Ryan's table.

As the party went on, Ifes confirmed her suspicions about Mandy. She couldn't help but notice the way her roommate gazed at one of the guys. For how long had this been going on in Mandy's head? And she didn't say anything about it? Was Mandy afraid of her reaction when she found out or what?

It was quite obvious. Mandy's gaze followed him around once in a while. She never failed to take advantage of any opportunity she had to talk and laugh with him.

The party ended. Everyone was exhausted to their bones and more than eager to go home. They all thanked Mandy for the exciting bash, said their goodbyes, and returned to their various dorm rooms.

## CHAPTER TWENTY-FIVE

Ifes noticed Mandy's flushed face as they entered their dorm room. Ifes spoke but Mandy didn't join her in the conversation. She asked a question but Mandy was too engrossed in her thoughts and didn't answer.

"Mandy!" Ifes called.

Mandy jerked slightly at her friend's tone of voice before regaining her composure. "Yes, Ifes."

"Are you in love with Ayo?"

Mandy froze and her heartbeat skyrocketed. She had been discovered. There was no way out for her now.

"Mandy!" Ifes called out when her roommate gave her a silent answer.

"Yes, Ifes." Mandy replied but didn't look at her friend.

"Are you in love with Ayo?"

Mandy's lips trembled but she had to answer her friend anyway. After all, you could only die once, so why not get done with the whole thing now and face the outcome.

Ifes wanted to ask the same question for the third time but Mandy had begun to give her the answer she requested.

"No! I mean yes, I love him."

Ifes did not utter a word. Mandy sighed and continued talking.

"I'm sorry I could not muster the courage to tell you." Mandy looked apologetically at Ifes.

"I've seen how close you two are to each other and was afraid that you felt the same way about him. I tried, Ifes. I tried to keep my feelings at bay. But the more I tried, the more it continued to escalate. I can't do this anymore!" Mandy covered her face with her palm, sobbing.

"I can't continue to bottle up my feelings. It's so much that I feel it would make me burst!"

Ifes gazed at her friend pitifully and after a while reached out and patted her shoulder.

"I love him. I love him so much and you've got to understand please!" Mandy continued in between sobs.

"Relax, Mandy, I do understand."

Mandy looked up to meet her friend's gaze. "What about your feelings for him?"

"What feelings are you talking about? Ayo is just like a brother to me and I can assure you that there's nothing more than that between us."

Mandy continued staring at her roommate, wanting to get more assurance.

"And if you also want to know how I feel about you two, then I'd like you to understand that it's your life and you are free to do things however you decide."

Mandy stood and hugged her friend so tight that Ifes felt she was being squashed. "Thank you for not having issues with this. Thank you! Oh, thanks for understanding!" Mandy squealed as she squished Ifes some more.

Finding her breath and voice a few moments after Mandy let go of her, Ifes said, "You don't have to thank me Mandy, but you are welcome anyway. I think your only headache now is to find out if he feels the same way."

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Two weeks later,

It was the last Sunday of the section and the Christian Quakers were excited about it. It was usually a great service and the students always looked forward to it.

Avery, Mandy, Chini and Ifes got dressed for church and made for Bradley's dorm room. Bradley answered the door when he heard a knock.

"Hi, ladies." Bradley stood at the front of the door which was now ajar. "You're all looking great."

"Thank you," they chorused, flashing smiles at him.

"Oh, Bradley, we are not that old, so you can just refer to us as girls. Calling us, particularly me, a lady makes me feel like an old coot." Avery spoke with a slight hint of disgust.

"Guess what?" Bradley asked, ignoring Avery's protest.

"What?" the girls asked simultaneously.

"I've got some good news."

"Okay, we are all ears," Avery said.

"Why don't you come in and see for yourselves." Bradley stepped beside the door leaving enough space for the ladies to walk in.

Bradley closed the door after them and gestured towards Hunter who was dressing up. Without a word, they read the message and began clapping in glee.

"My brother has been saying a lot of exciting stuff about today's service so I decided to see for myself," Hunter said, scratching the back of his neck coyly.

As he spoke, Ifes hoped that he meant to also give his life to Christ in the church. Bradley put a call across to Ayo letting him know that the girls were in his dorm room already, waiting for them.

"I'll be there in a jiffy," Ayo said and Bradley disconnected the call. There was a knock on the door after a while and Mandy stood to answer the door.

"That must be Ayo," Bradley said, reaching the door before Mandy in a couple of long strides. Bradley yanked the door open and was a bit taken aback to see Ryan in front of his door.

"Now wait a minute, Ryan! I know you ain't a morning person, so where are you off to at this time of the day?"

"Umm! I- I was thinking if I could come to church with you guys today, if you don't mind?" Ryan answered nervously.

Bradley grinned. "Of course we don't mind, come on inside."

"What's he doing here?" Hunter asked as his gaze fell on Ryan.

"He's coming with us to church."

"Oh my world! I can't believe this!" Mandy bolted towards Ryan and threw herself on him excitedly.

Hunter sneered at his twin brother and the ladies who were all chatting and giggling excitedly. He stood abruptly, went to his closet and started undressing.

Bradley saw him first and his face turned pale. "W-What are you doing Hunter?" Bradley stammered.

"Sometimes I just can't help but feel that God could be unjust and doesn't know what he is doing."

"But why would you say such a thing?" Chini asked in apallation.

"How could he come here and request to join you guys to church and you get so excited about it?" Hunter pointed towards Ryan.

They all shot him a confused look.

"What's the meaning of this, Hunter?" Bradley asked.

Ayo entered into the heat of the tension unawares. Mandy spotted him first. His entry had been so quiet.

"Well, I'm simply saying that if he is coming along with you to church, then I don't think the church is good enough for people like me."

Bradley wanted to speak but Hunter waved his hands in dismissal. "If he's coming along then you can just go ahead without me."

Ayo was perplexed by the scene unfolding before him. After their fruitless persuasion, they all left for the church service without Hunter.

"Umm! I don't think it's proper coming to church with you guys," Bradley said when they were about to drive.

"Oh, not again!" Mandy muttered under her breath.

Ryan gazed up at Bradley. "I think I should stay back so that Hunter can come along with you guys."

Bradley placed hands on Ryan's shoulders. "You don't have to. It was Hunter's choice to stay back."

"But it was my fault."

"No, no, Ryan. Please don't blame yourself for anything. Hunter would come around someday." Ryan searched Bradley's face to be sure he wasn't angry that his brother did not come along but Bradley gave him a reassuring smile.

Twenty minutes before the kick-off time, the church hall was packed full with anticipating Quakers. It was the last Sunday and also the service both Christians and non-Christians loved to attend because of the special performances.

The students loved the ballet, dance, drama and music presentations, but mostly comedy. It was usually the last program before the choir came up for their ministration.

"Ladies and gentlemen, please join me to welcome the choir for another great, awesome and exciting ministration!" The coordinator said and the choir were ushered to the stage with a resounding ovation by the Quakers.

The choir did a little display to amuse the students before singing.

"Praise the Lord!" Ian's voice echoed through the speakers.

The students yelled back a hallelujah that soared to the height of the lofty ceiling of the church auditorium.

"This is a sweet and special day for all of us, and today, the choir has decided to do something different. We will be presenting an acapella song."

The students gave a thunderous clap as they screamed at the top of their voices.

Ian continued talking. "We believe that as you listen to this song, you'll also get the message."

"Amen!" The congregation replied.

*My only hope is you, Jesus,*

*My only hope is you By Keith Lancaster & The Acappella Company.*

As the choir sang to the part that said, "All that I need is you", students who knew they needed Jesus but didn't have him began coming out to surrender their lives to Christ.

Ryan wanted to do the same but his feet felt clammy and numb. He knew he didn't have Jesus, and he knew he needed Jesus.

Bradley who had joined the ushering department stood at a particular point gazing at Ryan and observed how his body was trembling, how perspiration broke out on his brows. He walked towards Ryan and placed his right hand on Ryan's left shoulder. "You want to go out there?"

Ryan nodded his head affirmatively as he was unable to utter a word. His throat had gone dry and he was battling with his inner turmoil.

Bradley held his hands gently. "Come on, I'll walk you down the aisle."

Ryan looked uncertain.

"Come on Ryan, it's not that difficult. I'll walk you down."

"Thank you," was all Ryan could manage as he clasped his hands with Bradley's and stood.

Anne-Marie saw Bradley walking Ryan down the aisle and wished she could do the same but felt she dared not. Her gaze shifted to Ian who was adding libbing as the choir sang and thought how beautiful he was. She loved him. She knew she belonged with him. Each time she looked at him it always made her heart melt.

"Oh! Ian, how I love you so!"

She cried as the congregation cried. The congregation cried because they felt the glorious power of God but she cried because of Ian.

Ian's eyes flickered to the congregation and dropped on Anne-Marie and was distracted for a split second with the way she looked at him crying. He saw something that flickered in her eyes that he couldn't decipher. They were just friends but he didn't understand the soft spot he was beginning to develop for her.



"Holy Spirit, take control, please be with her and help her through whatever difficulties she might be passing through," Ian prayed in his heart and disengaged from her gaze.

The congregation looked up the lyrics at the projector and joined the choir to sing.

While the others sang all they needed was Jesus, Anne-Marie sang all that she needed was Ian.

As they sang their only hope was in Jesus, she sang her only hope was in Ian.

They sang their only peace was in Jesus but she sang that her peace was with Ian alone.

And she declared the same with her joy when others sang their only joy was in Jesus.

## CHAPTER TWENTY-SIX

The next academic session,

Mandy, Ifes and everyone in their squad prepared to return for the new academic section. Upon Mandy's insistence, Ifes had travelled with Mandy and celebrated Thanksgiving with her family. Ayo had politely declined Mandy's invitation to come with them to Texas for the Thanksgiving break. Now the duo were about returning to college and decided to put a call across to him to inform him of their coming.

"Why don't you call him with your cell phone," Ifes said, fully conscious of her friend's feelings for Ayo.

Since the day she learnt of her friend's feelings, she had created a little distance between herself and Ayo. Most times when they both went out with Mandy for a picnic or any other hangout, she would stylishly stay out of their conversation and when Ayo invited her in, she would speak little and back out again. She had intentionally stayed away from him to give her friend a chance with him but she wasn't sure if her efforts were yielding success. Well, she should give it some time.

Ayo was bent over his reading table, studying the Bible, when a call came in. He picked up his phone, looked at the caller ID and didn't hesitate to answer the call when he saw it was Mandy.

"Hello, pretty one."

He heard Mandy chuckle through his phone's speaker.

"I'll take that as a flattery," Mandy said although she wished he meant it.

Ayo laughed. "You think I'm joking, right?"

"How are you?" Mandy asked, ignoring his question.

"I'm fine, just missing everyone. I can't wait to see you guys."

"We're coming back today."

"Oh, wow! Seriously?"

"Yes."

"This means I'm expecting you guys anytime from now?"

"Umm, yeah."

"Alright then, I'll be waiting." Ayo said and they both disconnected the call.

Ayo was elated with the news of their return. He will not only be seeing the guys today, but he will also be seeing the lady he had fallen in love with but haven't had the courage to tell all this while.

How many times? How many times had he attempted to tell her of his feelings but his courage failed him? Now, he was determined and nothing was going to stop him. He could only hope and pray that she felt the same way for him.

"Oh, God! Please make her love me. Please, make her see how much I love and am willing to go for her. Oh! How I wish I could open my heart to her, so she could see just how much I love and respect her!" And he loved her indeed. He'd missed her.

As the flight took off from Waco regional airport, Mandy wanted so much to be in UPenn. She wanted to set her eyes on Ayo again in person. She had missed him. When he called her pretty one, it had made her pulse go wild.

Ifes had asked her to pray for God's direction to the right person and at the right time, but right now she couldn't see past what she felt for him.

"Oh, God! Please help me because I don't know what to pray for right now."

How could she pray and ask God to take Ayo away from her life if he was not his will for her? Was that also part of Christianity or her friend's sentiment?

Ayo received his friends at the airport and they were all happy to reunite again.

"My man!" Hunter slapped Ayo's back.

"Handsome as ever," Ayo replied, taking his hands for a handshake.

They all exchanged pleasantries before leaving for the college. As they drove to the college, Ayo's eyes were more fascinated by the glorious sight of the girl he had fallen in love with. Why? She seemed to have grown much more beautiful, with her sparkling smile that matched her beautiful and captivating eyes.

"God help me!" Ayo wiped off perspiration from his face with his hands.

Someone tapped him slightly on his shoulders. "Is everything okay?"

He tilted his head to see Mandy's concerned gaze. "Yes, thanks for asking."

Mandy wasn't satisfied with his answer but decided to be quiet.

Three weeks later, Ayo stood, went to his closet, picked out his nicest outfit and donned it. Smiling, he yanked out his phone from his side pocket and put a call across to Ifes.

"Hello," Ifesinachi's voice chimed through his phone's speaker.

"How are you?"

"Is someone spying on me?"

Ayo laughed. "So I shouldn't ask after a friend again?"

"Hmm! Oya go straight to the point and tell me why you called because I know you'd never call without a reason."

Ayo laughed louder. "So you think you know me that much?"

Indeed, she had really studied him. Being casual friends, he knew he should always give reasons why he called.

"Are you free this afternoon, Ifes?"

"Hmmm... Yes."

"I was thinking if we could have lunch this afternoon."

"Just you and I," he added, making it clear that a third-party wasn't needed.

When she didn't say anything, he continued, "Please na!"

"Okay, I'll be ready in half an hour," Ifes said before she thought better of it. "What of Mandy?" she wanted to ask.

"Alright then. I'll be waiting," Ayo said and disconnected the call.

He stood, looked himself over in the mirror before stepping out of his dorm room.

They ate their food halfway before Ayo decided to speak up what was in his mind.

"I'm in love with you, Ifes."

Ifes' fork and knife abruptly dropped from her hands to the plate. No word could explain how Ifes felt hearing those words from the one she never expected to say them.

Ayo reached out across the table and held her now-slightly-trembling hands in his. "I'm falling in love with you."

She wondered if this was real or a dream. But how could this be? After everything, why didn't he notice her friend's feelings for him? Ayo finished speaking and was now expecting an answer from her.

Ifes sat, staring. How would she decline his proposal without hurting him? How could she tell him that her best friend, who was like a sister, was in love with him? She hissed quietly, hopelessly, knowing there was no way out. She would have to give him the blunt answer no matter how much it hurt.

Ayo went back to his dorm room crestfallen and made for his bed. His roommate gave him a concerned look. "Are you okay?"

He tilted his head to look at his roommate. "Yes, Kelly, I'm fine." But no, his head was pounding, his heart in turmoil, his eyes moist, and his emotions in a total mess.

"Oh, God! Help me!" He had fallen in love for the first time in his life, and the lady he had fallen in love with had declined his proposal. It was crazy. Was this how other guys like him felt when they got a no from their belles? He wasn't just hurting because of the disappointment of the rejection, but also the heartbreak.

Someone tapped him. He turned on his back to see his roommate standing beside his bed with a cup of coffee in hand.

"You don't look ok, my friend. Maybe this will help," Kelly said, handing him the cup of coffee.

Ayo sat up straight in his bed. "Thank you." He stretched out his hands to receive the cup of coffee.

"You are welcome. I'm all ears if you wish to talk about it."

He looked at Kelly and wanted to ask if he had ever fallen in love and how he felt about it but abruptly decided against it.

"I'm fine, really," Ayo said, shoving his hurt down his heart. Kelly gave him a skeptical glance before walking to his bed.

He drank his coffee in one gulp. Kelly came back, collected the cup from him and made for the dishwasher.

"I'm sorry I'm stressing you."

Kelly waved his hand over his shoulder. "This is no stress my friend. Let me serve you. It's my pleasure."

Ayo laid back on his bed, staring blankly at the ceiling.

"Oh, God! Precious Holy Spirit, I knew that if I had sought your guidance, you would have directed me to someone who wouldn't say no. Nevertheless, I still bring this up to you. Help me. And if it is your will, let her go over my proposal tonight and give me a positive answer tomorrow morning. If not, help me to get over these feelings I have for her in Jesus name, Amen!"

Ayo slept that night with a heavy heart, and woke up the next day feeling peace. And that was the answer to his prayers. He would continue to take Ifes as a sister and a friend as he looked forward to the direction of the Holy Spirit about the right person for him.

In answer to his prayers, that morning; God had spoken to him during his morning devotion from the book of Proverbs 3:5. Trust in the LORD with all thine heart; and lean not unto thine own understanding. 3:6 In all thy ways acknowledge him, and he shall direct thy paths.

Although he was a Christian, he knew he didn't follow the instruction in that particular scripture to the letter. This was mostly the reason why he struggled and went through a lot of things which the Lord did not promise him in His word. He made a resolve to learn to seek God's face in everything, in every way of his life. He was certain God would direct his paths.

## CHAPTER TWENTY-SEVEN

Two weeks later,

Ifes stood from her bed and went straight to Mandy's reading table. It was almost 3:30pm on Friday. The Quakers were done with their lectures for the day.

Mandy had gone out with her friends. Her roommate had invited her to join them for the hangout. She had declined for no just cause. Now she felt bored, regretting that she had declined her friend's invitation. She made herself comfortable on the seat adjacent to Mandy's reading table and reached for her roommate's laptop.

She turned on the laptop and didn't know what to do with it. She played music but it didn't soothe her. She watched videos, but it still didn't help. Slapping her forehead, she browsed the internet, but it wouldn't suffice.

She stretched out her hand to the left side of the reading table, and grabbed a novel to read. As she flipped through the pages, she felt as though her body split into two and a part of her was already traveling back to Africa. She could see herself crossing the Atlantic ocean and the Bermuda triangle. "What nonsense!" She hissed heavily and tossed the novel back on the reading table. *This is what you bargained for, Ifes. Live with it.*

She stood, turned around to walk back to her bed when her gaze fell on the black cover Bible which was on her reading table. She decided to read her Bible instead of laying idle on her bed, maybe that could help.

She reached for her Bible, opened it and saw the church tracks she collected and had not distributed them because of the hectic school activities.

Grinning slightly, she decided to go share the tracks instead of sitting and doing nothing in her dorm room. She brought out the tracks from her Bible and counted them. They were thirty-five. At least, this will keep her busy until Mandy returns with her friends.

She carefully placed back the tracks in the middle of her Bible and tossed it on her reading table. She said a short prayer, asking the Holy Spirit to direct her to the people to whom she should give the tracks, that those words written on it would change their lives in vast ways.

Stepping away from her reading table, she went into the kitchen, made straight for the coffee maker and made herself a cup of coffee.



She moved towards the cabinets at the left side of the kitchen to take out coffee creamer. She pulled out one of the drawers and didn't see it. She started pulling out the drawers one after the other before she realised they had run out of coffee creamer and other groceries. She would go to the grocery store on her way returning from her evangelism. For now, she would have to take her coffee black.

She finished making her coffee and brought out a mug from the cabinet at the right side of the kitchen, and poured herself a cup before spinning around to the mini dining table in the kitchen. She finished drinking, took her mug to the dishwasher, and turned on the water. After washing, she took it back to the cabinet and stepped out of the kitchen to her closet.

She stared at her box of clothes for a while contemplating what to put on. She finally brought out a Jeans skirt, a pink top and a pair of white sandals. She dressed up, took up her Bible and tracks, and stepped out of her dorm room.

She walked freely on the college alleyway, sharing the tracks to students who came her way. Some students received the mini book and thanked her, some politely rejected it, while some threw it back at her.

Ifes kept walking till she saw an oak tree that silhouetted against one of the halls close to the Students' Union building and decided to go rest under it for a while. She sat down and dropped her Bible beside her, enjoying the cool breeze from the tree.

"Oh my world! What a hot day this is!" she exclaimed, relieved to be out of the scorching sun. She opened her Bible, brought out her tracks and counted them. There were five more tracks remaining.

"Hmm! So five more to go!" She exclaimed excitedly, waving the booklets in her hands. "Thank you, Jesus. All glory to you."

Since she was close to the Students' Union building, she decided to sit there and wait for any student that would come her way to give the booklet.

Ifes' eyes were fastened on the college alleyway as she watched three students coming towards the tree under which she sat. There were two male and one female students.

There was something that disturbed her about the boys. Their facial expression changed slightly when they noticed her looking at them, but they ignored her and kept walking towards the tree.

From their reactions, she wasn't sure if they were just coming towards the tree or to see her.

As they drew closer, One of the boys glowered at her when he saw the Bible in her hands. The only female student among them snorted. The last among the trio scowled.

Ifes flashed them a grin ignoring their expressions. They gave her a look that clearly showed her that she was intruding, before taking their seats at the opposite side of the tree.

She clearly got the message when the boys sat close to each other and the only lady amongst them was sitting inches away. She repeatedly stole glances their way and looked away when she felt she was about to be discovered. She couldn't help but wonder at their unfriendly demeanor.

"Ifes, beloved, why don't you share the tracks to the three of them." Ifes stood to do her Lord's bidding.

"Hi, guys!" she said, opening her Bible.

They tilted their heads to look at her, but didn't say anything.

"This is what I have for you. I believe you will enjoy reading it." She stretched out her hands to the trio.

One of the boys laughed sardonically.

"What the—!" the girl mumbled.

"Thanks, but we don't need it. We are also Christians and we will read books from our church."

*Oh, Holy Spirit! Touch their hearts and make them see the light.*

"Good to hear that, umm! But this book is actually a non-denominational book."

"Of course, a non-denominational pamphlet condemning and discriminating," the female said in a harsh tone, scowling at Ifes.

Ifes was perplexed at the lady's sudden outburst.

"I assure you that this book is not discriminating or condemning." Ifes wanted to say more but the lady cut her off.

"You are a full-time liar!"

"Chloe, leave her alone," the first guy, seemingly the most mature of the lot, said as he stroked the lady's shoulder. "She could even be worse than the \*\*\*\*\* that spoke to you in the last session."

"W—who spoke to you in the last academic section?" Ifes was curious to know who this unknown person was and what seed had been planted that could cause such hostility from the trio.

The lady laughed and clapped her hands. "Our church girl wants to know what her fellow church member did and said to me!"

"Chloe, leave her and let's get outta here."

"No, Israel! Since she wants to know, I'll tell her."

The lady whirled around to look at Ifes. "First, let me introduce myself and the guys with me. My name's Chloe Gilstrap. This is Israel Gilstrap, my only brother. And finally, This is Michael Scott, my brother's lover." Chloe looked at Ifes' face and was perplexed when she didn't see the look of condemnation. She decided to press her on. "I also have a female lover and her name is Alexandria McCoy."

At this point, Ifes was a bit taken aback but refused to show it. She pressed her lips together and tightened her grip on her Bible. *Lord help me.*

"Alexandria and I love each other so much and it's the same with my brother and his lover here. This is just a preamble. Now let me go straight and tell you what your ears have been itching to hear."

## CHAPTER TWENTY-NINE

Flashback.

Chloe walked aimlessly along the college alleyway. She was confused about what she was doing. Was she doing the wrong thing or the right thing? Each time she returned from her lover's dorm room, her conscience always pricked her.

It had been four months. Four whole months of being in a relationship with someone with the same gender, but she could still not get her heart to agree with her decision to be a lesbian. After all, this was what she chose. It wasn't like she was compelled into doing it. Some circumstances had prompted it, though, but what did it matter? This was a free world where everyone had the liberty to choose the life they wanted to live, and she had chosen this for herself.

Speaking of choice, was it not the wrong choice her mother made that twisted her life into this tangled mess?

Her mother was a good and loving Christian, slow to anger, wise as a serpent, quiet as a dove. She could be referred to as one of the perfect women in the world. But her father, Oh, her father was the most useless thing that had ever happened to her mother, or so she thought.

Chloe's eyes were moist as she remembered all the awful things her mother passed through in the hands of her father.

"Oh, it hurts! It hurts so much to have a worthless man as your father!"

And it hurt her mother more that Chloe hated her father. It hurt her even more that she could call him names and not feel remorseful about it.

What had become of Chloe? The mummy's girl, the Christian child that would grow up and be one of the great women in the world like her mother. Chloe remembered how she and her brother had trailed their mother's foot step in loving God, how she had raised prayer points for her father during morning devotions and night prayers.

Did God not specifically say marriage was between man and woman? And she and her brother were now doing the opposite. All because of what? Because of who? Who was the cause of everything? Who else but the man she had grown to know as her father.

Her parents' marriage had terrified her to the bone. Her mother, always a good and submissive wife. Her father, always the nagging husband drinking, complaining about everything, and never failing to use his hand on her mother, even in public.

She remembered her high school days when her father had slapped and called her mother names in front of her classmates who came to visit her for their homework. The news had spread like wildfire in school.

Chloe had never felt so humiliated in her life. She hadn't been able to raise her head high after that day in school.

She began to question the God of her mother. "God, where are you in all this? I thought your word says that those that put their trust in you shall not be put to shame? We serve you and yet we are going through the worst embarrassment of our lives."

"Even when we are not faithful, God remains faithful!" Her mother's words came back to her like a mighty wind blowing with the sounds of water. "Trust in the Lord, my dear, with all your heart and lean not on your own understanding."

"Though we walk through the valley of the shadow of death, we will fear no evil, our god is with us."

"Oh! Look around and see that God is with us. We are not alone. We will trust in him till we draw our last breath because his love never fails and his mercies are new every morning."

Yes, she remembered the hope in her mother's eyes each time she made those affirmations. And she continued to trust in God. That was before she discovered that her mother's younger brother, Uncle James, was passing through the same scenario with his wife, even worse.

Her mother was suffering in the hands of her father while Uncle James was suffering in the hands of his wife.

Life was really a jerk.

From that day, Israel and Chloe decided not to have anything to do with the opposite sex. At least, they hadn't heard of any domestic abuse or trouble from that angle. And now that she started it, she still could not find the happiness and peace she craved for.

Her mother's words, "Love the Lord and obey his words," kept chiming in her ears as she moved.

Chloe had been walking absentmindedly along the college pedestrian that she didn't know when she walked past her dormitory.

"Oh, Jesus! Jesus, forgive me. Give me another chance. Let me love you. Let me serve you. Let me be devoted to you. Help me present my body as a living sacrifice!"

And she knew there was an answer to her prayers. Chloe felt it as the peace of God encompassed around her and she smiled. "Thank you, Lord. I am now a new creature in Christ Jesus!"

Believing that her sins were forgiven, Chloe looked straight ahead, head high as she saw three ladies walking towards her with Bibles and flyers in hand. She grinned broadly. This was what she needed, an answer to her prayers. "Oh, thank you, Lord!"

As she moved closer to the trio, she recognised one of the ladies as her lover's roommate. The way the girl looked at her had made her shiver to the pit of her stomach. It was nothing close to a friendly look, rather it was of self-righteousness, condemnation and discrimination. Her courage was beginning to fail her and she didn't know if she should continue walking up to the girls or to spin around and walk away.

Just as she predicted, it really didn't end well. They had humiliated her with the look of disdain. The words they had spoken to her were so degrading.

She had cried bitterly. She regretted ever trying to repent.

To hell with it. To hell with everything! If this was the kind of Christianity her mother spoke of, she didn't care anymore.

Unable to bear the hurt, she went back to her lover and explained everything to her.

"I can't believe you wanted to leave me!"

"I'm sorry. I didn't know what I was doing!"

"Well, we'll deal with that later. For now, my roommate will have me to contend with when she comes back."

Alexandria went on to invite Chloe to her church since they weren't against it. They believed that the world was civilized and a marriage between man and woman alone was antiquated.

## CHAPTER THIRTY

Chloe finished telling her ordeal and could not control her emotions as she wailed bitterly. Ifes could not also stop the tears that rolled down her cheeks. Her lips were shut, but her heart cried in anguish as she stared down at the girl who bent her face to the ground crying. Her brother, Israel, hunkered down beside her and held her in his arms, crying as well.

*Oh, Jesus! Oh, Holy Spirit, help! Heal these wounded ones.*

Michael watched the siblings who were crying and fumed. He walked towards Ifes and slapped her hard across the face. "You idiot!"

Ifes staggered backwards. He caught hold of her shoulder, digging his long fingernails deep into her flesh, before she could fall to the ground, and slapped her again before abruptly releasing her.

Ifesinachi's feet buckled and she dropped to the ground. She tried stifling the show of pain, but couldn't.

"How dare you ask her questions?" Michael barked. "Why didn't you mind your business you foolish girl?"

Michael gazed at the siblings and glared back at Ifes. He wanted to punch the life out of her when Chloe's voice stopped him.

"Leave her alone, Michael. It was never her fault. She only asked the question and I answered."

"You are lucky I can't find any rifle now. I would have been arrested and charged for a murder case." Michael clenched his fist.

Israel glowered at Ifes.

"I- I- I'm so sorry. I didn't mean to arouse any emotions," Ifes stammered. She winced in pain as she sprang to her feet with the little strength she had. She felt dizzy and her cheek tingled hotly.

*Oh, Holy Spirit! Edify my mortal body. If not, I might just black out anytime now.* Ifes felt a surge of strength all over her body.

Michael grabbed her again and jerked her forward. "Come here!" Ifes whimpered.

"Why do you apologize? Why are you acting remorseful? Go on, tell her everything. Go ahead and tell her how big of a sinner she is, and how she would die and go to hell. Isn't that the message from Christians?" He was seething.

Michael's annoyance increased at Ifesinachi's silence. "Why are you quiet? Come on, she's all ears. Tell her. Tell her everything. Better still, I should say we are all ears. Tell us everything."

"Go on and tell us how awful the act is," Israel said.

When she didn't say anything, Israel picked up her Bible and walked towards her till he was close enough to hand her the Holy book.

The testing of our faith.

"Take this Bible from my hands and show me where God speaks against homosexuality and lesbianism."

Israel tilted his head and looked at his sister then returned his gaze back to Ifes. "This is a question my sister has not been able to answer for herself."

He couldn't hide the anger from his voice. "You are a Bible scholar, so tell us what it says."

Ifes collected the Bible with shaky hands. The trio looked at her solemnly. She began to perspire and move uneasily. Did they even notice it? Did they notice how she was trembling?

She thought it was something more than a miracle that they were close to the Students' Union building yet no student passed by. It was so unusual that no one passed by that way at that time of the day. If they did, perhaps they would have rescued her. But why was she looking for rescue? Why was she trying to escape? Because she was trying to defend her beliefs and she couldn't. Because she was trying to fight for God but realised she couldn't. Because she had forgotten the exact Bible passage she needed right now.

"But you can't fight for me. I will fight for you," the still voice said to her.

She looked up from her Bible to the angry faces before her and cried in her heart.



*Oh, Holy Spirit! I need you to help me. Glorify Jesus in me today and let the earth know that you are God.*

Ifes grinned broadly as she felt as though the light had just been lit in a dark room. The scriptures had started flowing into her mind like water down a waterfall.

She opened her Bible and flipped over to Genesis 19:4-11. She read it slowly, in a low voice. After that, she flipped over to Jude 1:7, Leviticus 18:18-22, Leviticus 20:13, Romans 1:18 & 32. 1 Corinthians 6:9-10. 1 Timothy 1:8-10.

After reading the Bible passages, she explained them as simply as she could without suggesting they were thus doomed to hades for committing abominations. She closed the Bible and gazed up at them.

"I've answered your question. To back up all I've said, scan through from the book of Genesis to Revelations; there was never a place where a marriage between same-sex was performed or blessed by God in the Bible."

She stretched out her hand Bible in it. "Which of you can take this Bible from my hand and prove me wrong?"

When none of them could take the Bible from her hand to refute her evidence, she went closer to Chloe, embraced her and then whispered to her ears, "Now that you've gotten the answer to your questions, will you give your life to Christ?"

Chloe felt undeserving, unworthy of such love. "I'm not worthy to receive such a gift," she thought somberly in her mind.

"Please, trust me when I say Jesus still loves you and doesn't condemn you."

Chloe could feel the same peace that had encompassed her the first time she had contemplated repentance.

"Yes, why not? I'm ready to rededicate my life to Christ." Chloe cried.

Ifes felt her heart leap for joy. "There is joy in heaven for a soul that repents!"

Letting go of Chloe, she smiled as she reached out to Michael. "Would you also want to give your life to Christ?"

Michael jerked free from her hands and looked away. "But my own case is exceptional."

"Exceptional? How?"

"I had no reasons for being gay. It just happened that I discovered I am attracted to..."

"Hush! I can understand but it doesn't matter how it started. What matters now is your heart for God."

"But do you think I am worthy enough?"

"No one is worthy but Jesus makes us all worthy."

"If so, then I will."

Israel's facial expression changed to that of horror. He yanked his hands free as soon as Ifesinachi's hand touched him. "Don't \*\*\*\*ing touch me!"

Chloe and Michael gazed up at Israel, astonished.

"And what do you think you are doing?" Israel bellowed, eyes and nose flaring. "How dare you come here and dictate to us how to run our lives?"

"But Isr—"

"Chloe, please stay out of this!" Israel barked at his sister. Israel tilted his head to look at Ifes again. "I won't let you succeed in what you are doing."

"But she didn't do anything."

Israel ignored his sister and Michael, and continued talking.

"I won't allow you to take Michael from me." Israel glowered. "Or my sister from Alexandria."

"Israel!" Chloe yelled at the top of her voice. "What is wrong with you?"

"Please calm down, Israel. We can talk about this," Michael said.

"The only thing I want is to know where you stand."

His gaze fell on his sister. "Do you stand with me or with her?"

Chloe moved closer to Ifes and without a word he got the message. His gaze slowly diverted from Chloe to Michael. Michael didn't move but replied from where he stood. "I stand with Jesus."

Israel was crestfallen but refused to show it. He was disappointed that his sister still continued to stick with the same Jesus that cost their mother nothing but suffering, and Michael for not even thinking of the both of them. Without a word, Israel walked out on the thrio.

"Israel! Israel!" Chloe called after him. She kept calling till he was out of sight. Frantic, not willing to lose her brother, she turned and shook Michael. "Please do something. Go bring him back."

Michael did not move. She faced Ifes, eyes pleading. "Please go, go get him back. I'm telling you, he's not as bad as he appears. He's just a little over the edge. He'll get over it. He's my brother. He's not a bad person, I tell you."

Ifes felt sympathy for Chloe. Had she been in her shoes, she'd have done much more to defend and rescue her brother from the destructive path he was walking in. She wiped the tears that rolled down Chloe's cheeks.

"Don't worry, let him go. God brought you to himself and I believe he will do the same to your brother."

"But..." Chloe's face was still contoured with concern.

"Shush! Let go and let God."

Ifes led Chloe and Michael to Christ and they were baptized the same day.

## CHAPTER THIRTY-ONE

"I'll sing for the Lord is good. I'll dance, I'll dance for the Lord is good. I'll praise, I'll praise him because he is good. His mercies endures forever."

Ifes kept singing happily as she walked back to her dorm room. Getting to the front of her door, she brought out her keys. Suddenly remembering Mandy had called her a couple of minutes ago, asking her where she was, she didn't bother to insert it. She opened the door and saw her roommate going through her stuff.

Mandy whirled around to look at her. "Hey! What's up with you? And what is that beam on your face?"

Ignoring her friend's question, she kept singing as she made straight for the kitchen to unpack the groceries she had gotten.

"So, who was the generous Prince Charming that paid for those groceries?"

Ifes darted her eyes to see Mandy standing in front of the kitchen door, arms over her hips.

She grinned. "I paid for these groceries with my own money, Missie."

Mandy urged an eyebrow at her friend. "So why the unusual beam on your face?"

Ifes stared at her friend and didn't know if it was right to discuss Chloe, Israel and Michael with her, so she gave her what she reckoned was a simple answer. "I went out for evangelism today and souls were won for Christ."

"Oh! I see." Mandy moved towards the kitchen counter to help unpack the groceries. "That's reason enough to be happy."

"Oh yeah! You can say that again."

"So how was the picnic today?" Ifes asked.

Mandy wished her roommate didn't ask that question. How was she supposed to answer that question now? How would she tell her friend, "It wasn't good. I spoiled the party today with my mood."

Everyone had been uncomfortable because of her mood. When she noticed she had become the centre of concentration, she could not stop the tears that rolled down her cheeks. She had apologized, but it was too late to repair the damage. The glamour in the party was gone.

Her gaze fell on Ifes and wondered how she was able to still smile even when she was faced with difficulties. She also had life issues but how was she able to handle it? Maybe it was her way of showing how much pain she went through, you know, the suffering and smiling thing. Maybe she was devoid of feelings, or it was just her way of life.

Haa! If that was also another way of life, then Mandy wanted it. She would do anything to have it. She would even pay any amount of money to get that kind of serenity.

Mandy was deep in thought when her friend's voice drifted her back to reality. "What did you say again?"

"You haven't answered my question." Ifes expected her roommate to do what she usually did first after she was back from any hangout, but when Mandy didn't show her any pictures, she sensed there was a problem. "No selfies?"

Mandy shrugged. "Okay, it was okay."

Ifes recognised her friend's tone of dismissal and decided not to pry and changed the topic instead. "What do we have for dinner?"

"How about sourdough bread?" She looked to her roommate for approval. "Roast pork and pickled cucumber sandwich?"

Ifes shook her head. "Not a bad idea."

They finished eating; not one word was spoken all through the meal. Ifes stood and left the kitchen with Mandy trotting behind her.

"Do you think he would come around?"

Ifes tilted her head to look at Mandy, eyebrows knitted in confusion. "Who are you talking about?"

"Do you think he cares?"

Ifes gave her a puzzled look.

"Please don't act like you don't know who I'm talking about!" She took a step closer to Ifes.

"Do you think Ayo loves me?"

Haa! Giving her friend an honest answer wouldn't help her current situation right now. What a dicey question! 'Ayo asked me out a fortnight ago, so I don't think he loves you.' Would that be a good answer to give?

"Did anything happen today at the picnic? Did he show any signs of having interest in any random girl?" Ifes asked, expecting the answer to be negative.

"He didn't have to, but I love him so much that it is making me go nuts."

"I can understAnd Mandy."

"How could you possibly understand? Okay, tell me this. You also have your own life challenges, but how are you able to smile as though you ain't feeling anything? Are you suffering and smiling? Have you been secretly seeing a psychologist?"

"Oh, please Relax, Mandy!"

"Relax? Okay, I'm going to relax now!" Mandy took a seat beside her reading table. "Alright I'm relaxed, so tell me everything."

Ifes saw the depression in her friend's face and shook her head. *Holy Spirit, I could use some help right now.*

Seeing the look on her friend's face, Mandy placed one of her hands on her chest. "You think I'm crazy, huh? You think I don't know what I'm doing or saying?"

Well, how could she expect Ifes to understand? She also had other issues that plagued her heart apart from what she felt for Ayo. So, the Christian life wasn't all a bed of Roses?

"No, Mandy, God did not promise us a stress free life but he promised to deliver us out of them all. For many are the afflictions of the righteous but the Lord delivers them out of them all. Psalms 34:19." Ifesinachi's response had made her realise that she wondered that question aloud.

"So tell me, when you go through perilous times, what do you do as a Christian?"

Ifes fetched her Bible from her nightstand and opened it and read Joshua 1:8 and Psalms 19:14 aloud. She closed the Bible and elaborated more on what she had just read.

"So when I meditate more on the word of God instead of worrying about my situation, I am relieved to know that God carries my burdens. If he bears it, why should I take it from his hands? Why should I worry when God is working for me? Indeed, sometimes I get so overwhelmed with everything that I don't seem to get any word of encouragement from the Bible. But do you know what I do?"

Mandy folded her hands across her chest and shook her head listening to her friend's secret. Mandy realised as she listened that she had been mixing things up all this while. Now she knew where she was getting it wrong.

"When I feel depressed, I start praying in other tongues, and like a flicker of light, my burdens are lifted."

"Hmm!" Mandy exclaimed astonishingly as she leaned forward in her seat.

"Even when I don't pray with other tongues, I just call on the name of Jesus. I'd keep calling that name over and over again, and it just works like a miracle."

Mandy nodded her head affirmatively. She clearly understood it now.

"Hold on, friend. That's not all."

"Really?" Mandy leaned back on her seat. "Tell me everything, I'm all ears."

"When it looked like they wouldn't serve, I'll just go to heaven."

"What!" Mandy's eyes popped. This was unbelievable. "What do you mean, 'go to heaven'? Do you attempt suicide?"

Ifes grinned. "I beg your pardon, Mandy. I should have explained better. 'Go to heaven' is an African way of saying, you sing praises to God. Worship and praise brings you to the presence of God. You know, it's as good as going to heaven."

Mandy eyes glittered. "Wow! This is something new."

"No matter how life tosses you around, give God the centre of your heart," Ifes added. "Christ makes the difference in us."

Mandy smiled, feeling more peaceful than she had ever felt. "Oh yeah! I feel like a newborn baby." She embraced Ifes.

"I now feel refreshed knowing that Jesus carries my burdens. Thank you so much for unveiling this to me."

"Well, the Holy Spirit did. I'm just a vessel, so channel your thanksgiving to the right source."

Mandy laughed. "And what can I do without him? What can the people of the earth do without him?"

"Absolutely nothing!" Ifes laughed with her friend.

They both felt the strong presence of the Holy Spirit and began praising God.

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On Monday of the following week.

Ayo had gone to Ifesinachi's place of work to see her off to her dormitory. Before traveling with Mandy for the Thanksgiving break, she had resigned from her job at the college library and quickly took up another job as a waitress in one of the college restaurants as soon as she got back from the vacation.

Three jobs in two years, Oh, goodness! Was this showing her lack of consistency? If not for the situations that prompted it, would she still remain with her former employers?

Ifes watched as Ayo walked in through the swinging doors of the new deck tavern. She grinned up at him as he came closer to her.

"You're welcome to the new deck tavern, sir. What do you care for?" Ifes asked jokingly, pretending as though she was handing him the menu.

Ayo beamed. "You drama queen! This is Philadelphia, not Hollywood."



"Oh, really! Do you think I'm a drama queen? So tell me, do you also think I can measure up to a Hollywood star? A girl has to know all her viable options, you know?"

"You better go get yourself out of that uniform. Let's leave here."

Ifes winked at him before spinning around to the ladies restroom. "You are just jealous. Nothing more, nothing less. Jelousy jellof," she said over her shoulders as she walked off.

"Na those your small small legs I go dey jealous abi?" Ayo said in Nigerian pidgin English and couldn't stop himself from laughing at his friend's remark.

Ifes returned and the duo exited the restaurant. As they walked along the pedestrian route, Ayo struck a pathless conversation with Ifes. She enjoyed the conversation until Ayo asked a question that threw her off-balance.

"So, Mandy loves me?"

"H-how did you know? Why do you ask?"

"You're stuttering, and it just cleared any twinge of doubt I had."

"Alright, I will admit she's in love with you, but how did you know this? Did she speak to you about it?"

"No!" He paused for a while and continued. "I heard your conversation on Friday."

Ifes gave him a weird look. "So you were eavesdropping on us?"

"No, let me explain, please."

"Okay, I'm all ears."

"You remember the picnic we went out for without you on Friday?"

"Yes."

"Mandy wasn't in a good mood and no one was happy about it, so the picnic was abruptly postponed. E

We tried asking her about it but she didn't speak, so I decided I was going to come and speak to you about it if she would open up to you. As I approached your dorm room, the door was half ajar. I was about to walk in when I heard something that kept me transfixed in my tracks."

"So, how much did you hear that day?" Ifes asked.

"I heard everything."

They both stood in silence before Ayo spoke up again.

"I was quite perplexed about the whole thing so I curiously listened to your response." He exhaled sharply.

"Hem-hem!"

"I was perplexed at the whole thing so decided to keep listening to hear your response," he reiterated. But Ayo did not tell her that his heart had been thumping loudly at the same time.

"Umm! Well, your answers were amazing but I wouldn't say if I felt relieved or..." The rest of his words hung in the air.

"Guilty, you meant to say," Ifes said.

"No, no! It's not that, it's just that... Well, just forget about it."

Ifes saw the confused expression on Ayo's face and held one of his hands. "I can understand how this must have felt for you. You're interested in someone, and it is being reciprocated by her own best friend."

"But you never told me, Ifes, even the day I asked you out."

"I'm sorry! It's just that I thought, well, I thought..." Ifes waved her hand. "Nevermind."

Ayo gazed into space. "I think I am beginning to fix the puzzle now."

"What puzzle is that?"

"All those times, all those times you left Mandy and I in the middle of a hangout, when you seemed less interested in our conversations, the sudden distancing. All of it, I mean, all of it."

At this point, Ifes wished Ayo would stop talking as though he was trying to recount all her sins as the Bible said it would be on the judgement day.

"Tell me, Ifes." Ayo's voice drifted her back from her own world. "You did all these because you were aware of her feelings for me, right?"

"Ayo, let's not dwell over matters that are inconsequential. The question is what do you plan on doing with the knowledge you gained?"

"Hmm!" Ayo inhaled and exhaled.

"I must be honest with you Ayo, she loves you. Mandy loves you so much and I'm hoping that the answer you are about to give me would be encouraging."

After hearing Mandy's and Ifes' conversation on Friday, Ayo had gone back to his dorm room and pondered over what he heard. Determining not to go through the same heartbreak again, he went to God in prayers.

"I spoke with the Holy Spirit about this, so he helped me sort it out," Ayo said.

"Ha! But it was just a relationship matter na!"

"A relationship that might have a bleak or a promising future. I don't know about you, Ifes, but I involve the Holy Spirit even in the smallest matters that concern me."

"Oh, okay! I see." Ifes had never seen how important it was for a guy to pray for what she regarded as the smallest things as an ordinary relationship, but Ayo was beginning to make her see the importance.

"If I had asked the Holy Spirit first before asking you out, I wouldn't have... Umm! Nevermind."

Beginning to feel uncomfortable with the conversation, Ifes was eager to end it as fast as she could. What excuse was she going to give to him now to walk out of this conversation? It looked like her leg was beginning to ache her? Or the night breeze was prickling her skin so much and she could stand it no more? Ayo looked eager to continue talking.

"I prayed about it and I got a positive response from God."

Ifes heaved a sigh of relief. Then, her face broke into a wide grin.

"I had to come talk to you about it," Ayo said.

Ifes looked at him and grinned mischievously. "Las las, I hope you're not trying to tell me that the Holy Spirit is teaching you how to chase girls sha?"

Ayo laughed aloud. "See you!"

"Hmm! I know what I'm saying oooo!" Ifes placed her right hand on her right ear like an African mother who was warning her child.

Ayo blushed. I don't have your time sef."

"Na so na, for your mind abi?"

"See this girl oooo!" Ayo gave her a playful slap on her back, but she successfully got away.

"So, what do you want to do now?" Ifes asked after the joke.

"Mmm! I kinda like her, but I'm not going to ask her out just yet."

Kinda! Ifes did not like the use of that word. They were talking of love here and not like, but maybe they could start from scratch.

"But why won't you? " Ifes asked.

"There was something I observed about Mandy from your conversation on Friday."

"Which was?"

"You see, Mandy is still a baby Christian and not yet rooted in the word of God, going into a relationship where Christ is not the foundation would lead to a shipwreck."

Ifes nodded affirmatively. "I agree with you." She understood that entering a relationship now could make Mandy have the wrong priority and Christ who was meant to be the centre of her whole being could finally lose his place in her life. No! That could not happen.

"Ifes, I want you to please help out with this."

"What role do I have to play?"

"Okay, I must admit that I am beginning to love her, but I am not in the right position to always share the word of God with her."

Ifes understood alright. If he tried playing that role, Mandy might not see past what she felt for him. "Is that all you want me to do, just sharing the word of God with her?"

"Yes, and you're already doing a good job at it, but please do more."

"We'll trust the Holy Spirit to help us out."

Ayo stared at Ifes in admiration. "You are really a good laborer in God's vineyard, Ifes. I just pray that your labour over those souls that have been won in this college will not be wasted."

"Oh, Ayo! Thank you, but if only you could just look around, you'll see that there is still a lot to be done."

"I can understAnd and I'm trusting the Holy Spirit on this one."

They finished conversing and bade each other goodbye before moving their separate ways.

## CHAPTER THIRTY-TWO

"Get out! I'm calling off this relationship. Leave my dorm room now." Hunter bellowed at the top of his voice.

This was his sixth relationship in one year and all had crumbled like a pack of badly arranged cards, like a sand castle washed away by the waves. He knew he couldn't love them, so from the start of the relationship he had told them, no strings attached. They'd agreed to the terms, but soon they began professing their undying love for him.

The girl reached out and touched his hands, but he yanked free with such sudden force that the girl jumped in fright.

"But I told you. I told you earlier that there would be no strings attached. Now I won't be held responsible for your heartbreak."

The girl looked at him pleadingly. "Now look into my eyes and tell me. Tell me that you felt nothing. The hugs, the kisses and the..."

Hunter laughed and looked at the girl as though she were crazy. "Oh! You think I haven't gotten enough of that with other girls?"

The girl's mouth dropped agape. She felt like someone had just punched her spirit out of her body. She wanted to faint now. No! She wanted to die. Hunter was her life, and without him, she couldn't see the possibility of remaining alive the next minute.

"Please, Hunter, I could do something about this. We could make it work," she begged.

"I said get out of my dorm room, Jessica."

Ha! Jessica? Another girl's name? He called her another girl's name! He couldn't remember her name, maybe this was why he treated her rudely.

Perhaps Jessica did something wrong to him but she didn't. Maybe if she told him her name, he would look at her again and take her back into his arms.

"Ashley. It's me Ashley!"

"Oh well! I really don't care, Jennifer. Just get out!"

"Not Jennifer, it's Ash!"

"And I said, " Go. To. Hell!" He was at the brink of exploding.

Speechless, Ashley gathered all that was left of her and scurried out of Hunter's dorm room like a tiny, orphaned baby rat.

Hunter slammed the door behind her then whirled around and leaned on it.

"I definitely won't miss that one!" Hunter mumbled under his breath. She got too emotional too easily. He should have known it would come to this.

"I believe we are meant for each other," she had proclaimed as if she were a seer.

Hunter snickered. Meant for each other indeed! Mumbo jumbo with this one too. Girls had a way of being annoyingly clingy and started seeking a relationship after intimacy. Couldn't they just stick to the agreement, for goodness's sake?

It would be all beautiful at first, but he was different with this one. Right from their first date, she had been looking, starry-eyed at him as though he were a greek god, as though he could reach out and pluck the stars for her.

Well, now that he thought of it, they all did.

He almost smiled when he remembered that when he turned down the proposal of girls that wanted to 'label' what they had. Some would claim that they only agreed to be with him, thinking they could change him. Because of what? It amused him because for Hunter, he definitely didn't deserve it. The people that entered into a contract without making all their intentions known were the ones that deserved the bashing.

He recalled how one of his ex-girlfriends, soon after some time with him, started telling him of other guys, who were rushing after her and how privileged he was to have her in his life. It wasn't until later that he found out that it was just a ploy to make him jealous.

He scoffed audibly. Jealousy was far from his heart except when it came to one rudely beautiful girl.

Hunter gazed at the seat the gal sat on before her fantasy talk and scowled. He would probably change that seat, anything to get the memory of the ugly looking girl out of his head.

She was beautiful. In actual fact, very beautiful. Unfortunately, Hunter couldn't see it. What was her name again? Amelia? Angela? Audrey? Something like Ashley.

"I am definitely a mess!" Hunter said as he shoved his fingers into his disheveled hair. Uttering a four-letter word, he sat on the cool floor with his back still leaning against the door.

"But must it always get to this?" After everything, why the emptiness? Maybe it was because he still loved Megan, but why did she reject him? Wasn't he good enough for her? She had told him she had someone better than him.

Hunter knew he was handsome. With blonde hair and blue eyes, ladies were dying for him. He was rich too. But she told him she found a richer dude. What if Megan had accepted him? What great life would it have been? Would her love be able to make him whole again?

But Megan was not Hunter's main problem. His addiction was eating on him again. Unable to resist the urge, Hunter sprang to his feet, put on his leather jacket and scurried out of the dorm room.

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After work hours, Ifes went to her locker room to change out of her work apparel. Coming out of the locker room, her eyes darted around the open restaurant, but she didn't see Ayo. This was unusual of him, she wondered. He always arrived before the end of her shift.

She quickly reached for her purse and pulled out her phone to place a call across to him. She had ten missed calls. She was shocked to see that eight of those calls were from her driver for the evening, Ayo.

Her thoughts wandered for a while. Ayo usually came before the end of her shift, but today she was getting his missed call instead.

He picked the call after the second ring. "Hello, fine girl, how far?"

"Ugly boy, I'm fine. Bia, why do you want to kill my phone's battery with your call?"

"Well, it's not my fault that you weren't picking your calls," Ayo said. "I'm sorry I can't make it, you'll have to walk home alone this evening."



"You better have a good explanation for that."

"I do. I have been called by Ian to accompany him to the hospital. Turns out one of the boys that attends the fellowship was involved in a car accident"

"Jesus!" exclaimed Ifes. "How is he now? Hope he did not sustain any fatal injuries?"

"Nah, don't worry, he's alright. Just some careless driving by the cab man."

"Oh! I see. Say hi to him on my behalf."

"He'll hear. What about you, Ifes? Hope you can manage?"

"Don't worry, I'll be fine "

"Sure?"

"Sure, I am no kid"

"Okay, okay. Be careful and call me when you get home."

"Okay, I will surely do that."

"Bye."

Ifes dropped the phone back into her bag and walked out of the restaurant exhausted and in need of a refreshing sleep.

## CHAPTER THIRTY-THREE

As Chloe laced her shoe into a perfect bow as she had always done since she was five years old, all she could think about was the Lord Jesus.

After giving her life to Christ, she had been studying all she could lay her hands on that spoke about God and building a relationship with him. She was filled with new-found joy and purpose, though at times she felt bad and guilty for avoiding or totally cutting off old friends, like Alexandria.

Her thoughts paused as she heard the loud shriek of her phone. She groaned, remembering that she had been planning to change her ringtone to something less annoying for a month now. What made it always skip her memory, she couldn't fathom.

"Hello," Chloe said, not stopping to think about the fact that it was an unknown number that was calling.

"Hello." A cool chill ran down Chloe's spine as she realised that she just picked Alexandra's call.

"Hi," Chloe managed to sputter out.

"I see you are tongue-tied now, after letting my calls go on and on and on without you applying the common decency of picking up your phone, huh?" Chloe was silent, obviously confused about what to say.

"I've spoken until I turned blue, blue in the face, to convince you to come back to me, but you have insisted that it is over. How dare you, after all those times together? I don't blame you. I blame her and I'll get her." Alexandria spoke all of these words with bitterness and fury that kept and left Chloe mute. The call got disconnected.

As soon as some of the shock wore off, Chloe realised what the last words of Alexandria meant. Springing up, she ran out of her dorm with a cheetah's speed in search of Ifes. She knew the capabilities of an angry Alexandria.

"God," she cried in her heart. "Why did I give ifes details to Alexandria? I should have just told her that I had changed and no longer interested in the relationship and left it at that."

On her arrival at Ifesinschi's workplace, she discovered that Ifes' shift had ended and she had left for home. She hoped that, against all odds, Ifes' had made it home in one piece.

Still feeling queasy due to uncertainty, she started running in the direction of Ifes' dorm when she discovered she had left her phone on her bed in a bid to make it to Ifes speedily.

As Ifes darted back to her dorm room alone, she missed the company of Ayo. Talking about Ayo, didn't he say he was going to visit a friend in the hospital? She had been too cynical about herself that she didn't even ask the name of the patient.

Still walking back to her dorm room, the night breeze prickled her skin as her thoughts wandered wildly. Somewhere deep inside her, she felt this odd sensation that made her uncomfortable. Shrugging, she waved it off. Maybe it was because she was without the company of Ayo. As the night wore on, the odd sensation intensified.

Maybe the devil was trying to plant fear in her heart, she quickly remembered that God had not given her the spirit of fear but of power, love and of a sound mind.

Ifes was not paying attention to her path and pace anymore, too engrossed in binding and casting out that spirit of fear.

The loud hoot of a horn jerked her back to reality. The driver was a young, athletic-looking lady.

"Excuse me, please can you direct me to the gymnasium?" asked the stranger.

Ifes stepped closer to the car and started giving directions to the lady who had the company of another in the passenger's seat.

"I can't hear you clearly. Could you please come a little closer? I'm a little hard of hearing."

Something somewhere in her head screamed 'run!', but Ifes was immediately filled with compassion. She stooped low to the window of the car to speak to the driver.

"It's good to finally get to meet you," the driver said as she brought out a handkerchief from nowhere and reached out to Ifes, covering her nose with it.

Immediately, Ifes realised she had made a mistake as the smell of chloroform invaded her nose. Unable to resist the smell, she blacked out.

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"Who's that!" Mandy yelled, half annoyed at the persistent bangs on her door. "Patience is a virtue," she murmured to herself. On opening the door, she saw a lady who was panting hard, craning her neck in as if looking for something or someone. The face was somehow familiar, but where had she seen this face?

"Please, I'm looking for Ifes."

"She's not around."

"But she's supposed to be around, I'm just coming all the way from her place of work and I was told her shift was over."

Mandy drew back a little, studying the girl. "I'm sorry, who are you and why are you asking?"

"Oh! My bad. My name's Chloe Gilstrap." She paused for a while and continued. "I'm a friend of Ifes. I mean, a convert, rather."

"Okay."

Mandy stepped beside the door allowing Chloe enough space to enter.

"You look troubled, come in and let's talk."

Chloe hesitated for a while before accepting Mandy's invitation. Mandy slammed the door, whirled around and leaned on it. "Do you mind if we talk over a mug of hot chocolate?"

"Thanks, but I really don't have the appetite for anything right now." Chloe's body trembled as she spoke.

Sensing the urgency in her voice, Mandy decided to go straight to the point. "Okay, would you like to leave your message with me or would you like to wait for her till she returns?"

"I don't know, I believe she might be in danger, serious danger. Please, please, if you can connect me to her, I'll be grateful!"

"Look, she's not back from work yet but it's not anything abnormal. She normally goes to read from her workplace."

"I understand what you're saying, But please call her, please!"

"Is anything wrong somewhere?"

"I can't say much because I don't know much either. Just help me call her now!"

"What are you talking about?" Mandy asked, truly alarmed for the first time since seeing Chloe at the front of her doorstep. Considering the possibility that Mandy might not know her, she decided to elucidate.

"You see, I met Ifes for the first time close to the Students' Union building, one of the days that she went out for evangelism." Chloe paused to catch her breath. Then, she continued elucidating. "I came here because of Ifes. I can't let anything happen to her because of me, I'm so scared right now, and I'm confused as well!" The girl spoke so rapidly with a Northern accent that Mandy could barely grasp something important. "We've got to do something!"

Mandy darted away from the door pacing up and down the dorm room. She still couldn't bring herself to believe that her roommate was not back because of a threat from one random girl. At this point, Chloe's heart was thumping loudly.

Reacting on an impulse, Mandy picked up her phone and dialled Ifesinachi's number. After calling her twice without Ifes picking up her phone, Mandy almost exclaimed. But then, simple reasoning told her that she would not have her phone chiming out loud while reading.

"I have called her twice and she's not picking up. But don't get worried, she keeps her phone silent when she's reading."

"How could I not worry when an innocent life is in danger because of me?" Chloe yelled. "It seems like you ain't understanding anything I'm saying!"

"Okay, okay, I understand but please calm down." Mandy gestured with her hands.

"This is what I think we should do," Mandy continued. "Let's just sit out one or two hours, at least till the time she usually returns from the library. If she doesn't arrive at that time, we will both go look for her at the library."

"And what if we don't find her there?" Chloe asked.

"Then we will call the emergency number after twenty-four hours."

Chloe knew the drill quite alright but would she be able to wait out twenty-four hours? Twenty-four hours would suffice to carry out a hideous plan on a missing person. Weary and helpless, Chloe sank back in her seat with her hands on her head as she prayed silently.

## CHAPTER THIRTY-FOUR

Ifes woke up to the sound of muffled voices. Eyes still shut, she tried to recognise the people by their voices, but she wasn't getting anywhere. She tried to open her eyes but they were too heavy to budge. Their words drew her attention, so she decided to wrap her attention around their conversation.

"What are you saying to me, Alexa? What do you mean you don't have the rope?"

*"What rope and what do they want to do with it?"* Ifes asked in her heart.

"I'm telling you that everything happened so fast that it took me unaware."

"Oh! You've got everything messed up Alexandria."

Alexandria! Ifes furrowed the lines in her forehead. Where had she heard that name?

"My bad! I was so overwhelmed with the whole thing, but I swear I was keeping everything to plan."

"Oh, really? Like seriously, Alexandria, you plan to abduct a person and you get so overwhelmed that you lose focus. Is this a kidnap or a child's play?"

Alexandria inhaled and exhaled sharply. "This ain't the time to apportion blame. Let's look for a solution around this."

Ifes knew there was no doubt about it. She had been abducted.

"I don't know how I got entangled in your mess."

"Yes!" Alexa exclaimed, her voice drowning her friend's sentence halfway.

"What are you thinking of? And it better be something fast because she will soon be awake, and we do not know the level of her strength."

Alexandria gazed at the skinny girl who was lying down on the floor and stifled a grin. She could not even be a match for one of them.

"You know, Becky, I think I remember where I dropped the rope now."

"So, where is it?"

*Oh, no! God, this can't be. Surely you won't let them get that rope and bundle me up just like that.*

"It's in the main house," Alexandria said.

Main house! This meant she was currently inside a cottage. *Dear Jesus, what to do now? How do I escape this?*

Alexandria stood and walked across the room to the door, turning the doorknob. She yanked open and slammed it behind her. Ifes quickly told herself it was time to react. Giving into an impulse, she sprang to her feet, startling Becky. But Becky quickly composed herself as though she was expecting her to get up as soon as Alexandria was out of the room.

"So, our heroine has finally woken up?" Becky clapped her hands. "Hope you remember me?" She pointed to herself. "We met each other not quite long ago."

Ifes gazed speechlessly at Becky, calculating her next step.

Becky raised up a hand to her. "Oh! and don't look at me like you're watching a soap opera. I actually knew when you woke up, I intentionally asked Alexa to go get the rope because I wanted to see what drama you are up to."

"Wow!" Ifes exclaimed. This girl was more than who she thought she was.

"And do you know the second reason?" She looked to Ifes for an answer. When she didn't say anything, Becky continued.

"Alexa is more like a sister to me, and I love her so much. If you hurt her, you hurt me."

"But I didn't do anything to Alexandria!"

"Yes, you did, and it's high time I dealt with you."



Becky darted closer to Ifes and slapped her hard across her face, making her stagger backwards gasping in pain. "This is for crossing your boundaries." Becky said and gave her a punch on her nose. "This is for coming between Chloe and Alexa."

Ifes winced in pain; her nose was now seriously bleeding and she was struggling to breathe.

Becky smirked, clearly enjoying what she was seeing. "Dear Christian girl, what was it the Bible said again? When I slap you on one cheek, turn the other cheek, huh? This means I will have a good time dealin' with ya today!"

"Please let's talk this over," Ifes begged. "There must be a misunderstanding somewhere."

"Oh, just shut up!" Becky struck Ifes across the face again. "Did I tell you that your voice irritates me?"

At this point, Ifes knew it was a matter of life and death. If she allowed this girl she would beat her to death, but if she defended herself: she might be alive to fight for another day.

"And this is for..." Ifes grabbed Becky's hand as she was about to give her another slap, and whirled her around before pushing her hard against the wall.

Becky rolled back on her feet and squeezed her hands into fists to punch Ifes on the stomach but Ifes held her hands and twisted it in such an angle that she groaned out loud.

Letting go of Becky, Ifes moved to the other end of the wall as she tried to catch her breath. Becky's eyes moved around the room and it landed on a wooden plank. Lifting it up to arm's length, she flung it to Ifes who dodged it.

"I'll kill you!" Becky said, seething.

Ifes made a swift turn and reached for the wooden plank. She picked up the plank and sent it straight to Becky. Again Becky cried out as she fell to the ground.

"Listen here, we've got to stop this right now, I'm begging!" Ifes said. But Becky would have none of that as she quickly jerked up and grabbed Ifes by her hair. Ifes struggled to pull free as Becky tried taking her down to the floor.

"Let go of me!" Ifes yelled as she mustered her last strength and punched Becky on her stomach with full force.

Becky cried as she abruptly let go of her and landed on a glass table that shattered underneath Becky's weight. Shards of broken glass dug into Becky's skin; blood oozed out.

Seeing what she had done, Ifes rushed up to the girl. "Hey! I'm sorry. It wasn't intentional, hold on, let's get you to the hospital so you can be treated."

As Ifes drew closer, Becky saw it as an opportunity to react. "You must be a fool to think that I would accept any help from you." Becky took one of the shattered glasses and made to stab Ifes in her stomach.

Again, by an inch of goodluck, Ifes successfully made away. As Becky sprang to her feet, something in Ifes' head bellowed that she should run away. "Get out of here right now!"

As she yanked open the door, Becky grabbed hold of her and both of them started exchanging blows. They continued fighting until they were out of the cottage. Ifes thought her escape would not be long again. Good! Very good! She would continue defending herself till she got to the gate. But Ifes didn't think of the possibility that the duo might have locked the gate and shoved the keys into their pockets. Well, when she got to that bridge, she'd cross it.

The building was large and beautiful but she didn't have the luxury to drink in the magnificent sight. If she were here under normal circumstances, she would savor each moment.

Ifes was dumbfounded when she saw Becky's oncoming feet hung Mid-way. There were other things she noticed as well. Becky's body was rigid, eyes and mouth agape, obviously staring at something that caused her terror.

Could it be her? No, Becky wouldn't care if she died now.

Following Becky's gaze, she saw Alexandria sprawled on the compound's red marble floor, twitching and struggling for her life. Ifes darted her gaze towards Becky as she pointed to Alexandria. "What is wrong with her?"

"She—she's..." Too terrified to explain further, Becky ran towards her friend. "Get up, Alexa!" She touched Alexa and could feel the spasm of the muscles whacking through her body. "Oh, no! you've gotten one of your seizures again?"

"Seizures?" Ifes asked as she walked towards the duo. "Is she epileptic?"

As she hovered around in concern for her now-suffering abductors, a voice in her head yelled, "And what do you think you are doing? This is the best time for you to escape. Come on, run, Girl, run!"

As she thought of her escape, she realised that indeed this was the best time to leave these girls who did nothing but harm her.

But the problem was, she was troubled by Alexandria's illness. How could she close her heart to the beckoning that she felt inside of her?

"Let's take her to the hospital," Ifes said.

Becky gazed up at her, surprise written all over her face. She wasn't sure if she heard well. Maybe she did, but it was certainly not from Ifes. Ifes the same person she had planned to torture and had even wrestled with.

Ifes hunkered down beside Alexandria and touched her gently. "Don't worry, you'll be fine, okay!"

Lifting up her gaze from Alexa to Becky, she called out to her. "Let's take her to the hospital now!"

Becky could not stifle her surprise, but did as she was told. Both ladies helped Alexa to the backseat of her car.

"I'm going to get the keys now!" Becky said as she hurried into the cottage and returned with the car keys almost immediately.

She entered the driver's seat, and slid in the key into the ignition; the engine came to life and she zoomed off. Ifes sat in the back seat with Alexandria's head on her lap as she prayed quietly.

## CHAPTER THIRTY-FIVE

As Becky entered the hospital's parking lot, she opened the door and without bothering to close it, she bolted in through the hospital's entrance door to the lobby.

Some group of nurses rushed out of the hospital with a stretcher as Becky led the way. Seeing Ifes And Becky's state, they brought out two more stretchers and carried both ladies inside the hospital as well.

Ifes had lost a lot of blood. She felt lifeless as she blacked out again. The next time she woke up, she was in a hospital bed. She tried to recall the previous events and how it landed her in a hospital bed.

One of the nurses noticed her movement and spoke up. "It's good to see you're awake now. Hope you feel better?" The nurse pressed her wrist, checking for her pulse.

"I guess so. What of Alexandria and Becky? The last thing I remembered was that we were all pulled into a stretcher."

"Yes, you were. The police are outside the door. They would like to speak with you."

Ifes body jerked slightly. "But why?"

"They would like to know how you sustained the injuries. Can you remember anything that happened before that?" The nurse pointed to the injuries on her arm. "How did you sustain these?"

Ifes was in a dilemma. Should she go ahead and tell the cops what happened? She knew it would make them arrest Alexandria and Becky. What next? They might end up in jail for attempted murder and torture.

"Umm! Nurse, I don't think I want to remember anything right now."

"Okay... This means you remember quite alright, but you don't want to talk about it?"

"No, I just don't want to remember and I don't want to talk either." She darted her gaze away from the nurse. "Alexandria and Becky are my friends. You've got to get us discharged as soon as you are done treating us."

"But Miss Ifes, you can't let the cops go without giving them any valid information about you or your friends. What if your life is in some sort of danger out there?"

"Do not worry too much, nurse. My life is not in any danger."

The nurse knew she was hiding something from her but decided not to pry again. The nurse touched her brow with her thumb. "Rest now, okay, I'll be back."

Letting go of Ifes, she walked out of the ward. The cops came in shortly after. Ifes heard the sound of their shoes louder and louder as they approached her bed.

"Good day, Miss Ifes."

"Good day, officer," Ifes replied.

"We got a report that you and two other ladies came into this hospital yesterday badly injured. Is that true?"

Oh! She had laid unconscious in the hospital since the previous day? She hadn't even bothered to know what time of the day it was and how long she had laid on her bed.

"Yes, officer."

"Can you tell us anything about this? Did you get into a fight with Becky here?" The officer pointed to Becky. "And how did Alexandria get involved with the whole thing? Do you also know anything about epilepsy?"

"Alright, officer I will admit that we had a misunderstanding and it led to a serious fight, but that was just about it."

"But you can elaborate more to help us better carry out our job." Of course, how beautiful of America to protect the lives of foreigners who were within the confines of their political territory, but Ifes didn't want the cops to carry out their job on her, not to talk of helping them do it better.

At this point, Becky, who currently was in the bed next to Ifes', was certain she was dreaming. It couldn't be. She had expected Ifes to do what she regarded as the needful by blowing up everything so she and Alexandria would prepare to be arraigned in the police net. But something different was happening here. It was too good to be real. If this was a dream, Becky wasn't ready to wake up.

"Alright, Officer, I appreciate the fact that you're doing your job, but let me tell you that Becky, Alexandria and I are friends. We just had a little misunderstanding, and I don't want to hold it against anyone."

"Alright, if you say so." The officer didn't look pleased.

"Yes, Officer. Friends do disagree, right?"

The police officer nodded his head and cast a suspicious glance at Becky. He turned back to Ifes, sighed and said, "Alright but we'll keep an eye on you to prevent further recurrence."

Unwilling to continue bantering with the police officer, Ifes scoffed. "Okay, Officer, if you insist, we'll have it your way then. Anyways, I really appreciate your concern."

"You are welcome Miss Uzundu, I guess we'll be on our way now. Do not hesitate to dial the emergency number should you sense trouble."

"Yes, I sure will. Thanks once again."

"My pleasure." The officer said and turned slightly to address Becky. "Miss Becky, we'll be keeping an eye on you and your friend. This should not repeat itself again."

"Alright, Officer." Becky said, trying to control her emotions.

The officer left with two other men who walked behind him. Becky's gaze followed the officers until they were out of the ward. She paused and listened, just to confirm that they had really left and weren't lurking behind the door to eavesdrop.

When she was satisfied, she turned towards Ifes and asked in perplexion, "Why didn't you spill the beans? Why didn't you testify against Alexandria and me? We almost killed you. No! I almost killed you. Yet, you defended me in front of those officers. Why?"

Ifes tilted her head to look at Becky. "Well, it's not about me. Jesus did much more for you. If he were here in flesh and blood, he'd still do more."

Jesus! Becky wondered in her heart, Ifes spoke of him as though he were someone she was fond of.

"So you see, it isn't about me, but the one who offers salvation to mankind."

Becky wondered that the same Jesus who would make someone speak good of her even when she had tried to harm her, that Jesus was worth emulating. He was indeed a role model to Ifes. Hunger stirred up inside Becky to know this Jesus that could ask his followers to forgive.

"Please, I know I'm not worthy to make this request, but can you tell me about Jesus?"

Ifes beamed. "Yes, I'll definitely tell you, and don't take it that you aren't worthy. Actually, no one is worthy, but Jesus makes us worthy with his blood"

"His blood? How?"

With delight, Ifes began elaborating. "Jesus is the Son of God, the true living God. Because of his love for mankind, he left all his privileges, rights, honor and power, and came to us in flesh and blood."

"There was a man named Adam. The Bible recorded that he was the first man created by God. God placed him in a garden called Eden and gave him charge over all he created. But Adam committed high treason, and sold out his rights to our enemy which is the devil. So, that was how sin came into the world."

"The Bible makes me understand that sin is the root of poverty, sickness, hatred, hardship, corruption, war, and ultimately, death. Sin came and man was immediately separated from God. But Hallelujah! Jesus came in to be the link between God and man. To restore what had been lost."

Becky exhaled deeply as she was engrossed in the story she was listening to. "Please continue."

"Jesus was made flesh and was birthed by a virgin mother. Before his crucifixion, Jesus moved about doing good wherever he went. He healed the sick, raised the dead, and cast out devils by the words of his mouth. He even walked upon the sea, fed five thousand souls, excluding women and children, with five loaves of bread and two fishes. He did so much that I cannot finish recounting all to you in a week. But after all this, like a lamb, he was slain on the cross of Calvary and rose victoriously from the grave on the third day like a lion. He is called the Lion of the tribe of Judah."

Becky sat still, obviously shocked at what she was hearing about Jesus Christ for the first time. Sure, she had heard the name of Jesus before, but that was just about it. She didn't know of his suffering, his death and resurrection.

"Jesus is in heaven, at the right hand of God the Father, still speaking on our behalf. He is our advocate, our link to the Father. That is why when we pray in his name, we get results," Ifes said, emphasizing her words by nodding her head.

"Who's God the Father?" Becky asked and Ifes elucidated.

Feeling convicted, Becky asked her to pray the sinner's prayer with her.

"You can repeat the sinner's prayer to receive Christ after me," Ifes said.

Becky nodded affirmatively. "Alright."

"Lord Jesus, come into my life. I'm a sinner but I believe you died and rose from the dead to save me. Now, with my mouth, I confess you Lord over my life. Thank you, Father, for saving me. In Jesus' name, Amen!"

Becky chorused after Ifes, meaning every word from her heart.

As they finished, Becky felt her burdens lifted. She felt the light pour into her life, obliterating every darkness. She was happy. In fact, for the first time she felt a peace she had never felt before.

"Wow! This feeling is great!" Becky exclaimed. "Alexa! I need to tell Alexa what happened. She needs to know."

As she made for the door, Ifes called out to her.

"Hey! Wait up, I would like to come along." Ifes removed her infusion drip and the sheet used to cover her as she heaved up her still-sore body to follow Becky.

"Ifes, you might not be strong enough to come with me," Becky said, studying her.

"I insist. I don't only want to see you off, but I also want to see how Alexa is faring."

Becky looked animatedly at Ifes and said, "That will be beautiful."



On getting to Alexandria's ward, they explained everything to her and shared the good news with her. She opened her heart, accepted the truth and gave her life to Christ.

Mandy and Chloe were relieved to see Ifes at their doorstep.

Ifes recounted her ordeal in the den of Alexandria and Becky, then the wonderful news of the transformation that happened in the hospital.

Chloe was exonerated and relieved that Ifes came back unhurt. Yet, something still bothered her heart which was her brother Israel. She made a strong resolution to continue praying and believing that one day, Israel's heart would be opened to receiving the truth.

## CHAPTER THIRTY-SIX

"Happy birthday to a friend, sister, coursemate and roommate! No words can express how happy I feel about one person who has touched my life positively. "

Ifes smiled after reading the short note on the green wall opposite her bed. Her eyes darted around the room as she saw the same note passed around each corner of her wall. Mandy had obviously done that overnight, making sure it—her token of love—filled almost every inch of the room too.

Ifes wanted to get up and look for Mandy. She stopped herself when she remembered that she hadn't prayed. Mandy was definitely going to ask her about it. These days, she wondered who had become more prayerful.

Ifes thought of her friend's prayer life and couldn't help the smile that crawled across her face. Prayer had become like air; Mandy couldn't do without it. It was one of the things she lived for.

"Thank you, Jesus!" she said as she ambled to the front of her standing mirror. Looking at her reflection, she couldn't help but wonder in adoration. She was finally eighteen. If she were in her country, she would now be classified as an adult. She would have the right to make her choices, live on her own if she wanted to, and gain her right to franchise, amidst other things.

Looking back to her childhood, she knew it hadn't been easy but yet, she still had every reason to thank God for a successful eighteen-years journey.

Moving away from the standing mirror, her eyes glanced on one of the notes Mandy had pasted. She moved closer and read it as she was seeing it for the first time.

Where was Mandy? She didn't hear any sounds of music from Mandy's room so she wondered if Mandy had gone out that morning. It was Saturday and lectures weren't being held. It was also unusual for her to go out in the early hours of the day.

Turning away from the birthday note, she headed straight to her bedside, knelt down, and had her morning devotion. After prayers, she heard a sound from the kitchen—the sound of the opening and thud of a door—then she saw Mandy walking in with a tray in hand.

"Uh-oh, I thought I might serve you breakfast in bed, but you are already awake." Mandy pouted.

"Better luck with it next year."

"Yeah, sure!"

Ifes' gaze moved to the tray Mandy was holding which contained a mug of hot chocolate and grilled cheese sandwich. Her stomach growled loudly.

Mandy smiled. "You better come feed that hungry lion in your stomach."

Being a party person herself, Mandy made arrangements for a birthday party despite Ifes' objections. "We'll just organise something small at the dorm suite."

Ifes received a call from her mother and siblings but they didn't say much. She wondered maybe it was because she had been away for three years, so she didn't get offended that they did not sound as enthusiastic as they usually did.

Mandy finished decorating the suite, and asked Ifes, as the lady of the day, to come inspect it. "So, what thinkest thou? Est la belle?" Mandy said with a grande flourish and a pitiful attempt at french.

"As beautiful as always." Ifes smiled. "Sometimes I wonder why you choose Peace and Conflict Resolution as your discipline, instead of something like design or decorating!"

At 6:00pm on the same day, it was almost party time.

"We better start getting dressed before the rest of the guys start coming, I don't want the celebrant looking weird at her own party." Mandy whirled Ifes around and pushed her towards her room and helped her to check out her closet. She selected a beautiful purple gown, a silver-colored high heel, a matching set of hair bands, earrings and bangles.

"I think this will be perfect on you." Mandy said as she tossed the outfit to her roommate. "Go ahead and put it on."

When both ladies finished dressing up, they emerged stunning.

"You're really looking good, you know!" Mandy said.

"Thanks, same here."

Thirty minutes later, their friends began to arrive in their dorm room for the night celebration.

Chini ambled in, dressed as glamorous as always. When her eyes met her friend's, she walked towards her and embraced her. "Happy birthday to you!" Taking an approving look at her friend all over, she beamed. "I wish Kachi was here." Chini said, aware of her friend's crush on her brother. "He would have liked what he would see."

Ifes slapped her hand away. "You started your unwanted jokes again."

"Yes, I'm serious! Well, I must take your picture; my brother needs to see this."

With a grin, Ifes rolled her eyes. "You better stop teasing me, Chini. You won't get anywhere with it."

Chini leaned forward and whispered to her ears. "I have not seen you with any guy lately, or you want to tell me you still have a crush on my brother? If so, I think today will be perfect to let him in on that because I'm sending him your pictures right away."

Ifes groaned. "Just leave me alone! What I felt for your brother was a child's play."

"But you are all grown up now, and I believe you have grown with the feelings as well."

Ifes blushed. "I don't know about that, but I don't think so either."

"Yeah, you'll be sure very soon. Wait till I send your pictures to Kachi. I don't think he's got a girlfriend, so I think it will be just cool matchmaking you two. At least, you're eighteen now."

Ifes smirked. "I know how serious your brother has always been. Always smart and focused. He won't take you seriously."

"And that's why you have always loved him, isn't it? He's still handsome and smart."

Chini yanked out her phone and started taking pictures, asking her friend to pose in different styles.

"Wow! This is beautiful!" Click!

"This is great!" Click!

"I think he would love this one the most!" Click!

"He needs to see this one... You are looking lovely... I love the way you smiled!" Click!  
"Oh! I can't believe this. Muah!" Click.

"That's enough for today, Chini," Ifes said, waving her hand.

As Chini was just about sending the pictures to her brother, her phone vibrated, letting her know that a caller was requesting to speak to her.

Ifes saw a hint of discomfort crawling across her friend's face and decided to talk to her after the call.

"I have always noticed this uncomfortable movement each time you answer Jidenna's calls. Do you mind talking about it? The last time I checked, you told me he was asking you out."

"Yes! He still does. But you know, some people ain't just lucky to get what they want."

"But why did you say so, Chini? Jidenna is a cool guy, a Christian and also focused like your brother. At least, I've heard that from you several times."

"Yes, I said so, but I don't really like him that much. He's a great guy, I mean, a really cool guy that most ladies would want to have. Everything is not just making sense to me. Sometimes, I want to talk about it with you, but it makes me feel ashamed."

"And when did we start keeping secrets from each other? Have you forgotten so soon, how we shared our problems and prayed about it together?"

"No, and I'm sorry about it."

"So, what is the matter now?"

"Can't say!"

"Does it have anything to do with his twin brother?"

"No, this has nothing to do with Kasie or any other dude out there. It's just about me and Jidenna."

"Mmm!" Ifes exclaimed. "This is really a tough one for you."

"Yeah, it is."

As Ifes listened to her friend, she remembered her scenario with Mandy and Ayo. The difference was that Chini wasn't entangled in a love triangle.

She reached out and touched her friend affectionately. "Yeah, but in all these: have you asked the Holy Spirit for His all leading? Ayo spoke to me the other day and I learnt a lot from him which was about involving the Holy Spirit in even our relationships."

"No, I haven't really thought about it." Chini looked away from her hands to her friend. "But I think I'll give it a try."

"Yes, please do, and the Holy Spirit will direct you. Perhaps Jidenna could be perfect for you. And if it's someone out there, I believe he will show you a way around it."

Chini smiled as relief flooded her heart. "Thank you so much, Ifes. Did you know he is asking for a lifetime commitment? So, I'll just take your advice and pray about it."

Ifes wasn't surprised that her friend was getting a proposal, she was two years older than her. A twenty-year-old lady should expect things like that, right?

"I have really missed our days in secondary school. We don't even speak that much again because of our school activities," Chini said.

"Yeah, I know, right? But out of sight is not out of mind."

"Yes, and I think it was a blessing that we were both accepted into the same college."

"I can't agree more, and I'm happy about that."

"I'm also happy about that too; and don't worry, I believe we will always be here for each other."

Hunter opened and slammed the door with a thud, notifying everyone of his presence. "what's up, cowboys and cowgirls!"

Everyone's gaze turned on him.

"Hey, Ifes, ya looking sweet!"

"Thank you." she replied dryly, feeling embarrassed with the way he played with her. She looked for a fast means to get away from the jerk.

Ayo came to her rescue as he walked in, greeted her with a one-sided hug, and engaged her in a conversation.

As the party started, Ayo could not keep his eyes off Mandy. To him, she was the fairest of them all. Did anyone see what he was seeing? Or was his love for her making her seem a hundred times more beautiful than before?

She overwhelmed him. The way she moved, her warm smile, when she laughed; it was the most beautiful melody he ever heard.

Ayo shoved his hands into his side pockets. It was all he could do to restrain himself from holding Mandy and pouring out his emotions.

Two spots of pink appeared on Mandy's cheeks when she noticed Ayo looking at her. She loved him too, he was also looking great.

As the party went on, someone's knuckles banged on the door. Seeing everyone invited was present, they wondered who it was.

"I'll get the door," Mandy said.

"No, don't worry, I'll take care of it," Ayo replied and got to the door before Mandy. He opened it and saw a man in his mid-thirties standing with a parcel in his hands.

"Good day, I am here to deliver a gift item to a student named Ifesinachi Uzundu. It's her birthday gift."

"Oh, alright!" Ayo stepped inside and called Ifes. Ifes moved to the door, collected the package and signed before the carrier exited their doorstep. She carried the small box and tossed it on the centre table.

"What's that?" Mandy asked.

Ifes shook her head. "Don't know. A courier brought this, and he said it's a birthday gift from a loved one."

Curious, Ifes couldn't wait until the end of the party to open the beautifully wrapped box. She opened it and saw one large envelope and a smaller one at the corner. She took out the small envelope and saw a handwriting she recognised very well.

*"A letter to my daughter."*

Feeling excited, she tore open the envelope and started reading her father's letter.

*Hello my dear, I'm so glad to witness this day of my life. It's a pleasure to see you turn eighteen, though I am not there to celebrate with you.*

*You don't know how happy and proud I am of you. Each time I think of you or your siblings, I become elated and I can't help the joy that flows from my heart. I give God thanks for bringing you and your siblings into my life. You made me a proud father, even when I could not live up to the expectations of taking you to college.*

At this point, Ifes almost cried. To Ifes, her father lived more than his expectations.

*I am currently in the UK. I finally travelled for my internship. It will last for eighteen months.*

*I couldn't make it to the US because of my busy schedule, so I decided to send you a little gift. My dear, you are now eighteen. In Nigeria, when people turn eighteen, they become eligible to get their driver's licence and drive their car. I have asked the delivery man to deliver the car to you at your doorstep. You can ask your friends to help go through the documents inside the big envelope to confirm if they are intact.*

Ifesinachi's mouth and eyes widened in astonishment.

*I hope you'll soon learn how to drive so you can earn your driver's licence. I trust you, my dear. You are smart.*

*I know your mum and siblings already called you to give their birthday wishes, but I specifically asked them not to say much because they might spill the beans. I wanted to give you the news myself.*

Ifes wondered what news.



*Before making my trip to the UK, I was transferred to the national headquarter in Port Harcourt, This meant that I had to relocate. With delight, let me announce to you that your mum and siblings are currently in our new home in Port Harcourt.*

Ifes screamed excitedly at the top of her voice. She didn't know how to contain the glee that welled up in her heart! A new car as her birthday present, eighteen months of internship in the UK, and finally, a new location in a bigger city. All this in one day!

*There are other gift items inside the box I sent you that I don't want to mention. Please take a look at it, and I hope you will like it.*

*With love, your father, Ifeanyi Uzundu.*

She read the letter for the second time out loud in the hearing of her curious friends. They all scurried downstairs to the dorm parking lot and spotted a brand new car which had the same matching description to what was written in the letter.

Oh, wow! This was great! They all congratulated her. Having learnt how to drive and given his driver's licence, Ayo was asked to help Ifes with her driving classes.

## CHAPTER THIRTY-SEVEN

At the end of the first semester, the Quakers started leaving the college.

Ayo drove Mandy, Megan, Skylar, Avery and Ifes in Ifes' car while Ian drove Ryan, Hunter, Anne-Marie and Bradley in Hunter's car. Ayo and Ian were added with the responsibility of safely driving the cars back to the college. They helped the travelers to offload their luggage before bidding them farewell.

As they darted to the lobby where the duo stopped following the travelers, Ayo stepped in to walk beside Ifes.

"So, I won't be seeing you after sometime?" Ayo asked.

"Yeah!" Ifes grinned up at him.

"And Mandy."

Her grin broadened. "I was just waiting for you to mention that name."

"You know how special she is to my heart."

"Yes, but you still declined her invitation to come along with us. She felt bad, you know."

"I know, and I already said my apologies. I believe she understood."

What can a girl who is in love possibly understand? Ifes wondered. Maybe, just maybe someday she would probably find real love and know how it felt. But for now, she wasn't ready. No, no! Not after what she had seen with Mandy and Ayo.

Ayo's voice broke her chain of thoughts. "I know you disapprove of my not coming along with you, but you've also got to understand, Ifes."

Ifes scoffed. "What I approve or disapprove doesn't count in this case. It's between you and Mandy."

"Yes, I know. I pondered over my decision carefully, you know." Ayo shifted uncomfortably from one foot to the other. "Mandy is beautiful. I mean, very beautiful! When I saw her the other day at your birthday party, it was all I could do to prevent myself from proposing to her

already. It took an ounce of willpower for me not to do so. If I come along with you guys, I might not be able to restrain myself any longer."

Ian turned and gave Ayo a signal he was familiar with. Ayo nodded affirmatively and tilted his gaze back to Ifes.

"What was that?" Ifes asked

"It's nothing much. Ian was just telling me that we should leave soon."

"Oh! I see you two seem to be getting along just fine."

"Yeah, and the guy is cool."

Ayo gazed solemnly at Ifes. "You and I know that Mandy needs you now more than me?"

"Yes."

"So, take good care of her for me, will you?"

"I'll try my best!" Ifes answered delightedly as though she was just elected the president of the country.

"Also remember the most important thing—Christ! Teach her about Christ till her heart swells with it. Her soul is more important than my love for her."

"Oh, Ayo!" Her knuckles brushed his arm. "I'll do it."

After the conversation, Ian and Ayo ambled out of the airport's lobby. The duo cast one last glance at the ladies they both loved but had not told. Anne-Marie and Mandy didn't look eager to go either.

Ian was now in his fourth and final year; Anne-Marie was not certain of the future. He would soon be graduating and he would leave her all alone in this college. "No! That mustn't happen."

"Oh, Lord! Please make this fast. I'm not sure how much time we have again!" Ayo prayed concerning Mandy.

"What is it, Alex? What is happening?" Ian's question made him realise that he had voiced out his innermost heartcry.

"Ha! N-nothing." Ayo shook his head.

"But you don't look ok, budd!"

Ayo forced a smile. "Don't worry, I'll be just fine." And he would be fine indeed.

"You sure you don't want to talk?"

"Positive."

"Alright then, but I'm around anytime you decide to change your mind."

"Thanks man." Ayo darted away from Ian to Ifesinachi's car.

A week later, it was just three days to Mandy's twentieth birthday. She and Ifes made earnest preparations, checking every detail to ensure that everything turned out perfect.

But since that morning, Mandy had been feeling uneasy. She and Ifes were supposed to go shopping for a few more things for the event, which, of course, she was supposed to be excited about. But no! Something, something else pricked her heart. But what was it?

That was the problem—she didn't know. Ifes said to pray each time she felt uneasy, she tried to pray but didn't know what to say.

Her phone chimed, she picked it up from her side stool and stared at the caller ID.

Seeing her Father's name, something inside her stirred up an alarm of panic. "Oh, Lord! What has happened to my daddy?" Was her father the reason for the chill that ran down her spine? No, he couldn't be!

Hands trembling, Mandy tapped on the green circle of her phone and slowly drew it up to her ear. "H-hello!"

"Hi, my pumpkin!"

Relief surged all over her body upon hearing her father's lively voice. "Is that you, Dad?"

"Yes, were you expecting someone else's call?"

Mandy let out her breath, that was when she realised she had been holding it. "No Dad. In fact, your call was a relief." Mandy said those words before she thought better of it.

"What happened? Did anything go wrong with you or your friend?" Mr Jonathan asked quickly.

"No, nothing. I just missed you, Dad."

"That makes the two of us." Mandy could hear Mr. Jonathan chuckling from his tone of voice. "And that was why I called, Pumpkin."

Mandy had forgotten what plagued her heart. "So, when are we expecting you home, Dad?"

"I should be back after work hours."

"Okay, you better do, I don't want you feeling too stressed out, old man."

"Oh! well, let me remind you that I'm a young boy still in my mid-forties, widowed with a beautiful daughter."

Mandy smiled and winced almost immediately at her father's remark. She prayed she had not aroused any memory her dad had buried. She still missed her mother; she always would.

Jonathan spoke as though he perceived what was in her heart. "My dear, do not worry your heart. Your mother was a blessing from God and I will always miss her. But I'm glad she's in a happy place, smiling down at us."

Mandy bit her lips.

"And you better cheer up, I don't want Oretha and Jason scolding me from heaven for not taking good care of you."

Mandy grinned. "Alright Dad. Please remember to get me a box of chocolate on your way back."

Her father protested. He had bought some chocolate for her a couple of days back. "You know too much sugar intake is not good for your health, little one!"

"But you know you have to take care of me. I'm just asking for a box of chocolate, not a whole truck of it," Mandy insisted in a baby voice.

Unwilling to continue bantering with his daughter, Jonathan resigned. "Alright I'll get it for you." He could hear her squeal. He quickly added, "But don't expect any more this month again."

"We'll see about that."

Alright, got to go now. I love you, Pumpkin."

"I love you too, Dad." Mandy pressed the end button on her phone and gently tossed it back to the side stool.

The same trepidation she felt prior to her dad's call had returned with full force. And this time, it tore into her soul. Okay, it wasn't her dad, so what was it now?

After showering and dressing up, Ifes scurried downstairs to go out with her friend for shopping. "I'm sorry I took so long. I was trying out different clothes."

"Well, you are here now, so shall we?" Mandy said and they both picked up their purses and went out of the apartment building to the garage.

They entered the car, closed the door, and Mandy couldn't slip the key into the ignition. What was this trouble that played her heart? She tried praying about it but again; the words would not come. Finally; she resigned. "I don't feel like going out shopping again today."

Ifes fastened her eyes on Mandy. "So, where do you want to go?"

"Don't know." Mandy ran her hands through her hair in frustration. "Anywhere. Anywhere but the shopping mall."

Yet somewhere in her heart, a still small voice whispered Skylar's name. Was that it? Had she been the reason for her trepidation?

"Yes, Skylar! Let's go to Skylar's place."

"Alright, Skylar's it is," Ifes said and the duo drove out of the mansion.

## CHAPTER THIRTY-EIGHT

They entered Skylar's compound and headed straight for the entrance door to the living room. Pressing the doorbell, they stepped back waiting for someone to answer the door. When no one did, they pressed again and again. Still, they were greeted by silence.

"I don't think anyone is around," Ifes said when they had gotten tired of ringing the doorbell.

Mandy stared. She was sure something about Skylar worried her. Could her instincts be wrong? But she didn't think she had ever felt that way before.

"I think we should be on our way. Maybe no one is around," Ifes said. She was able to decode her friend's facial expression.

"I think someone's in there. You know how deep Skylar sleeps. Maybe she's taking a nap, and the main gate wasn't locked when we entered." Which was more of a reason for Mandy to be afraid.

"The gatekeeper wasn't there either. I'm thinking he left the gate open for the owners to have access into the building when they return from wherever they went."

Mandy gazed at her friend thoughtfully. "You reckon so?"

"Yeah, maybe we will come check on her later. She should be awake by then."

As they whirled around to walk back to their car, Mandy's trepidation was palpable. She called out to Ifes who was a couple of steps ahead of her. "Hey, Wait up! I have an idea."

Ifes turned her head.

"Instead of going now, I think we should go wait for her in the garden. The garden's just behind the building."

They reached a consensus and ambled around the building to the garden.

As they drew closer, they saw a silhouette standing on a table under a tree. It was Skylar. They moved closer, and saw a rope furled around her neck.

Gasping, they drew back, perplexed and scared. What was she trying to do? Take her life with her own hands? No! Maybe it was all a mistake. They went closer, got a clear view, and gasped in horror.

"Don't come close!" Skylar yelled at the intruders.

Mandy covered her mouth with her palms, gaping in stunned silence.

"What are you trying to do, Skylar?" Ifes asked as though the scene was yet to register in her head.

"What can you see?"

"But why this, Skylar?"

Mandy again stepped forward and tried to reach for the ropes. "And you wouldn't even allow us to come close to..."

"I said don't come any step further or else!"

Mandy drew back, gasping astonishingly.

"It's already too bad enough that you two barged into my house poking your nose around!"

The duo gazed up speechlessly, afraid that any word or action they took without proper calculation might make their dear friend plunge into her doom without thinking twice.

"One more step from any of you and I will end it sooner than you thought I would," Skylar threatened. "Well it wasn't like I was never going to do it anyway. It wouldn't make much difference if I did it now or later."

"Alright, Skylar, we won't try to stop you. But as your friends, don't you think you owe us an explanation for trying to take your own life with your own hands?" Mandy said.

"Oh! Trust me, you really don't want to hear it."

"You think so. Okay, why don't you try us?"

"And you will leave my house after hearing it?"



Mandy didn't know how to answer that question. Would she hear the full story and leave her friend to commit suicide? Surely she could not accept such terms and conditions.

Skylar stared into Mandy's eyes and saw the uncertainty then shook her head. "I know you wouldn't leave me be after telling you, so maybe I'll just go ahead and do it right now."

Mandy's lips parted, she wanted to say something but her trembling lips wouldn't let her utter a word.

"What I'm about to tell you is a secret I have kept from, not just you, but our friends."

Mandy winced inwardly. Secrets! She also had her own secrets. Didn't she also keep it away from everyone? As Mandy pondered over it, she remembered it wasn't only her and Skylar who kept secrets from the rest. Bradley kept the secret of his illness away from everyone too. So, this left her with so much to wonder about what the rest were also hiding from each other, What a terrible squad they made!

"I have a monster in place of a father who always abused my Mum," Skylar started, her eyes distant.

Ifes didn't like the hideous name Skylar called her father. No matter what her reason was, it didn't justify it.

"Everything became so awfully annoying. I persuaded my Mum to divorce him, but she wouldn't, always claim how much she loved him. Today, they have filed for a divorce, and they're currently working on the papers." Skylar sighed, then continued, oblivious of Ifes' and Mandy's uncomfortable gestures.

"But that's not all, the whole thing is really hard on her. My mum loves him so much that she's so vulnerable."

As Skylar spoke, Mandy thought of herself. Did she love Alex to the extent that it made her vulnerable as well? Was her reaction spelling it? What if it turned out that he didn't love her as much? Will it affect her terribly?

Oh, Alex! You won't be the death of me.

"He never took care of my sister and I, always abusing my Mother in every possible way," Skylar said, cutting into Mandy's thoughts.

"He goes out and comes back from the streets to steal my mother's money, and instead of my mum getting all annoyed at him, she would offer to give him more money when he came back."

Mandy and Ifes were dumbfounded and felt bad at the revelation, but Skylar wasn't finished.

"That's not all," Skylar continued. "My sister had a serious car accident that broke her legs. The doctors said she won't be able to ever walk on her feet again. Tell you what? She uses the wheelchair!" Skylar began to wail. " My own elder sister, Joy; Joy now moves about on a wheelchair!"

"As if my sister remaining crippled for the rest of her life wasn't bad enough, her husband I mean that useless husband of hers, left her and ran off. I hope he rots in hades."

At this point, the duo joined Skylar in wailing.

"Joy blames herself for all her misfortunes," Skylar spoke amid tears. "My sister is back home. She is going through a serious trauma. As I speak to you, she's currently having a session with a psychologist. Life's one d\*mn jerk."

"Life's a jerk without Christ," Ifes added silently.

"Her daughter, Olivia, is all she's got in the world."

Skylar saw Mandy's disoriented face but didn't care to spare her the last bombshell. Mandy bargained for it, so let her hear and bear it.

"So, I've finished speaking about everyone. Now, it's time to tell you about me."

Mandy and Ifes looked up to the red-haired girl and trembled inwardly. What was she going to tell them now?

"You both knew the kind of life I lived," Skylar continued her ordeal.

"I dated several men at once. I got pregnant several times, but I wouldn't know who the particular father was. Unwilling to take care of an unplanned pregnancy, I terminated them several times. But the last one I did, ended my world. I almost died. Looking back today, I wish I did."

"But, Skylar!" Mandy called out.

"No, Mandy, you have to listen to what I'm telling you. The last abortion I carried out shattered any hope I have of ever being a mother in the future. So tell me, Mandy, what's there to live for again? What hope do I have now that my world is shattered into pieces?"

Skylar took up the now-empty bottle of alcohol and smashed it on the ground. "Look at this!" She pointed to the shattered bottle. "Look at this bottle down here. Are any of you able to mend it again?" She shook her head. "No, it can never be mended. That is what I am now, a broken home, destroyed sister and finally a shattered life!"

Skylar began to wail uncontrollably again. "There's nothing to live for again, nothing! This is a cruel and wicked world, and I regret ever being born. I regret everything."

"But you didn't tell us anything. Why? Why didn't you?" Mandy asked Skylar, but she knew that question could also be directed to her.

"Oh, I almost did! I remembered a time when the whole situation got to me, I felt like I was running crazy and I needed someone to talk to, and Ifes' name kept chiming in my heart."

Mandy tilted her head to look at Ifes who was beginning to get filled with realisation.

"I made her promise me that she wouldn't tell any of you about our meeting. Looking at your expression, I reckon she kept to her word."

Ifes felt her heart going down her stomach as she clearly remembered that day—the frightened look on Skylar's face, her trembling body, and the way she spoke. What had she done? Why didn't she go back to Skylar and find out what plagued her heart?

"I wanted to start telling her about it when Megan called me. Since then, I have not been able to muster the courage to talk to her again."

"I'm so sorry, Skylar. I'm sorry you're going through all this and none of us were there for you." Mandy said, tears pooling down her face.

"It wasn't your fault." Skylar raised her head and looked at her friends, her vision blurred with tears. "Now that you're here, you might as well pass me a farewell message across to our

friends. Tell them everything I just told you. They will understand. Tell everyone I love them and you all should always keep me alive in your hearts."

"Don't say such things, Skylar!"

She ignored Mandy. "Now I want you to turn around and leave my house unless you also want to tell me how I'll."

Mandy looked at her friend's situation and didn't know what to make of it. Before Christ came into her life, didn't she speak those exact words that Skylar was speaking now? Didn't she tell her father she regretted being born? Mandy felt the sorrow in those words, but she didn't know who, between Skylar and her, suffered the most.

"I said get out of my house you two!" Skylar's voice rang loud. Mandy jerked away from her thoughts.

They wanted to plead with her to stop but she had told them that any persuasion would make her end it faster.

"Alright, Skylar, if that is how you want it, we will leave. But before then, there's something I'd like to tell you too. I have also kept some secrets from you as well."

Mandy saw a flicker of surprise on Skylar's face but she continued anyway. "Not just you, but I also have a secret I have kept from everyone all this while."

Ifes was concerned about Mandy. "Wait, Mandy, are you sure of this?"

"Yes, Ifes, I need to tell her," Mandy replied, not taking her gaze from Skylar.

Voices in Mandy's head bellowed. "What are you doing? What will she make of you after now?"

Come on girl, be wise! You can't say anything now."

Mandy felt the Spirit of God nudging her to go ahead. Maybe this was Skylar's only lifeline.

"My family and I have had dark moments but we saw the light when we accepted Jesus. Mandy began narrating her ordeal.

"My family ran an illegal business. We owned a brothel, an illegal one where they deceived some desperate African girls who were tired of the poverty, starvation and every other hideous thing in their countries. Those who didn't have good food or clothes, who begged on the streets of Africa, who had no access to good health care, were the people my dad and his colleagues deluded by promising them a better life in America. These people were illegal immigrants, and business was going just fine for my dad and his business partners. But their problems started with one of the Nigerian girls."

Aha! What did Mandy say again about this Nigerian girl? Ifes remembered what she heard, but was there anything more? Everything was registering in her head now. Mandy had reacted the first time she told her she was a Nigerian during their introduction.

At this point, Skylar's eyes and mouth were widely agape as though she was watching a horror movie. Was this her friend, Mandy, beautiful and tall?

"My father's men brought this girl from Nigeria, after luring her with the promise of a good paying job over here in the States. Her family were skeptical at first, But according to my dad's men, she was beautiful and had all the shapes intact, so they thought she was a good asset. After much persuasion, her family finally let her go."

"Don't you want your daughter to go to a better environment where she'll get all the necessary amenities? She will get a good paying job and the money she will send to you would help better your life. She could even settle down and get married to a white man if she wishes. I assure you that your daughter would be in good hands when she comes with us,' they had told the girl's parents."

"Of course, parents and guardians were left with no choice than to release their children after giving such mouth-watering offers."

"Now, back to the Nigerian. She was a Christian. When she got here, she became a tough kid for my parents and their business partners to handle."

"My father and all his staff tried all they could to convince her about making good ends meet by abusing herself sexually, but she declined, she kept saying these nine words: 'My body is the temple of the Holy Spirit!'"

"They didn't know who the Holy Spirit was; neither did they understand what she was saying. To them, Africa was a religious place where the gods they believed in left them with poverty and starvation."

"Each time she said those words, they ended up laughing at her. 'How can you say your body is the temple of your God! Is he that small?' they would mock her."

"They tried all they could, but all to no avail. It went on and on, until the day she set off and wanted to escape. Prior to that day, my dad and his men had noticed some strange movements from her, but it didn't occur to them that she was planning her escape. The night they saw her sneaking out of her room, making her way to the staircase with her luggage in hand and they wanted to pretend as though they didn't see her and let her go. After all, she was of no use to them. But they gave it a second thought as they pondered over the possibility of getting exposed if she was seen loitering the streets of America. So, they charged after her. When she saw them coming, she bolted, maneuvering her way around the building."

Skylar held her breath until it was beginning to choke her. The whole thing was unbelievable.

"As the men came closer, she tried to jump two steps at a time. She tripped on a step, and fell over the rail. Then she landed on the ground with a thud."

"Before my Dad and his men could get to her, the damage was already done. She had broken her neck and her head, but that wasn't the worst. She died! She died!" Mandy said, choking on her sobs.

Skylar had forgotten her own issues and was now trying to digest all Mandy was saying.

"But that's not all, Skylar. I have more things to say," Mandy said.

"My brother was a drug addict and belonged to a gang. It affected his brain and he ended up in a mental asylum."

"What! When did this happen?" Skylar asked. "We were usually at your place. Not most of the time, But at least, we regulated our meetings to everyone's home."

"Of course, I kept a happy face when you guys came around. It is still a wonder to me how I managed to put up with the whole thing. Well, he died, my mum as well, after a strange illness. My dad's illegal business crumbled."

"All these happened after the death of the Nigerian. Everything wasn't looking ordinary again, so my dad told one of his friends who consulted his priest. The priest told us that we were under a curse, and we believed him."

Skylar shook her head forlornly, she didn't know what to make of that. Illegal business, brother ending up in a mental asylum before death, mother dying after a strange illness. All in one family.

"But I am happy that my mum and brother have gone home to their place of rest. Each time I remember this, I smile because I have hope."

Skylar gazed at Mandy as though she was going crazy. "What do you mean, 'place of rest'? They died. Their bodies were cremated. We were all beside you at the funeral!" Skylar looked towards Ifes for affirmation.

Mandy brought out her handkerchief and sniffed into it. "Yes, we did all that. But what I meant to say is, they accepted Christ as their Lord and Savior before they left us."

"What! Are you sure of this Mandy? If so, why did God save Bradley from cancer, but did not save your Mother and Jason?"

"All things work together for good to those that love God and are called by his purpose," Mandy quoted. Skylar did not understand.

"Before now, we all claimed to be atheists. But there is heaven and hell, whether we believe it or not. I don't know why my mother and brother died, but one thing I am certain of is this: they are in their resting place. What about you, Skylar?"

Mandy's question struck Skylar's heart. Was there really heaven and hell? She thought it was all a myth to scare people. "Are you certain of this? Is there heaven and hell?"

"Yes, Skylar. I believe there is, and everyone in the world would go to either place at the end of their lives."

"So, I think I deserve to go to the dark side."

Mandy wanted to shake her friend. Didn't she hear what she said? Mandy pointed to the bottle Skylar shattered on the ground. "What you said about the shattered bottle is true. But for you, it is not!"

Skylar looked to her for more elaboration.

"Your life can be mended, but only by Jesus. Skylar, I want to tell you that he loves you so much. Even if your life is shattered more than this broken bottle here." Mandy darted her gaze from Skylar to the broken bottles. "He can take good care of you, and fix you even better than you could ever imagine!"

She returned her gaze to Skylar. "Just open up your heart. Open the door of your heart to him, give him a place, and you won't regret what you did."

After Mandy finished a brief sermon, Skylar found herself on the ground, her face to the earth as she cried. It was as though an invisible force had taken hold of her.

She found herself crying out. "Jesus have mercy on me! Have mercy on me! I know I'm not worth it, but please, have mercy on me! If you did it for three of my friends, you can do the same for me! Have mercy on me!"

"I am tired of life, tired of the life I'm living! Mandy said you can change me. She said you can reform me and turn me into a better person. Do it now. I'm ready. Help me, Oh, Jesus, help me! Have mercy on me!"

Mandy gazed at her friend dismally. She wanted to go give her a hug and tell her it was alright, but as she made to do so, Ifes held her hAnd jerking her back. "Leave her alone."

"But can't you see she's not alright?"

"No, she's perfectly okay. The Holy Spirit is working on her. Allow him to finish. After preaching to your friend, do not be the stumbling block to her encounter with the Lord."

Mandy drew back, surrendering her friend to the Holy Spirit.

Skylar kept pleading for mercy, and felt the blood of Jesus washing her sins away. She could hear a voice speaking to her.

"I have forgiven you and cleansed you from every unrighteousness. I am your righteousness. I am now your God and Savior. I will stand by you until your last day on earth. I will show you my love, I will care for you because you are my daughter. Welcome home, my child."



"I have taken you from your dark world and brought you into the light. From today, you abide in me and I in you. Cast all your cares upon me and take my yoke for it is light. I am the one that saves. I know the number of the hairs on your head. Before the foundation of the world, I have called you by my name. Even while you were in your mother's womb, I knew you beloved. Beloved, you are welcome into my loving and saving arms."

Skylar felt a strong presence, and began to speak with other tongues.

Mandy watched astonishingly. Ifes came closer and whispered into her ears. "I told you to leave her, that the Holy Spirit is working on her. Now you can see for yourself!" Ifes smiled.

"But everything is scaring me half to death. Are you sure she will be alright?"

"Yes of course, Mandy."

"But this did not happen to me, Bradley or Avery. I got baptised first before speaking with other tongues."

"Yeah, but isn't it amazing that God works in mysterious ways? She's a great person. It's a pity the devil tried tampering with God's property, but thank God, after these long years, she's back to him. Now, by his grace, she will stick with him forever."

Mandy's heart swelled with joy, but it still didn't make her forget the surprise that surged all over her body.

Skylar finished praying and raised up her face to her friends and smiled. "I'm not dying again. He touched me and I am made whole again! He says he's with me always and I shouldn't be afraid of anything!"

At this point, Mandy could not wait to hear everything as she quickly reached out to her friend, embracing her tightly. Ifes joined in and they all shed tears of joy. They all laughed and cried at the same time.

Mandy raised up her hands to the heavens in adoration. "Thank you Lord, thank you! Just three more to go."

## CHAPTER THIRTY-NINE

Three days later.

Mandy opened her eyes in the morning, and beheld the tall and handsome figure of her dad staring down at her on the bed. She quickly closed her eyes as if she was still sleeping. It was all she could do to stop herself from smiling.

Mr Jonathan smirked. "I just saw you open your eyes now, Pumpkin. I wanted to be the first to wish you a happy birthday."

Mandy grinned childishly, popped her eyes back open and sat up. "Dad, thank you so much!" she said as she received the flower and card he handed to her.

"Thank you, my sunshine."

Ifes opened the door and realised she wasn't the first to give Mandy a birthday present. She was disappointed but soon perked up and said, "At least, I'm the first amongst your friends to wish you a happy birthday." What she did not know was that Ayo had sent Mandy his birthday wishes before to her. She wasn't the first. Mandy stayed awake all night, reading his text over and over, smiling and blushing till her cheeks hurt.

Just when she managed to sleep, her father and her best friend woke her up. Now that she thought of it, the sleep evaporated from her eyes, and she wanted to go look at her phone again.

"I believe you have all you need for your birthday party, Princess?" Jonathan asked

"Yes."

"And would they suffice?"

"Yes, I've got more than enough."

Jonathan nodded his head proudly. "I'm glad to be the father of a twenty-year-old daughter." He rubbed his knuckles on her cheeks

Mandy's face flushed as she beamed up to her father, clearly proud of being the twenty-year-old daughter of Mr Jonathan Parker.

"Thank you, Dad!" Mandy sprang up from her bed and embraced Jonathan

"You're welcome, Pumpkin, always remember that Daddy loves you."

"I love you too, Daddy."

Jonathan broke the hug. "I guess this is where I'd leave you ladies. I have to go to work now." Mr Jonathan gave them a peck on the cheek, whirled around and walked out of the room.

Almost immediately, Ifes headed for Mandy's closet.

"Hey! And what do you think you're doing in my closet?"

"I'm trying to check out your outfit to be sure my work is not messed up."

Ifes began checking out Mandy's outfits as she struck up a conversation with Mandy. When Mandy stopped replying, Ifes darted her gaze to her friend, then she saw her looking at her phone, smiling like a high school girl.

She moved close to jab her friend back from her world of fantasy when her eyes stared at something that stopped her from carrying out her plan.

A framed picture of Mandy and birthday wishes from Ayo.

"Dear Mandy, I could not risk having another person wishing you a happy birthday before me, and that was why I sent this at this hour of the day. I hope you like it." Ifes darted her eyes to read the main message on the frame when Mandy noticed her presence.

Mandy scooped up her pillow and stoned her roommate. "You're a busy body, you know!"

"Oh! I'm sorry, Mandy. Don't worry, you are safe. I didn't read the message."

Mandy blushed and looked back at her screen. She liked what she saw. How and when did Ayo take that picture of her? Before now, he had never asked to take her picture, and from what she could remember, he never made any sign of taking her pictures. Did he ask someone to do it for him? Maybe she would think of that later. For now, she wanted to keep basking in the euphoria of the moment. At least, the portrait and the message had given her some clue that Ayo cared for her after all.

"So, have you forgiven me for peeking into your phone?"

Mandy was too elated to be annoyed. In fact, she wondered if she should read out his message to Ifes.

Downstairs, the doorbell chimed and Ifes scurried out of the room to check who it was. She yanked open the door and saw a storky man carrying a parcel in his hands. "Good morning," she greeted.

"Good morning, Ma'am," he replied. "Is this Mandy Parker's residence?"

"Yes."

"I'm a delivery man, I've been asked to hand this over to her, if you don't mind may I speak to her?"

Ifes hurried upstairs and called out to Mandy.

"Yes, I'm Mandy Parker," she said as she shook his hand.

"Alright, Ma'am, please sign here." Mandy did as she was told and collected the package from him.

Just then, the large gate opened, and all Mandy's friends drove in. Mandy and Ifes watched as they all parked in their favorite positions.

That was not all. They came with another set of people, Mandy shifted her gaze, from her friends who were now a couple of steps away from her, to the guests that accompanied them. Looking at their T-shirts, their van and the way they composed themselves, she instantly recognized them. She gasped in surprise and joy. It was her favorite band.

Before Mandy could properly analyse all that was happening, she heard a melodious sound floating around her. For a while, she thought she was now in heaven, singing with the angels. She whirled around and saw her roommate standing with her friends, who were now smiling and looking at her.

Oh! So, she hadn't gone to heaven? It was still her favorite band; they were the ones giving the melodious sound.

After the band finished displaying, she threw herself in the arms of her friends. She was too overwhelmed to speak. The joyful tears that rolled out of her eyes said it all.

When they entered the living room, Mandy was asked to open the gift box she received from the deliverer first before receiving their own gifts. She opened it and saw the name written on it and felt as though she was now flying. Who gave her the wings?

Ayo had sent her a more beautiful frame with a hand-written message, a box of chocolates, a bouquet of flowers, and a birthday card with the shape of love. Mandy looked away from the gift items to her friends. They were all beautiful people, but there was someone missing amongst them, someone she so desperately wanted to see, someone she desired to spend this special day with.

She wanted to see Ayo. She wanted to give him a hug and tell him how much he meant to her. She loved him; she always would.

She took up her phone and dialled Ayo's number. He answered after the third ring.

"Hello!" Ayo's voice echoed from the other side of her phone. "I knew you'd be very much busy with your friends by now, that was why I haven't bothered to call. I was planning to do that later in the day."

She wanted to speak but didn't trust her voice so she quickly disconnected the call. Ayo called her back. She didn't say a word, but handed her roommate the phone. Ifes got the message and handled it.

It was time to present their birthday gifts one after the other to her.

Chini stretched a silver-colored box at Mandy. "I love jewelry a lot, so I decided to get some for you. Hope you'll like it."

"I love it, thanks!" Mandy smiled and gave her a hug.

Bradley and Hunter stepped out to present their gift. "We know how much you love reading, so we decided to credit your e-wallet so you can buy and read as many books you want online when you feel like it."

Mandy collected the card, and jumped on the lads when she saw the amount they credited. It would be sufficient for a millennium of binge reading online books.

"We are glad you like it," they said, and walked across the living room to their seats.

The rest all came out presenting their gifts. Skylar's turn came. Before giving her gift, she said something that perplexed and touched everyone.

"First, I want to tell everyone that I am now a Christian, and I gave my life to God three days back."

Everyone looked up, astonished. "When? How did this happen?" Hunter asked.

"It happened three days ago. It's a long story. I don't know when I'll be able to tell everyone. For now, I am glad to give out this good news." She finished speaking and turned to Mandy.

She held Mandy's hands. "I didn't know what to give to you because three days ago you gave me the greatest gift of my life. I remember we used to be a circle of dark friends."

Bradley, Avery and Ryan nodded affirmatively but Megan, Anne-Marie and Hunter were uncomfortable.

"But this changed after your encounter with the African who was assigned to be your roommate." Skylar continued.

"Looking back now, I'm beginning to wonder, what if you had not gotten along with her?"

Mandy felt embarrassed. "Then, I think you should be thanking her. She brought us the good news."

"Yes, she did. She was our link to the light, And for the past thank days, I've been thanking God that she crossed our path. But what of you, Mandy? You were the door which Jesus used to enter our hearts. What if you had not listened, believed and told us? You know as well as I do that I'm not supposed to be alive by now."

At this point, everyone except Ifes and Mandy gasped. "What are you saying?" Megan asked.

"You ain't making sense, Skylar," Hunter said.

"You speak in an unknown language," Anne-Marie chimed.

"Can someone go straight to the point? I'm confused here."

Everyone was beginning to get uncomfortable apart from the three ladies who knew what happened three days back. But Mandy and Ifes would not speak of it until Skylar was ready to do it herself.

Skylar didn't care about their exclamations. She ignored them and continued addressing Mandy. "So, this is what I have for you." Skylar stretched out her hands.

Mandy received the bag from Skylar's hands and opened it with tears of joy dripping down her eyes. It was a King James Bible.

"Like I said earlier, God used you as the door to reach out to all of us, and that is why I'm handing you this Bible. You could also be the door to leading other people to Jesus!" Skylar wiped the moisture in her brown eyes. "You're strong, Mandy, and I know you can do it!"

Everyone in the room was touched by Skylar's remark. Mandy and Skylar embraced each other, crying as they remembered the event that took place three days ago.

After the celebration, everyone left for their home, leaving Mandy to pack her gifts.

After much persuasion, Ifes had also gone with Chini to spend the rest of the vacation in Los Angeles. Ifes would see Kachi, just as Chini planned it to happen.

Mandy kept staring at what everyone had given her and was overwhelmed, she quickly reached out her hands to take the one she regarded as the most precious gift that had been given to her. The Bible that Skylar gave was more than every other gift, even that of Ayo did not come close. And Mandy was going to forever cherish that Bible despite the fact that she already had three different versions.

Mandy embraced the Bible tightly to her chest. Skylar did not just give her a physical book but she had given her the words of the heart, and she now knew the direction to take.

Christ was now the centre of her life. He was above Ayo, above her dreams and aspirations, above all she lived for. She could do without all of them now, but she could never do without Christ. She would keep that in mind.

She smiled as reality washed over her, nothing could stop the river of excitement that flowed from one end of her heart to the other.

"Oh, Lord, I have written the name of Jesus at the centre of my life. He is now what matters to me. Precious Holy Spirit, help me live for him, help me love him and help me do all that he desires."

Skylar thought that Mandy had given her the word, but it was both ways. She had also reached out to Mandy and given her the good news of Christ.



## CHAPTER FORTY

The Quakers resumed the second semester and it was time for Mandy and her squad of friends to return to college. Everyone was excited about it but Mandy was more excited, she would see Ayo again and she would tell him all the events that took place during her birthday and the change that a simple act aroused in her life. Skylar's words and her gift, she would never forget them.

Mandy and Ifes entered their dorm room. Mandy quickly went to work and started unpacking her luggage. She could not wait. She'll give Ayo the full gist. Ian too, for he had been nice to her over the years.

Mandy finished unpacking and darted into the bathroom and had her shower. At that time, her roommate was exhausted and wanted to eat something good and sleep for a while. Mandy, on the other hand wasn't hungry or exhausted one bit.

"So, what do we make for dinner?"

"I'm not hungry," Mandy replied. "I'm going out now. You can figure out what to eat."

Ifes was too tired and decided that she would just have a nice sleep first before deciding on what to eat. Maybe by then, Mandy would be hungry as well. Mandy made to leave the dorm room when someone's knuckles rapped on their door.

She hoped that whoever was at the door wasn't going to stop her from going to do what she planned. Praying softly in her heart, she reached for the door and yanked it open.

Her breath caught in her throat and her eyes widened in pleasant surprise. Smiling, she drew in a sharp breath, stepped beside the door, and said, "Come on in."

Ayo was elated to see Mandy and her friend back in college. "I heard of your arrival so decided to come and see you. How are you?"

"I'm fine. It's good to see you," she replied, grinning broadly.

"Same here, I've missed you too, you know."

Mandy blushed. "Yeah, I was just about coming to see you," she said, ushering him to one of the seats in the dorm room.

The three of them exchanged pleasantries. Mandy could not wait to start telling him the whole gist.

Her roommate laid in bed, she turned on her side and slept off with the voice of Mandy and Ayo drifting away slowly as she navigated to dreamland.

"So how was your journey back to Pennsylvania? Hope it wasn't that stressful?"

"No, not at all!" Mandy replied, entering the kitchen and returned with a tray that contained two glasses of orange juice and her favorite biscuits. They continued speaking amidst eating.

"We both had an agreement that you'd tell me about how you spent your vacation when you return, so let's hear it."

Mandy's eyes glinted, and she started talking. "Yes, Alex, I've never celebrated my birthday as beautifully as I did this holiday!" Then, she made a pouting face. "Though I wished for one thing that didn't happen."

"Which was?" Ayo asked.

"I wished you were there!"

Ayo moved his hands. "I'm sorry. Hope you didn't miss me that much?"

"Of course, I did! But something else happened, something very beautiful, something you won't believe. Well, I don't know if you could imagine it or not."

He felt the glee in her voice as she spoke. "Well, let's hear it. You seem to be so excited about it."

"Yes, I am." She talked and laughed at the same time. "During the vacation, I was able to find the cause of my life." Mandy went on to elucidate everything to him.

"You said you came back to college with the Bible?" Ayo said.

"Yes I did."

"So where is it? I wanna look at it."

Mandy stood. "I'll be back."

"Here it is." She walked towards Ayo handing him the book that had altered the course of her life.

"It's beautiful," Ayo said. To him, both Mandy and the Bible were beautiful.

Mandy beamed. "I'm glad you like it." She returned the Bible to the nightstand and walked back to her seat.

"So, seeing that I missed out on your birthday, I'd like to make it up to you." As he spoke, he felt every fibre in him nudging and cheering him on. "That's if you don't mind though."

It was time he spoke to her already. "I waited, Lord. I waited and it was worth it!" No need keeping her or himself waiting again, he loved her so much and it was time she knew about it. Ayo looked forward to enjoying a great relationship. With Christ in the centre, all was going to go well.

He was so elated he wanted to punch his fist in the air but he wondered what Mandy would make of that. It wouldn't be good for her to tag him crazy at this point, so he fought to control his emotions.

He wanted to scoop her up in his arms, spin her around and tell her that this was the moment he was waiting for, but he still fought to control that as well.

Ayo shoved his hand into his right pocket, brought out two papers, and handed it over to Mandy.

"What's this?" she asked, taking the paper from his hands to read it herself.

"Movie tickets!" She exclaimed, looking at Ayo

"Yes, movie tickets. I'm inviting you. Can you come along?"

"Yeah!" Mandy said with so much excitement brewing from her voice. "Yes, I'll come along with you!"

"Alright then, I'll be waiting."

"Okay, let me go get dressed." She tossed the tickets to him, stood to make it to her room when Ayo held her hands, pulling her to a halt.

"You are beautiful this way. So, shall we?"

Mandy blushed with the way he looked at her, "Yes, let's go."  
And the duo scurried out of the dorm room.

Ayo bought the ticket to one of Mandy's favorite movies. As she watched the movie, Ayo watched her. She was so thrilled with every action. Not being a movie person himself, Ayo only came because it was a valid means to spend time with her.

Only a few movies had been able to catch his attention, the same movies he told Ifes on their way to Pennsylvania.

He preferred watching documentaries. He could see the ten wonders of the world, how the world was developing and leaving Africa years behind. Discovery, science, everything happening like magic.

As Ayo continued in his reverie, someone tapped him. "Hey! Ayo, did you just take that in? Oh! That was quite good! I can't believe I was holding my breath all through that moment!"

Ayo quickly composed himself as though he was also flowing along with the movie and mimicked the way she reacted. "Yes, everything was captivating!" he said quickly, but Mandy did not notice that he was forging his excitement. Well, how could she have noticed? The way he reacted was even a surprise to himself.

"She didn't notice because she loves you," a voice said in his head.

"Yeah!" he replied, "I love her too!"

Mandy kept calling out to Ayo, wanting to discuss one or two scenes from the ongoing movie. Ayo knew that he must bring himself to concentrate on the movie if he was going to get what he wanted that day. So, he completely centered his focus on the movie.

After the movie, everyone began to file out of the cinema. Ayo intertwined his fingers with Mandy's as they strolled out.

"Thank you for taking me to the movies today!" Mandy said when they were well away from the cinema walking back to their dorm room.

She didn't offer that they drive in her car to the cinema because she wanted to walk with him. If they drove, they would reach the cinema in fifteen minutes' time, but walking with him would give her thirty minutes extra to be with him. She wouldn't mind walking for the whole day with Ayo.

"I'm glad you enjoyed yourself."

"Yeah! I am glad too, especially because you came along with me."

Ayo pulled her to a stop and whirled her around so her gaze met his.

"Mandy!" He called out, his pulse running wild. He didn't trust his voice, but he was going to speak anyway. He wouldn't let this chance pass him by.

"Yes, Alex," she replied, her gaze matching his.

"I'm glad you enjoyed the movie. I am also glad that you were happy that I came along." He paused for a while, all he memorized he had forgotten. But blast it all. He would open his mind to this beautiful princess who'd emotionally captivated him, no matter what.

"I- I- I have something I'd like to tell you Mandy," Ayo continued after he had gulped down saliva.

"What is it, Ayo?" she asked, sensing his tense movements.

"I love you, Mandy!"

Those words echoed repeatedly in Mandy's head and heart. Perhaps, this was a dream. She wished Ifes were present to pinch her back to reality. She never saw this coming.

"I waited for you. I waited all this while because I wanted Christ to take root in your life first. And now that he did, nothing else is stopping me. Mandy, I'd like you to give me a place in your heart."

Mandy was still in her state of shock. She opened her mouth but closed it back when no sound came out. Ayo continued speaking.

"I love you, Mandy, so much!" he placed his hand on her chin and tilted up her face to look at him.

She grinned up at him. What wouldn't she give to be with this young man! 'Yes, yes! I've already given you a place in my heart for so long that you didn't know!' Mandy wanted to say. Oh! If only she knew that Ayo had been aware of that.

"Yes, Alex, you've got a place in my heart already, and I love you!"

"I love you, too!" Ayo replied. Mandy threw her hands around his neck and embraced him happily.

Ayo now felt free to scoop her up in his arms and whirl her around, and he did.

Mandy laughed happily, the sound of her laughter was like a sweet melody in his ears. Her brown eyes shone, sparkling the reflection of the moon that was up in the sky.

Ayo looked up and could not express the glee he felt in his heart. He saw the stars and the moon, and felt like they were all rejoicing with him. They had witnessed the confession of his love for her.

"Oh! That's enough, Alex. You can now drop me. Please, drop me down now!"

"No, I won't!" He continued to hold her tight.

She hit him playfully on his chest.

"Ouch!" Ayo dropped her.

He chased after her playfully, threatening to get back at her for what she did. She kept running, giggling like a little child, dodging this way and that.

"You can't catch me! You can't catch me!"

"You think so? Let's see!"

Mandy laughed as she increased her pace, she knew it wouldn't be long before Ayo caught up with her. She couldn't run away from someone who was tall and had an athletic build like Ayo.

He finally got hold of her and yanked her closer to himself.

"Let go of me!" She hit him as she struggled to break loose but Ayo's grip was strong on her.

He tilted up her face to meet his gaze. "I love you!"

Mandy stopped protesting and gave in to the warmth that she felt. "Oh, Alex! I love you, too. I love you so much!"

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Ifes woke up from her sleep and could not make out where she was and what happened before she slept. She tried opening her eyes after brushing her palms across her face.

She heard a growl from her stomach and remembered that she had been hungry but it was overpowered by her quest to sleep. This is what you get when you sleep on an empty stomach.

Slowly, she started gaining the knowledge of the environment she was in. So she was back to college?

She stood to call Mandy, then she remembered that the last thing that happened was, she saw Mandy and Ayo chatting before she drifted off to sleep. Now, where were they? She didn't know, but she would call Mandy anyway.

She got up from her bed and dragged herself to the kitchen to drink water from the dispenser when the door to her dorm room flung open,

Mandy darted in like a merry butterfly. Unable to hold back her excitement, she bolted towards Ifes, and embraced her so tightly that she almost choked the life out of innocent, hungry Ifes.

When Mandy let go of her, Ifes noticed her flushed face and the unusual smile that was etched on her face.

"From what I can recall, two people were chatting in my dorm before I slept off, but I woke up and couldn't find any of them," Ifes teased her.

Mandy could not wait to let the cat out of the bag. "He loves me. He loves me. He loves me!" Mandy was speaking rapidly that Ifes could barely grasp anything.

"Okay, calm down. Take a deep breath and start all over, because I can't make out any sense from all your blabbering."

"He told me that he's in love with me. Oh! you don't know how happy I am!" She embraced her roommate again "I just want to keep basking. The memories are so great. I will never erase it out of my heart!"

"So, you've started dating?" She asked as though she could still not register anything Mandy said in her head.

"Yes, yes, yes! We are. You've got to understand me, Ifes, I said we're dating!"

Ifes smiled and embraced her happily. "I'm so happy for you Mandy!"

"Oh, thank you so much! I know you would and that is why I could not wait to return and give you the good news."

As she went to bed that night, she thought of a greater life ahead with Ayo. If God had brought him into her life, he would preserve both of them. For now, she would continue to stand by him and love him.



## CHAPTER FORTY-ONE

Hunter walked hurriedly along the college alleyway. He was certain the events that had recently been taking place would be the death of him.

Cussing, he raked his fingers through his disheveled hair. What was he going to do now? He had offered to give Kelly a ride before he saw the thugs who had been after him for days. He cooked up stories, and handed over his keys to Kelly so that he could drive back into the college.

Where was Kelly now? Had he returned his car safely to his dorm? There was no sign of Kelly, so Hunter wondered if he had run like a cheetah and outran his car.

"What do I do now? Where to go?" Hunter pondered. His dorm room was no longer a safe place. What would Bradley do or think of him when he saw those thugs after him.

His addictions had cost him more pain than joy. It had ripped off his life purpose; nothing about life excited him again. He had used up his allowances on his addictions. Sometimes, he even stole from his brother. He didn't know if his brother noticed. If he did, he didn't speak about it, and Hunter was thankful that Bradley didn't speak of it. If not, guilt would have washed over him that he would have been forced to spill out everything to his brother. He couldn't afford to do that anytime soon.

He remembered his brother's remark about the people with his kind of addiction. That was before he became a Christian. What about now? Did Bradley still think the same way?

From the little he had been able to hear and learn about Christianity, anyone who was a Christian wasn't meant to condemn his fellow human being, no matter what the person had done. Surely his brother would not condemn or hate him.

Still, he couldn't help the chill that ran down his spine each time he thought of his brother knowing all about his addictions. What of Avery, Mandy, Skylar, Anne-Marie? Ryan was totally out of the picture. What of Ayo and Ifes? Megan was the last person he would seek as regards to this matter.

Love had failed him. They say love triumphs over all things, but it didn't, at least, not for Hunter.

"Call your brother now!" He heard a voice bellowing in his heart.

Instead of giving in to impulse, Hunter decided to first give it a second thought. How would he start narrating the whole ordeal to Bradley? Will he understand? How would he react after hearing the truth? He would probably hear something like, "You are such a mess, Hunter! I'm so ashamed to call you my brother. Just get out of my life. I never want to see you again!" So, what was the need of calling Bradley? Things would only get more messed up and he didn't want that.

A voice kept yelling in Hunter's head and heart. "Whether you tell Bradley or not, you are still gonna die when those thugs catch up with you. So, why not tell him everything? He deserves to know."

Hunter reasoned with the voice in his head.

He had been going to Mr. Master, even when he didn't have money in his pocket. Now he owed the man an amount that could rebuild the whole University of Pennsylvania. Okay, that was an exaggeration.

Hunter reached out for his phone in his side pocket, and remembered he had given it to Mr. Master the last time he went over. He had asked him to keep the phone in order to reassure him that he would return with his money.

"What do I do? I don't have a phone with me. Think, Hunter, think," he chanted. But his mind was blank.

Hunter saw someone's silhouette walking towards him. He focused on the figure now moving closer to him and recognised him to be one of the thugs he met earlier.

He whirled around to run back to the direction he was coming from, when he saw another figure behind him.

Two other guys appeared from nowhere. In no time, they surrounded him like hunting lionesses who had caught their prey.

Okay, he was going to die today! That thought dreaded him. "Please!" Hunter fell to his knees and began to beg. "I swear, I'm not running with your money, please!"

"Be quiet!" one of the thugs said and hit him with a metal on his cheek. Hunter began to bleed through his mouth.

"So, Mister Hunter, ya think ya could run away from us. Ya saw us coming' and handed over your keys to that poor boy. Well, thanks to ya he's fighting for his life now."

Hunter winced upon hearing those words. "What have you done to Kelly?"

And what had he also done? He had risked someone's life to save himself. Just how evil and cynical was he?

Hunter could only hope that nothing would happen to Kelly. If not, he would never forgive himself.

"Wh—what did, did you do t-to him?" Hunter stammered.

"We did almost what we would have done to ya and get done with our business."

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"Go towards the eastern college gate!" a voice whispered to Ryan.

"But why?" Ryan tried to resist the voice. He didn't hear anything again, but he could not resist the urge that he felt. The urgency that came with the whisper was eating deep on him, and it sent chills down his spine. "Alright, alright! I will go!"

As Ryan scurried towards the eastern college gate, he kept looking out for any signs that he might see. Everywhere was beginning to get dark. He could use the help of a torch light. Did he have any? And why exactly was he making this trip to the gate?

As he continued walking closer to the gate, he began hearing muffled voices. He paused in his tracks, trying to carefully scan the environment. The interactions from the muffled voices clearly showed that someone was under attack by some thugs.

Ryan continued drawing closer to the direction the voices were coming from, and immediately gasped at the sight. Hunter was at the mercy of some hoodlums.

This was it, this was why he felt the urge to come over—because of his friend.

They had cornered him to the darker part of the college. It was a big miracle that he was able to see them.

Ryan clenched his fists. How dare these hoodlums? Who did they think they were, attacking Hunter? As he walked towards the thugs, they almost jumped in fright when they saw him, but immediately composed themselves. "Who are you?" someone Ryan perceived was the leader of the gang asked.

"And what do you think you are doing cornering a free college student? Let go of him now!"

To be sure of the voice he heard, Hunter squinted at the figure. It was truly Ryan. He was here, in flesh and blood.

His case was hopeless now, very hopeless. Ryan would know everything about him and he would help the guys facilitate their plans. He hated Ryan, and he was sure Ryan hated him too.

The leader of the thugs fumed at Ryan. "And who do ya think ya are invading our business?"

Hunter quickly spoke up before Ryan could cause him more damage. "Don't mind him. He's a fool. Forget him and let's settle this between ourselves."

Ryan sensed the trouble in those words, and was immediately taken aback. He wondered how Hunter got entangled with this terribly looking gang.

Hunter kept pleading with the thugs not minding Ryan's presence. Ryan was an enemy, and Hunter had learnt not to look up to an enemy for help in time of need.

His friends had thought that he hated Ryan because of Bradley's illness, but he had resented Ryan because of the secret between him and Mandy. Of course, Mandy kept her promise and didn't tell anyone, not even Hunter, but Hunter had overheard their conversation.

That day, he had stormed up to Mandy and confronted her about the situation. Mandy ended up begging and crying, asking him not to tell anyone. He had agreed, but he said something that scared her that day.

"Alright, Mandy, I will not show him how much I hate him for doing this to you. But anytime I get the opportunity to do so, I won't hesitate!"

His hatred for Ryan had lingered, broiling secretly undercover.

Finally, today was Ryan's payback day.

"Please, let him go. Whatever the matter is, I think I can help out."

Who said that? Was it Ryan? Hunter could swear that it wasn't Ryan that spoke even though the voice was similar.

The thugs darted their gaze away from Hunter to Ryan. It was a good opportunity to escape. Hunter thought of the possibility but logic told him that he couldn't run faster than these armed thugs.

"And who do ya think ya are in the first place?"

"He is a fool!" Hunter said quickly.

"He's my friend, and I want to help out with anything that it is that made you come after him," Ryan stated.

Voices in Hunter's head screamed, "No! no! no! Don't say anything to him."

The leader gave a wicked grin. "Boys, he thinks he can help out."

His colleagues laughed with him.

"Hey! dude, your man is stuck with us, there ain't no way out for him from this." He used a foul word.

"I'm sure I could help somehow. Just let him go!" It was more like a plea.

"That's if ya gonna pay us the sum of ten thousand dollars. If not, we ain't gonna let him go, and we ain't got nothin' to tell ya either."

Ryan's mouth dropped open. How did Hunter and these thugs get involved with ten thousand dollars? "But– but how– how do you mean?"

Another gang member laughed. "Look at him. He's stammering. Well mister, that's what your so-called friend owes us, and we're here to deal with him since he's unable to pay up."

Ryan shook his head immediately. "No! Don't touch him please. I, I have the money, and I promise to pay you!"

"So, where is the money?"

"Come with me to my dorm room so I can get my credit card."

The gang leader glared at Ryan. "And have the cops on our heels? Do ya think ya wise? I am beginnin to run out of patience with ya intrudin into this matter."

Hunter sat down on the floor still dazed at what was unfolding before him. Why was Ryan trying to bargain on his behalf? Obviously to find a more dangerous ground to get even.

Ryan prayed in his heart, "Lord, what do I do? How can I settle these people so they can let go of Hunter." Ryan finished that prayer, and he got the answer he was looking for.

Smiling, he quickly reached out for it. It was his neck chain. No wonder that afternoon his heart had poked him to put on that neck chain.

"Thank you, Jesus!" He was willing to let go of anything to get Hunter out of the hands of these terrible people.

Ryan took off his neck chain and thrust it to the leader of the gang.

"Take this. It is real gold, worth twenty-five thousand dollars. It was a present given to me by my dad for my twentieth birthday."

The thug moved forward, and grabbed the chain, licking his lips. "And how am I sure that this is the original gold?"

"You can go check it out yourself with a gold dealer. If it's not real gold, you can come after me instead of my friend, Hunter."

The thug moved away to a corner and placed a call to his master. "Are you a fool? You better grab that necklace and bring it back here to me, idiot!"

"Yes, Master!" he replied, disconnected the call and quickly went back to Ryan. "Alright, I guess I'll take the necklace."

"Not yet, what do you have of my friend?" Ryan moved towards Hunter. "Did they collect any of your possessions?"

"Yes," Hunter said. "My, my phone!"

Ryan patted him gently. "Don't worry. All will be well now." He turned towards the hoodlums. "Get me his phone."

"Why should we do that? It's not here with us in the first place and we can't return it anymore. He gave it to the master himself, so forget it."

"His phone has a tracker, and I'm sure you would easily be found out by the cops if you continued keeping his phone with you. I think it will be better if you give me his phone and be cleared off the hook."

The thug leader was alarmed but stifled it. "It's not with us here. We can go back and bring it to him."

Ryan wasn't going to be easily fooled. "No, tell your master, or whoever it is, to send someone down here with the phone or bring it here himself."

The thugs tried to argue with him but Ryan stood his ground, so they placed the call, and someone quickly delivered the phone.

"Here, you can have your phone," the thug said, handing him Hunter's phone.

Ryan looked at it very well to be sure and when he was certain it was Hunter's phone. He walked towards Hunter. "Here, you are free now. Let's go. I have your phone with me."

Hunter transcended into hysteria. "But they will come after me again."

"No, nobody will come for you again. You are free now, Hunter, let's go!"

Hunter stood. The events that took place recently had just taken its toll on him. Speechless, he just followed Ryan like a moving object which had no control of itself.

When Hunter realised that Bradley was taking him back to his dorm, he began his hysterics. "No! No! I can't go there. Don't let me enter. They will come after me. They know I stay there!"

"They will not harm you again, I promise. You are free from them."

"They promised to haunt me And and... I don't want to go there, I can't go back. Go and get Bradley out of that place. They might hurt him if they don't see me. Get him out right away!"

Ryan shook his head dismally at his friend. They both headed for Ryan's dorm. They entered Ryan's room, and Ryan made sure Hunter was settled before hurrying off to call Bradley.

"Hi, budd!" Bradley said through Ryan's phone speaker

"Hello, Bradley. Please come over to my dorm room now."

"You're sounding strange. What's the problem?"

"Hunter's here with me, and he would like to see you."

"Hunter? Okay, I'll be there right away!"

Bradley disconnected the call and prayed silently that nothing was wrong with his brother as he put on his sweatpants and green t-shirt. Why was Hunter asking after him instead of calling or coming back to their room? Why was Ryan sounding strange over the phone? Had his brother been attacked?

As Bradley pondered over it, he remembered that Ryan had been under several attacks, was that why his brother wanted to see him? Was someone after the three of them?

Bradley got to the front of Ryan's door and didn't bother to knock.

He barged in, his gaze grasped his brother's and he stood in stunned silence. Ryan was cleaning Hunter's bruises.

Hunter swore upon seeing Bradley's horrified look, and quickly turned his face to the wall.

Ryan stood to his feet and approached Bradley, who was still transfixed on the spot.

"Come!" Ryan beckoned on Bradley.

Bradley did not move. "Who did this to my brother?"

Ryan could see Bradley's face contorted with both anger and shock. "Calm down and come over."

Bradley didn't budge. With a sigh of resignation, Ryan went back to working on Hunter's bruises.

Bradley's eyes kept darting from his brother to his friend.

"Please tell Bradley I'm sorry!" Hunter said and slept off.

"Thank God he's finally sleeping now."

"But who did this to my brother? And why did he ask you to apologize to me?"



Ryan was quiet for a while, unsure of the answer to give Bradley.

"You ain't saying anything, and Hunter didn't explain either. You two are confusing me. I remembered you've been attacked several times. Today it was my brother. Do we have a mutual enemy?"

Ryan heard the question and remembered his own issues. Indeed, he had been under attack severally, but the difference between his and Hunter's was that those attacking him had not made their intentions known.

"No! We do not have a mutual enemy. There was a reason for these bruises."

"So, tell me. Explain everything to me."

Ryan secured the lock of the door before he began to narrate the event that took place that night.

"Did they say what it was that made him owe them that amount?" Bradley asked.

"No, they didn't, and Hunter didn't speak of it either."

Bradley inhaled and exhaled deeply. He propped both elbows on his lap and buried his face in his palms.

What was his brother doing that he had kept a secret from each of them? What kind of lives were they living? Bradley remembered that before he was healed of cancer, he had also not told anyone. Little did he know that his brother also had a skeleton in his own cupboard. What was going on?

Bradley raised his face from his palms and gazed at Ryan. "I guess my brother and I are a mess."

"But why would you say so?" Ryan asked.

Bradley laughed bleakly. "But can't you see we've both kept secrets from each other, and from our friends!"

"I didn't know my brother was involved with some thugs that made him owe them up to ten thousand dollars, such an outrageous amount! We are a mess and a disappointment to our parents. I'm sure my mother will be heartbroken if she learns about what had happened between my brother and I. We have really messed up big time."

"I don't think I'll be able to look any of you in the face again. I've kept secrets, and today, my brother's secret has just been exposed."

"We all have our secrets." Ryan was unaware that he had voiced out those words.

"What do you mean, Ryan?" Bradley asked.

Ryan remembered his situation and shook his head. These brothers were not the only ones who were guilty of keeping secrets; he was too. Was he going to be exposed this way, or should he tell Bradley now not to consider his brother's condition as the worst? Would Bradley even understand him right now?

"Indeed, we all have our own secrets," Ryan repeated.

"What do you mean 'we all'?"

"I might not be able to speak for others, but I have kept something away from everyone."

Bradley's eyes opened wildly. "What are you talking about? What secret did you also keep from us?"

As Ryan was about to speak, Mandy led the way as Skylar, Megan, Anne-Marie, Ayo and Ian scurried into the room and made their way straight to Hunter's bed asking torrents of questions.

"Please, don't touch him!" Bradley said. "He finally managed to sleep, let's give him some time to rest."

"I received a call that Kelly was in the hospital after being attacked by a group of armed boys, and I was told that he was driving Hunter's car when the attack happened. Now, Hunter is also not in good condition," Ayo said.

"Yes!" Bradley began explaining everything he was told by Ryan.

They began asking questions, they wanted to know more, but Ryan and Bradley couldn't say more than they knew.

Two days later, Hunter opened his eyes and tried to take in his environment and recall what had happened before he slept. He tried to move but his head was pounding and his stomach was growling, so he relaxed his body and closed his eyes.

Ryan noticed his body movement and went over to him. Bradley immediately followed. "Hey! Hunter, do you feel better now?"

"You must be hungry, may I get you something to eat?" Bradley asked and without waiting for a reply, he scurried to the kitchen.

"I'm here!" Bradley announced his presence as he returned with a mug of hot chocolate and a plate of chicken noodle soup with crackers. "Let's help you sit up now, Hunter, so I can feed you."

Hunter wanted to get up and start eating, but he couldn't. He couldn't look at his brother's face and stifle the guilt that he felt.

As though perceiving Hunter's thoughts, Bradley reached out to his brother. "We can't avoid each other forever. When you learned of my secret, instead of condemning and hitting me, you were compassionate. I even remember how you cried. Your tears broke my heart."

"Maybe it will reassure you if I said it. No matter what you did, you might not say it if you don't wish to, I'll totally understand. And for the record, I've forgiven you!"

Hunter finally lifted up his face to look at his brother through a blur of tears. "I'm so ashamed of myself that I don't deserve your forgiveness!"

"Don't say so, Hunter. Because if that's how it is, no one deserves to be forgiven even by God."

Hunter ignored his brother and moved his gaze to Ryan. "Why did you do it? Why did you save me from their hands when all I've ever done was to detest you!"

"I know you didn't act out of animosity towards me. I'll do more to anyone who tries to stop my brother's welfare if I were in your shoes," Ryan said.

Hunter did not say anything as he gave this long-distance look that made Ryan and Bradley think he had blanked out.

He finally spoke up. "no, Ryan, I wish you were telling the truth, but it is not complete."

"What do you mean?"

Bradley heard a growl from Hunter's stomach and became concerned about his health. "Now, Hunter, you will not say anything until you are done eating your food."

At Bradley's insistence, Hunter finally obliged. He was hungry, but he didn't have the appetite to eat. Everything was like a rock hit on him. He had to let it all out now; it was high time he did.

When he finished eating, Bradley wanted to make him go back to sleep, but he knew his brother's babysitting would not work until he poured out his heart to the two people he had grown up with. "I've got to tell you everything, Ryan."

"I think you should listen to your brother and sleep now so you can relax your heart."

Hunter wasn't having any of it. "My brother wasn't the only reason why I hated you. It was beyond that."

"I don't get you, Hunter. Why would you hate him? Growing up, we've all been good friends to each other. What did he ever do to warrant your hatred?" Bradley asked.

"I hated you, Ryan, because of what happened between you and Mandy!"

"What happened between Ryan and Mandy?" Bradley asked.

Ryan's heart was thumping loudly.

"It is not in my place to say it, Bradley." He faced Ryan. "And Mandy did not tell me about this either. Instead, she made me swear to her never to let anyone know about this."

"You must be wondering how I found out. Everything happened during our 12th grade. That day, it was just the two of you in the class. I was going to drop my textbooks into my locker so I could attend my swimming class, when I heard your conversations. You were telling her how sorry you were, and begging her not to let any of us know about it, and she was crying."

"But you said you love me, Mandy."

"Yes, I do love you!"

"Keep your voice down!" Mandy sniffled.

"I can understand how this must have been terrible for you, but if you truly love me, you wouldn't say a word about it to anyone!"

"When I saw you coming out, I hid behind one of the pillars and watched you walk out of the classroom, leaving Mandy behind. After you left, I walked into the class and was dumbfounded as Mandy immediately changed into her normal smiling and happy face. I fumed, and so, quickly confronted her with it."

"At first she was dazed, then she began begging me, and wouldn't allow me to leave the classroom if I didn't promise not to tell anyone. So, I promised her that all was going to be normal but as soon as I found a reason to hate you, I wouldn't hesitate to do so. Mandy tried to talk me out of it but my mind was made up. Till date, I still kept to my promise. It is left for you and Mandy to say it out if you wish."

Remembering that awful event, tears streamed down Ryan's cheeks. Not because he wasn't aware that God had forgiven him, but he now imagined how it must have affected Mandy in terrible ways.

Was that why she never took interest in any other person before Ayo? Did Ayo give the healing balm to the wound she had been carrying for years?

"After that incident, I concluded you were a bad friend for using someone emotionally and physically. Nothing about you pleased me again, not until the day you saved me and gave me a new perception about you."

Ryan and Bradley could not speak past the lump in their throats.

"Maybe what happened between you and Mandy was a mistake. Maybe it wasn't your intention and I misunderstood and misjudged you. Even if it was intentional, who was I to judge when I had my own weaknesses too. Is it possible to ask for your forgiveness, Ryan? Could we ever be friends again like it was during our childhood days?"

Ryan felt unworthy to be asked forgiveness from. When he didn't say anything, Hunter thought it must really be hard on Ryan to think of forgiving him after all he did.

Ryan finally said, "I didn't save you, Hunter. God did. And he forgave you a long time ago. He's just waiting for you to grasp it."

"Yes, his grace is sufficient," Bradley asserted.

Hunter looked thoughtfully for a while, he knew he had no reason to doubt his friend and brother. They had experienced it first hand before him, so there might be some truth to what they were saying.

"I was addicted to gambling!" Hunter paused waiting for the information to sink in. "We gambled on games, religions, politics, and sometimes on ourselves. It got to a point when I ran out of luck, but I couldn't stop. The urge was usually too strong; I could literally feel it forcing me to get up and go for it when it started. So, that was how I owed the master that amount of money."

Instead of getting what he dreaded, he received the opposite from the duo. Instead of hatred, he received love. Instead of repulsion he received compassion. Acceptance in place of rejection. Light instead of darkness. Mercy in place of cruelty.

"That's no problem, Hunter, the most important thing is for you to make the choice if you want to leave them behind and follow Christ Jesus," Bradley said.

"I'll do anything right now to kill this addiction. You earlier said that he was the one who saved me. Only a person who is merciful and kind-hearted could do such, I'm ready to accept him!"

Bradley and Ryan looked at each other and smiled.

"Yes, His love is unconditional!" Bradley nodded his head, giving Ryan the go-ahead to lead his twin brother to Christ.

Ryan held Hunter's hands. "May I do the honor, if you don't mind?"

"Of course, I really don't mind." And Ryan led him to Christ.

Ryan and Bradley's heart swelled in joy. Bradley could not help his emotions, he felt like the world had been given to him on a platter of gold. "Jesus, how can I thank you enough? My brother is finally saved!"

"He should be baptised now."

"Yes, I think we should take him to the pool side, the one in the campus church. The pastor should be around."

They helped Hunter to his feet and changed his dress, before driving to the church.

Hunter got out of the pool and felt an inexplicable joy that he had never felt all his life. Something wonderful was happening to him! His eyes glowed and his lips parted in a smile. He felt what he had never felt all his life!

"Glory to God!" Bradley said. "Hallelujah!" Ryan replied, grinning. Soon after, Hunter joined in and shouted, "Hallelujah!"

Bradley did not hold back his glee as he quickly placed a call to the rest of their friends. They began arriving one after the other and Hunter recounted his experiences.

Skylar jumped on Bradley giving him a tight embrace. "You're welcome into God's family. You've finally experienced what I experienced during the vacation. I'm so happy for you, Hunter. Indeed, I am!"

Everyone excitedly congratulated him apart from Megan and Anne-Marie who also congratulated him but didn't understand what was so exciting about it.

Hunter went back to his dorm room, a brand new man.

## CHAPTER FORTY-TWO

Friday of the following week.

Ryan tiredly drove back to his dorm room when he was done with his lectures for the day. His backpack hung on his shoulders, swaying as he alighted from his car, which he had safely parked in the dorm's parking lot.

With a swift turn, he made for the elevator. Reaching the front of his door, he sighed and slugged in. He shrugged off his backpack and landed on his bed. He turned on his back, staring at the ceiling.

His pocket vibrated. The last thing Ryan needed was someone calling him after a stressful day. Reaching for his phone in his pocket, he hissed. He stared at the caller ID before tapping the answer button. "Hello, Alex."

"Hey! What's up, dude?"

"Just drained from the day's activities."

"Oh! I see. I'm sorry for any interruption."

"No problem. Want something?"

"Yeah, I was thinking if you could help take Ifes for her driving lessons today on my behalf? I can't teach her because I still have lectures today. My schedule is tight, and by the time I'm done, there will be no time left. You know she can't afford to miss a day."

Ryan placed his hand on his forehead. "So, you're saying I should go teach her?"

"Yes, if you don't mind."

"Gotcha, I'll give her a call then leave my dorm room after eating lunch."

"Thanks man. I knew I could count on you."

"You mean like one, two, three?"

Ayo chuckled. "Stop being silly."



"Whatever."

"It's time for anatomy. Got to go now."

"Catch ya later." Ryan tapped the end button on his phone and tossed it on his side. He got up, took off his shirt leaving only his singlet on as he dragged himself to the kitchen.

He went to the fridge, opened it and brought out a can of soda. Feeling too exhausted to do anything in its proper way, Ryan uncapped the drink and drank straight from the bottle. He didn't stop till he emptied the content into his belly.

He belched in satisfaction and decided to prepare himself some ham and cheese. After eating up the two slices of bread, he made another two slices, and another. He finally felt relatively satisfied after eating eight slices.

Ryan took up another can of soda and emptied its contents straight into his stomach. He was eating like a hungry lion, but he didn't care. He thought it was worth it after so much stress from the day.

After eating, Ryan wanted to go lay back on his bed. When he remembered Ayo's call, he pressed his knuckles on his forehead as he took up his phone with his free hand. He unlocked the screen and put a call across to Ifes.

She picked after the third ring. "Hello, Ryan."

"Hey! What's up, babe?"

"Great, I just finished eating lunch."

"That makes two of us."

"You weren't looking good the last time I saw you. I believe you feel better now?"

"I guess so."

Ifes grinned. "You've got no choice; you have to."

"Well, it's all thanks to Dr Charles for doing this to us. I'm yet to forgive him for sapping my energy today."

She laughed again. "I feel tired too, you know. But no problem, I'm sure you'll get over it."

"Of course. I think I feel better after hearing your voice."

"Thanks, but no thanks for flattering me."

Ryan ignored her and plunged into the reason why he called. "Ayo called to say he won't be able to take you for your driving lessons today. He asked me to do it on his behalf, so I decided to call you about it if you don't mind."

"Uh-oh, seems like he has a lot on his plate."

"Yeah, quite a lot from the way he spoke."

"Okay, so when am I expecting you?"

"I should be there in half an hour."

"That's okay, I'll be expecting you."

"I better go have a shower now. Just a warning though, don't expect too much. You might not get a perfect lesson."

"Let's try you out first."

Ryan shrugged. "All the best."

"I'll be waiting."

"Thanks." Ryan disconnected the call and went to his closet. He changed into a dark, fitted jean, blue t-shirt and a black leather jacket. Putting on his white sneakers, he left his dormitory to his place of assignment.

"Hope I'm not late?" Ryan asked as he scurried into Ife's abode.

"You came right on time. Welcome."

Ryan scanned the suite before sitting on one of the couches. "What of Mandy? I don't see her anywhere."

"Yeah, she's taking a nap."

"Seems like I wasn't the only one who got tired due to lectures today."

"I can't agree more."

"Hunter and Bradley must be sleeping and snoring away. Those twin brothers can sleep like dead animals, you know."

She smiled. "That's not funny."

"Alright, we better start going before we use half of our time to discuss those who are already in dreamland." Ryan stood from his seat and they both ambled out.

Ryan opened the passenger seat for her to enter and closed it when she was well seated, he went over to the driver's side. As soon as he got in, he buckled his seat belt, and had to remind her to do the same. Despite being the daughter of a commercial driver, Ifes wasn't used to the rules. As she buckled her seat belt, her little phone popped out from her side jean's pocket.

"I thought your dad got you a new phone. Why do you still use this?" Ryan asked before he realised that it was wrong to question people's choices. Well, she was his friend, so it wouldn't hurt to ask.

"Oh! This phone?" She raised it to his face. "This was a gift given to me by my brothers. They bought it for me when my parents didn't have enough money to buy me a phone. They worked hard and saved money. Without them, I would have traveled all the way to Pennsylvania without my own personal means of communication with my family or the friends I left behind. This is a gift I cherish a lot. I can't let it go."

"I see you had a good relationship with 'em."

"Yes, and I still do."

Ryan turned on the ignition and drove out of the parking lot. "It's good you and your siblings care for each other. I never had one and if I get married, I'll give my children the advantage of having siblings."

"Don't you think you're still too young to start thinking of marriage?" She smirked.

"Well, it's not in my current agenda, but that doesn't mean it is wrong to think about it once in a while."

As they continued discussing, Ifes began feeling on easy about something Ryan was oblivious to.

But he finally noticed. "Ifes, I noticed a car has been trailing behind us. At first, I thought the driver was driving on his own, but then, I noticed they slowed down when we did, and increased speed when we did as well."

Ifes suspicions had been confirmed. Someone was really after them. But to what end? "How many people can you see inside the car?"

Ryan looked at his rearview mirror. "Can't really say. It seems the driver's face is masked, and I can see more than two silhouettes."

Cold chills ran down Ryan's spine as he wondered if they were his attackers. But today he was with someone. Were they also going to harm her? That thought scared him and he was beginning to wonder why he did not report to the cops since the first attack. Was his negligence going to cost him and his friend?

"What will we do?" Ifes asked.

"Don't know. I'm as confused as you are right now."

"Should I call the police?"

"No, we've got to be sure that these people are truly stalking us. Now listen to me," Ryan continued, "Do not hesitate to dial the emergency number should anything go wrong!"

"Yes, I will."

Ryan kept maneuvering the road, but the second car was up to the task. Getting to a point, the driver started driving fast to catch up with Ryan's car. Ryan stepped on the gas, but the driver

in the other car was prepared as well. Ryan made a swift turn at a sharp bend, and the car skidded briefly out of the lane. Gripping the steering hard, Ryan fought to keep the car on track.

"Please drive faster, Ryan. They are getting closer to us!"

"Now, I want you to stay put and fasten your seatbelt." Adrenaline had shot through Ryan's system, and he was going to do something crazy.

Ifes did as she was told, but was acutely shocked when Ryan began to slow his pace. "What do you think you are doing, Ryan?"

"Do as you're told, and don't ask questions!"

Ryan kept slowing down his pace until the car got to him and overtook him. Then, he quickly made a U-turn and reversed to where he was coming from.

"Look at 'em, bunch of fools!" He laughed as he saw the way the other car was thrown off balance. His joy was short-lived when he saw the same car coming behind them in fast motion. Ryan continued driving hoping he would see the nearest police station. His mind had been so engrossed in his stalkers that he didn't know he had driven past three police stations. Even Ifes was oblivious, frightened out of her wits.

Ryan slowed down a bit in order to make another turn when the car caught up with him and pulled up in front of his car. Ryan stepped hard on his brakes so that he wouldn't collide with the car that had abruptly pulled in front of him.

Two figures speedily alighted from the car and bounced over to Ryan's side. They pointed a gun at him, commanding him to come down from his car.

Taking note of what was happening, Ifes quickly dipped her trembling hand into Ryan's pocket. She pulled out his android phone and shoved her small phone in its place. Ryan's abductors didn't see what had just transpired.

Ryan saw what she did and was amazed. She gave him the look that read, "I'll come and get you." Ryan's blue eyes were fixed on her as the kidnappers manhandled him into their vehicle.

Ifesinachi's heart began to thump loudly as the kidnappers of Ryan disappeared out of sight. She quickly dialled the sim in her small phone with her big phone, thankful that she had set the small phone to vibrate mode only.

Praying silently in her heart, she hastily called Mandy with Ryan's phone. "Mandy, pick up, pick up!" She kept mumbling in frustration. She had called Mandy up to five times but Mandy still wasn't picking her calls.

Mandy picked the call after the seventh time. "Hello, Ryan! Why are you disturbing my precious nap?"

"Hello, Mandy! This is not Ryan. It's me Ifes! You have to come now, come to—" She looked around for any sign to give her the address.

"But what happened to Ryan? And why are you speaking so rapidly? Why are you using his phone?" Mandy sat up in her bed, a panic alarm ringing in her head.

"I'll tell you everything when you get down here. You have to come now! Come with the guys. You've got to help me out of this right now!"

"Okay, I'm coming. Just stay put where you are, honey, and don't move. I'm calling the guys right away!" Mandy said and disconnected the call.

Ifes kept swaying back and forth, praying in her heart. "Lord, please keep him from evil in the hands of those who abducted him, whatever may be their plans. Holy Spirit, be with him."

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Ryan watched silently as his abductors drove him to an unknown destination. He had asked them several times where they were taking him to, but all they could do was yell at him to shut up.

The driver gave an instruction to his colleague who was sitting in the passenger's seat. Then, he took out his phone and placed a call.

"Hello, ma'am, we have the boy with us now." Ryan could hear a female muffled voice coming from the phone's speaker. He strained his ears to hear the words but got nothing.

Had a woman asked them to capture him? If so, what did he ever do to warrant that? Ryan concluded that whatever it was would unfold in the next few minutes or hours.

"No, ma'am, we didn't make him unconscious, but we've searched him, and he's got nothing on him; no phones either."

Ryan remembered the time they searched him and couldn't find anything. At that moment, he was grateful Ifes had taken out his phone and slid in her small phone so that they barely noticed. That was why he had been asking his abductors about where they were headed to, but they weren't easily fooled. He would have to figure out a way of finding out their location from these men if he wanted to be traced by the gal who had put up that brave act.

"She promised, she promised to come for me!" He knew she would be in panic by now, and he wanted to slip out the small phone to speak to her through it. He wanted to tell her that all was going to be alright.

"I'm sorry, ma'am. We will do as you said."

Ryan wondered what the man was apologizing for. Before he could finish processing that, the thug disconnected the call and reached out, using a handkerchief to cover his nose. He blacked out.

Mandy and the rest of the guys arrived at the address Ifes gave. Avery and Ayo were absent because they were still attending lectures. Mandy also called Chini.

Ifes told them the whole ordeal. She was still shaken from the whole occurrence.

Mandy embraced her roommate while the rest watched astonishingly. "You're indeed a brave girl. I'm proud of you. I could never have thought of doing what you did!"

Bradley took the phone from Ifes and put it on loudspeaker so everyone could hear. "I think they are still on their way. I can hear the sounds of cars and car horns."

"But where are they taking him to?" Hunter asked.

"I can't speak past what I just heard."

"Ryan has been having a series of attacks. I don't know why he didn't involve the police," Anne-Marie said.

"Ryan said going in and out of the police station would freak him out, and he didn't want anything that was going to distract him from his studies," Hunter chimed in.

"Besides, it seldom happened, so Ryan didn't give it much consideration," Mandy added.

"Now, it's obvious that someone has been after Ryan all this while," Bradley said.

"But who could it be?" Chini asked in worry.

No one could give an answer. They all kept quiet for a while before Megan broke the silence. "Are you sure they were not coming after you?" She gave a pointed look at Ifes.

Ifes pointed to herself.

"Me?" she asked, surprised at the abruptness of that allegation.

"But how could you say that? I've never been under attack before!"

"Ryan has been under a series of attacks; he had never been abducted. But today, he was in your car when he was taken away by some unknown men. Tell you what, I am bringing the cops into this!"

Feeling concerned that this might truly be related to Ifes, Chini spoke up first. "Wait! You can't be sure this is related to Ifes!"

"Trying to cover up your friend?"

"I think she's right," Mandy said. "We can't be sure this is related to her yet."

Megan glared at Mandy. "I can't believe you're clearly defending her in place of Ryan!"

"Ladies, wait!" Hunter spoke up. "This isn't the time to apportion blame. We should be thinking of how to find Ryan."

"What's wrong with everyone!" Megan yelled. "You think I am over-reacting, right?"

"No one thinks so, and no one says so either." Bradley came to his brother's defence.

"Oh just shut up, Bradley! Didn't you hear your brother speak? He was accusing me of..."



"I think I have an idea."

Everyone looked at Chini, who had snapped her fingers and spoken.

"I have a friend who works with the FBI. I think we should give him a call. He might help us get around this."

"Who is your FBI agent? And how are we sure we can trust him if you too ain't related to this!"

"Megan!" Skylar called out.

"Oh please, Skylar! You too should stop being ridiculous. How could she pop out from nowhere and start offering to help? As if it wasn't bad enough that Ryan was kidnapped in her friend's car!"

"You better leave Ifes out of this because she has nothing to do with it," Chini warned. "Plus, I am offering to help because my friend is entangled with this mess!"

"Chini, please calm down," Ifes said, then she faced the rest of the gang. "Mandy, Ayo and I know who she is talking about. I think we should call him."

Hunter eyed Megan before speaking to Chini. "Please put a call across to your friend."

Chini waited for approval from everyone before calling Jidenna. She explained everything to him and asked for his twin brother's urgent help.

"Are you sure you'll be safe with them over there, baby, or should I ask my brother to also get you out of there?"

"I'll be fine. They're my friends so I can't leave them."

"I understand. Stay safe, and do not hesitate to call should you sense any trouble."

"I will. I have to go now so you can call him."

"I'm putting a call across to him already. You should be expecting him any moment from now."

Chini tapped the end button on her phone. In less than forty seconds, another call entered. "Hello, Kasie, and before you start asking, let me explain to you why I had to ask your brother to help get to you first."

"Don't worry your head. Jide said it's an urgent matter."

"Yes," she said and began telling him all she knew.

"Oh! okay! I don't know why you don't want to involve the cops. I reckon your friend has some luck because one of my colleagues and I arrived in Philadelphia for an official assignment days ago. Since we are off duty now, we will look into this matter. But I can't assure you that at the end of everything, the cops won't be aware of it."

Chini wanted to protest, but she knew there was no time for that. "Alright, we'll talk about that later. Let's find Ryan first."

Kasie took down the address from her and promised he would arrive there soon with his colleague.

The FBI van arrived at the location in little time. Kasie and his colleague alighted from the vehicle.

"Hi everyone!" They waved their hands to the people who called them.

"I am Kasie Opara." He showed them his identity card. "And this is my colleague, Danny Lee. We would have asked for some proper introduction from y'all, but we will work with what Chini told us for now."

Chini gave Kasie a one-sided hug. "I'm glad you came. Thank you."

"It's okay. My brother asked me to make sure you are safe. Are you sure you don't want to leave now?"

"Don't mind him; you know how he worries a lot about me. I assure you that I'm okay."

"Alright, if you say so, we'll get into the action of the moment."

"May I have the phone?" Danny asked.

"Yes!" Bradley replied, handing him the phone. "We haven't been able to get anything so far."

Danny mumbled under his breath as he collected the phone and tried listening. "If I am right with what I am assuming, they are currently on a highway." Kasie let go of Chini as he drew closer to his colleague so that they both listened to the phone's speaker.

"And we ain't used to Pennsylvania; if not, we would have been able to trace them by now," Kasie said.

"Yeah, so I guess we'll just follow plan B."

"What is plan B?" Skylar asked curiously.

Danny tilted his head to look at the red-haired girl. "We will wait for them to talk, that might give us some clue."

"Hey, Danny! I just heard a car's horn, and the sound of a gate opening."

Daniel returned his attention to the phone. "This means, they have gotten to the location they were taking him to."

The FBI agents heard the sound of footsteps, muffled voices, and a door opening and closing. Danny scratched his head briefly thinking of how to get around the situation as his colleague continued to tap his foot on the ground.

"Hey, Danny, I think someone is now speaking more audibly now."

Everyone kept quiet to allow the FBI to listen carefully. They put on their tape recorder to record anything they might miss out.

"Hello, Ma'am, we have successfully taken him to the place we told you. You need to start coming right away. All the houses in Street Avenue are almost the same color. I doubt you'll be able to find the specific one if it gets any darker."

The FBI agents quickly jotted down the information they got. Street avenue. Houses look alike. The same colour.

"Just to make sure you don't miss the location. Come over to the 29th house. It's opposite the first nightclub named Lights off."

The FBI jotted it down quickly. 29th house. Adjacent to the first nightclub. Lights off.

"No, he is still unconscious."

"Alright, we'll be expecting you."

"Hey! Tiger and Jay, come take this boy to the room at the east wing." The shuffling of feet was heard. Another sound like the heaving up of a heavy load was heard.

"The one with only one window."

"Yes, boss."

The FBI heard the sound of a door opening and closing and when they didn't hear anything again, they figured that Ryan must have been locked and left inside the room all alone.

"It is obvious a woman had sent the abductors to get Ryan," Danny asserted.

The FBI watched as the students' faces contorted into confusion.

"Who is she and what is her motive for abducting him?" Ifes asked.

"That will be unfolded to us in the next few minutes or hours," Kasie replied.

## CHAPTER FORTY-THREE

Woodway, Texas.

The woman sat on the seat, close to her wine bar as she served herself a glass of wine, sipping slowly. She anticipated the news she wanted to hear.

As soon as her phone chimed, she quickly dropped the glass, thinking it would land safely on the table. It shattered on the floor. Well, it didn't matter, so long as she was going to receive the news she had wanted to hear for over twenty-eight years now.

She tapped the answer button and reached the phone to her ear. "Hello!" The caller on the other side of the phone said. "I have gotten him. My men just called to report that they have him with 'em."

"Oh, wow! This is such great news!" The woman grinned wickedly. Now, she would have her pound of flesh Tonight, she would party, party, party!

The caller continued talking. "As I speak, I am on my way to see Ryan."

"Very good, my dear!" the woman said. "Now you remember all I told you?"

"Yes!"

"Do not fail to take your chances."

"Yes."

"You need to understand that this might be the only chance you've got."

"Yes, and I'll make good use of it. I will not allow it to elude me again."

"Of course, we've been looking forward to this day, and I trust you."

"You are the only one who has always trusted me since I was born, and I will not fail you."

"That's right. Make sure you enjoy every bit of it."

"Yes, I will."

"Alright, remember one thing, sweetheart. Send me pictures of everything. You have to make him bleed to death. Do not give him the leisure of an easy death. Let him suffer till he dies. That's what he, his father and his wretched mother deserves. Now you won't disappoint me, will you?"

"No, I won't."

"Remember you are not just doing this for me, but you're doing it for yourself."

"Yes, talk to you later." The call disconnected after she finished dishing out her hideous instructions.

The woman tossed her phone away, not minding if it landed on the table or anywhere, and blew a fist in the air. After today, the William Miller family would carry an injury they will never be able to heal from.

The woman kept laughing as she took up another glass of wine. She kept pouring and gulping until she drank herself to stupor.

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"Alright guys, this is what we'll do," one of the FBI agents said. He began dishing out instructions on how they would carry out their mission to rescue the victim.

He pointed to Mandy. "We would have to go undercover with your car. We can't go with ours to ward off any suspicions. We still don't know the motive of these kidnappers. They might be watching out for any sign of the police or any agency, and when they do, they might hurt him before time."

"May I also come along with you, since I witnessed everything?"

"No, they might see and recognise you, and that will uncover everything."

"How about me coming with you instead?" Chini asked.

"No, you can't come along, you are also dark-skinned and we want someone entirely different from Ifes, so we would move with one of the boys, and the red-haired girl."

Skylar and Hunter finally got into the car with the FBI agents. Skylar was asked to drive, to clear up any suspicion. They located the 29th building opposite the first club in Street Avenue, and parked a few blocks away. It was painted lemon green with a black gigantic gate. An outsider would think it was a family house.

"Now, this is how we'll start. You two would go over there, get a good view of the building and report back to us," Kasie said.

The agents fixed mini cameras on the duo's shirt pin. "Anyone who sees you would think this is your shirt button so no one will suspect. When you get closer to the building, stylishly spin around so we could get a clear view of the place, is that okay?" the FBI agent said and Hunter nodded his head.

They looked at Skylar and noticed she appeared frightened. "Do not be afraid. We'll be watching all your movements, and we won't let them harm you."

"But What if they discover us and decide to hurt Ryan? I'll never forgive myself if—"

"No, nothing will happen to him."

"You two should walk confidently as though you were both lovers trying to enter the nightclub," Danny said to Hunter. "Make sure you hold her so affectionately. Let no one suspect that you are not lovers."

The duo nodded affirmatively.

The FBI agent turned to the red-haired girl. "You have to cooperate with Hunter and make your act look natural. By this, no one will suspect anything. We have also attached a little mic to the collar of your shirts so we will be able to communicate with you."

"When any of you wants to talk to us, make sure you hold each other as though you were trying to whisper some sweet nonsense, then pass your message across to us. Is this instruction clear?"

They both nodded as they alighted from the car, and proceeded to do as the FBI agent said. They began their acting.

As they began approaching the building, Hunter and Skylar began to argue if they should enter that nightclub or move to another one.

"Come on, baby. You know I love you so much, and I'm telling you this is the best place for you!"

"Best place my foot! And if you love me, you will not ask that we go there. I've told you before that I don't like 'em. And I'm not moving an inch until you make up your mind about this!" By then, the duo had gotten to the front of the building.

Hunter took the opportunity and turned to face her and the building. "Okay, okay! Why don't we try out something like this?"

"What?"

"Let's try this out today, and if you don't like it, I promise we won't go there again."

Skylar made to protest but finally agreed after Hunter persuaded her. "Smart girl. That's why I love you." Hunter made another swift turn to give the FBI agents another view before finally crossing over to the other side of the road.

As they entered the night club, they made sure they stayed close to one of the tinted windows that enabled them to see outside, but those passing outside could not see them.

As they took note of something, Hunter brought Skylar close to himself, he wrapped his arms around her and made her put her head on his shoulders, as though he wanted to whisper something to her. "Come here, Honey," Hunter said in an audible tone, then reduced his voice to give out the information to the FBI agents. "We just saw a gal, of about twenty-one years, driving into the building."

Skylar felt tensed up, but she did all she could to stifle it. Hunter could feel her body trembling in his arms, so he rubbed small circles on her back to soothe her as he kept talking.

Skylar knew she had to continue to put up with the charade for the sake of her friend's life. She would not allow fear to make her spoil things for Ryan and everyone. While she put up with the charade, she prayed in her heart. "God, help us." As she prayed, she also hoped silently that others were praying and waiting for results.

"Yes, she drove in alone."

"I'm not sure, but I think she is wearing a red top."



"Alright, you can start coming back," Kasie instructed after Hunter finished giving the information.

Although not having an appetite to eat or drink, Hunter and Skylar managed to finish up their drinks and played their charade as instructed by the FBI agents. They ambled out of the nightclub after acting up a little dance. They stylishly watched their backs for the signs of anyone trailing behind them. They hurried past the car the FBI agents sat in, and returned, walking over the car to where they were coming from. They did this several times to be sure that no one was following them before they finally got into the car.

Skylar let out her breath as soon as she knew she was safely inside the car with the FBI. Then it occurred to her that she had been holding it all this while. Even Hunter's assurance didn't taper the trepidation.

Lately she had been so overwhelmed and nothing could help, not even her faith in God, or so she thought. Skylar wanted to break down and start wailing in front of the FBI agents and Hunter; but for Ryan's sake, she knew she had to be strong. And she would be strong indeed.

Ayo and Avery finished their tedious lectures for the day and tiredly retired to their separate dorm rooms. Ayo felt so exhausted, but not to the extent that he did not miss Mandy, and her roommate too.

How was the lesson with Ifes going on now? he wondered. He brought out his phone to call Mandy. He'll call Ryan and Ifes to enquire about their progress, but that should be after calling his girlfriend.

"Hello, hon—" He barely said the words before Mandy's distressed voice cut him off.

"Where are you, Alex? Thank goodness you called. I've been trying to call you but your number wasn't reachable!"

"What's wrong, Mandy?"

"You've got to come over here right now, Alex. Ryan has been taken away!"

Ayo sat up on his couch. "What are you saying? What happened to Ryan?"

"We need you here, Alex. And please, come along with Avery."

"Okay, where are you? I'm coming right away. Yes, yes, I'll inform Avery right away! We'll be there in a jiffy."

Ayo quickly changed his clothes and hurried out of his dorm room. Knowing walking would not convey him faster, he ran to Avery's dorm room. They used her car to drive to the location.

As they drove, Avery wasn't feeling good about the situation. "What about Ifes? Did Mandy say anything about her? Is she safe?"

"Didn't ask, and Mandy didn't say anything about her either!"

"I just pray she is safe, and Ryan too!"

"Yeah! I pray so too!" Ayo's voice was husky as he spoke. He might have contributed to Ryan's kidnap. He had called Ryan that afternoon, asking him to take Ifes on her driving lessons, and now Ryan was nowhere to be found.

If Mandy wasn't playing a prank on him with the call, then he could only pray that all would be well with Ryan. But who exactly kidnapped Ryan? What did they want?

As they got to the address Mandy had given them, Ayo alighted from the car and was met by Mandy who bolted towards him, embracing him tightly as she sobbed on his chest.

She embraced him as though he was the one who was kidnapped and not Ryan. "They took him away. His attackers finally got hold of him."

Ayo glanced at the young brown-eyed beauty who was sobbing on his chest and it broke his heart. "It was all my fault that they took him."

She lifted up her brown eyes from his chest to look at his face. "Oh, Alex! Please do not blame yourself. I'm sure you didn't know this was going to happen, and no one knew, else we would have prevented it."

"I'm worried about Ryan!"

"I am worried too—everyone's worried. But that doesn't mean you should blame yourself for it!"

He moved the strands of her hair to the back of her ear. "Come on, let's go and meet the rest of the guys!"

Ayo looked around for Avery, then saw that she had gone to the other guys, inquiring about the information she received.

Avery embraced Ifes. "That was really smart of you. And I'm glad you're safe. With the help of the FBI, Skylar, and Hunter, I'm sure we will get around this pretty well!"

"Yes, I'm also optimistic!"

"God will help us, and Ryan will return to us!"

As Avery spoke, Ifes also wished that Ryan would return to them unharmed. Whether harmed or not, let his life be preserved.

The FBI agents sat in their car, and began sketching what they saw through the cameras and how they would carry out their plans.

"Someone opened the gate for the young lady, which means that there's a gateman. And now that the lady has gone inside the building, we have to do something fast before we run out of time," Kasie said.

"So, what do we do now?" Hunter asked.

Danny looked at Hunter and smiled. Hunter thought it wasn't funny.

"Don't worry, we've got things under control here," Danny asserted. "We saw the car coming towards this direction from a distance, so we suspected it could be the car. As she drove closer to us, we didn't let her drive past us before we threw a magnetic camera which, luckily for us, magneted to the car."

"We were able to monitor her movement until she entered the compound. It's a building with so many doors and five wings. She didn't park inside the garage and this is helping us have a good view of the building." He pointed to his computer as he continued talking.

"So, this is the door we could take to the left wing, but we still don't know which floor the room with one window is located in."

Kasie looked at the rest solemnly. "This is what I think we should do."

Inside the compound, the lady alighted from her car, entered the building through one of the entry doors and made for the elevator. Upon entering, she punched the button for the fourth floor. She got to the fourth floor, and climbed out of the elevator with the leader of the thug trailing behind her.

She walked briskly across the hallway to the room with one window. They got into the room where her captive was. One of the thugs poured a bucket of water on Ryan, forcefully jerking him back to consciousness.

Ryan spluttered and opened his eyes slowly. The first thing he saw were legs on high-heeled shoes. With full force, memories of what had happened before he fell unconscious hit him. The leader of the thugs had called a woman reporting their success in capturing him.

Ryan's eyes moved up slowly from the woman's shoes, to her knees, to her torso. They finally landed on her face. The full view of a familiar, pretty face smiling wickedly at him.

Ryan's eyes widened larger than saucers. He brushed his hands across his face and blinked severally to be sure of who was now standing in front of him. No! maybe his mind was playing a prank on him.

Before he was knocked out unconscious by the kidnappers, he had been too desperate for someone to come to his rescue. Maybe that was why he was seeing a familiar face.

Ryan's face contorted into confusion as he tried to reason properly. Surely she was not the one who had been sending attackers after him. She couldn't be the one. She had always loved him, and he loved her too. She couldn't hurt a fly, not to talk of a human being like him.

Surely she had heard of what happened to him and began searching for him. She had located this place so she would save him. She would save him and he would be able to return to the college and inform Ifes and all his friends that all was well with him.

Smiling, he made to get up and embrace his rescuer, but he was shoved down by a strong hand. Ryan fell with his back to the ground, and looked up in surprise. That was when he noticed another figure in the room, then reality dawned on him.

"I must be dreaming!"

"No, Mr Ryan Miller, you ain't dreaming. It is me, in flesh and blood."

He heard her voice and it confirmed the reality he didn't want to accept. Could she have been abducted as well? But her hands were free; in fact, she looked like she was the boss who was dishing orders to the thugs as they stood around her protectively.

"Surprise, surprise! Are you surprised to see me here? Don't worry, I'm also surprised as well. Surprised that I've finally gotten you. Finally, you will die today!"

Ryan winced upon hearing those words, clearly frightened about being killed. What about Ifes? And all his friends who were probably looking for him by now? He wondered if the phone in his small pocket was still serving its purpose, or if the battery was dead now, or if her airtime had finished.

"Still don't recognise me, Ryan Miller, ha?" She pulled out a small pistol and hit him hard on his head, almost making him to black out.

"This is to reset your brain back to default, or do you want me sending a bullet straight inside right now so you can come to your senses?"

The woman was seething now, and Ryan understood that this was no joke.

Back inside the car, the FBI agents, Skylar and Hunter kept strategizing on how to move as Mr Danny continued giving his instruction on how he thought they should go.

"I think he said it was the left wing and the room had just a window? With this description, I think someone among us would have to go around that building and check the room with one window. Can Skylar go for us?"

"No!" the other FBI agent objected. "I would go this time around. Think about this, what if they saw Skylar the first time, and they see her again? They could suspect something, and we don't want that. Skylar and Hunter cannot go out this second time, it's between you and I to figure that out this time."

"Alright then, we'll make the trip together."

As they made to step out, Skylar grabbed one of the FBI agents. "Please, don't leave us here all by ourselves. One of you should stay back!"

"Don't worry, you're safe in this car, we will be watching out for you," Danny told the frightened, red-haired girl.

Skylar would not have any of it, and refused to let both of them leave. Finally resigning, Danny stayed back as his colleague carried out the task alone.

Kasie walked freely as though he were searching for something or someone, and finally paced the building's circumference. To keep suspicious eyes away from himself, he decided to knock on the gate.

The gateman opened the gate wide with a loud creak, giving Kasie an opportunity to size him up. The FBI agent guessed he was in his mid-twenties. He was bald and skinny. With Kasie's training he could take down this man in a blink of an eye. But how many more were inside there? "Hello, good evening."

The gateman gave him an inquisitive look. "Yeah, how may I help you, sir?"

"Yes, I'm looking for..." He gave him a paper with a written fake address.

"I don't think such a place is anywhere around here. This is Street Avenue." The security man shook his head. "But you could go make enquiries in that nightclub over there."

Kasie sensed the trouble in those words. He was an FBI agent, they should have known better than to think of luring him to a nightclub to capture him.

"Umm... But what of?" The FBI agent scratched his head as though he was confused about something.

The security man acted as though he wanted to help sort out Kasie's turmoil, but he didn't know that the FBI agent had used that opportunity to weigh him and know how easy it was to penetrate the building.

When the FBI agent was satisfied with the information he had gotten, he decided it was time to head back to the car.

He had spotted the one room window at the left wing. He had been able to differentiate it because of the light that shone from that window. The room was located on the fourth floor, and this small man at the gate didn't pose a threat.

He smiled and thanked the security man. "I think I am having memory loss these days."

The security man snickered. "That's your problem, and I think ya should go deal with it yourself and not share it with me." The gateman stepped back inside and slammed the gate to the FBI agent's face.

Kasie took another quick walk around the building as though returning from the direction he came from, and diverted into another street.

His intuition prompted him to look behind. He noticed three, bulky men who were trailing him. Oh! The security man was way smarter than he thought. But no matter what, the lady was now inside with Ryan and could carry out her hideous plans any time, so they had to act fast.

Danny, Skylar and Hunter monitored Kasie's progress. They zoomed the cameras and saw the three men coming out of the building as they followed him.

"These guys are after you." Danny informed his colleague through the mouth-piece.

"Yes, I can see 'em too. There's three of 'em."

"I can see that their jackets are protruded." Danny asserted. "They sure have weapons on 'em."

"Just great!"

"They must have noticed you fronting with their gateman."

"This means there is CCTV."

Skylar's heart was beating haphazardly.

"You will have to continue walking."

"Alright!" He started walking and jogging at intervals. while he contemplated running. He knew he could not start sprinting now, because he didn't know his followers' pace. He decided to jog as though he were trying to exercise.

While he jogged, they also strode faster, following him at a measured pace. These guys were also trained. The agent diverted to another street on his left.

He kept walking slowly, slowly, until he diverted to another road on the right, and started walking fast again, certain that the men had lost track of him.

"I think they have lost track of you, we can't find 'em. Uh-oh, look at 'em, they've got you cornered again Kasie."

"This wasn't as easy as we anticipated."

Kasie gave a quick back glance and saw how they kept following him. He slowed down his pace and increased it again. He did it a few times as he navigated different alleyways and finally got them confused, but they still followed. He crossed the main road and the thugs tried to follow when a car came and drove past them, giving him the opportunity to sneak away. They lost sight of him.

Danny's voice came back again through the earpiece. "Yes, we actually drove to confuse the guys."

"I think I have escaped 'em."

"Indeed, we'll meet in the usual area?"

"Yes, I'll catch you there."

Skylar felt relieved knowing that they had made the FBI agent escape from those evil-looking men. "Please be safe and come back to us." Skylar kept mumbling as her heart wondered about the FBI.

To her, the people who worked in security agencies around the world were wonderful people because they put their lives on the line to save others.



## CHAPTER FORTY-FOUR

The lady looked down again at Ryan. "Are you surprised to see me? Maybe I should introduce myself to you first. I am the one standing before you in flesh and blood. It's me, Beulah. Beulah, your so-called cousin!" Reality finally hit Ryan like the shock wave of a bomb blast.

"So, it was you all this time?" He pointed at his cousin.

"Yes, and I'm still the one who will lead you to your grave!" She laughed maniacally.

Ryan was confused and was struggling with words. "But why me? To what end, Beulah?"

Beulah clapped her hands laughing. "Very good! Very, very good! I have been waiting for you to ask me that question because I would be delighted to annoy you by giving you the reasons for your death before you go and meet your ancestors."

"No! This cannot be you, Beulah, this is not you. Something is wrong somewhere."

Beulah slapped him hard again across the face. "Now listen to me! I am not cut out for your jokes, and do not make me feel worse about the way I feel about you and your useless family. Else, I won't hesitate to send the bullet straight into your thick skull."

At this point, Ryan began sobbing, not as a result of the slab, but because he had never seen his cousin exhibiting such a level of animosity, especially towards him.

"Now, you would have to be quiet and let me make this easier for the both of us. I'll tell you why I am doing this. All your life, you've known me as your cousin, but I am not your stupid cousin. I am your sister, your \*\*\*\*ing twin sister!"

"What! What are you saying?"

Beulah moved her eyes from her brother to the thug that stood behind her. "You see, I like that expression on his face when I gave him the surprising news of his life, but his facial expression wasn't as much as mine when I also got the shocker!"

She returned her gaze to Ryan and continued speaking. "You don't know how much it hit me hard to learn that you were my twin brother, and your aunt, who you thought was my mother, was also my aunt. Mrs Geneva Miller is my mother. A lot of times, I have wished that

this wasn't true, that the stories my mother told me were all lies. But in the end, it proved to be reality."

"But how could this be? This is not possible! Your birth certificate shows that I'm a month older than you."

"Did your mother not tell you that her sister-in-law, Dr Sophia Miller, worked at the hospital where she delivered her babies?"

Babies? But Ryan had been the only child of his parents since birth. "Are you trying to say that Aunt Sofia manipulated everything?"

"No, she didn't manipulate anything. Your parents did. She only did what she could to save me."

"But what do you mean by all this? It's not registering in my head!"

"Brilliant question, Ryan Miller, and I'll explain to you."

As Beulah spoke, she took pictures of every reaction Ryan made and kept forwarding the pictures to Dr Sofia Miller.

"When I was still a kid, I grew up loving you not as my cousin but as my brother. I felt as though we were both given birth to by one parent. I loved and enjoyed the bond between us. You remember how we always played together, how your parents and my mother took us out for a picnic? But the summer before junior high, my mum, your auntie, called me and told me the truth about myself."

"Hey! Beulah, come here!" she yelled. That night, she was drunk and the way she spoke scared me half to death. I thought she was going to harm me, but when she spoke up again, it clearly showed that although drunk, she was still in her right senses."

"She called out to me again, but I was so afraid, so I stood transfixed in my tracks. She came towards me and pulled me by my hair. It was so painful. Some strands of my hair even cut off. I screamed in pain, but all she did was to give me a slap that left me dumbfounded. I was in pain but I couldn't cry. Then, she took me by the hand and sat me down."

"You think I'm your enemy because of the way I treated you tonight? Well, I'm going to show you that I'm not your enemy. Today, you have to know who your real enemies are!"

"The woman I had always known as Mum held my hands as she spoke. Her fingernails dug into my flesh and I cried. She finally let go of my hands, but she didn't allow me to leave the room."

"When she saw that I had relaxed on one of the sofas in the living room, she began telling me about the awful ordeal."

Tears threatened to come out of Beulah's eyes as she spoke, but she pushed it back. She didn't want to allow her emotions to betray her. Ryan listened keenly to know the awful things his parents had done to deny him twenty-one years with his sister, his own twin sister.

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The trio inside the car continued monitoring Kasie's progress till he finally joined them inside the car. Heaving a sigh of relief, he leaned back into his chair.

"Good grief! Those guys were something!"

"Yeah! I know, right?" Danny commented. "After helping you lose those men, we lingered for a while to see their next line of action."

"What did they do next?"

"I'm thinking the men figured out that they could use the time given to them to find you for other things because we saw 'em entering one of the nearby hotels."

Kasie grinned. "The foolish boys were not even as smart as I thought!"

"You can say that again. Either way, I think it is something good, since the three of 'em are out of our way now. But we still don't know how many more are inside there."

"Yeah! you're right, so what's the plan?"

"This is what I think we should do..."

After he finished sharing his ideas with his colleague Danny made a request. "Make sure you come along with your radio so that we could call for emergency backup if it gets too tough for

us. Remember we can't afford to endanger this duo here with us, and Ryan who is already in some danger."

His colleague agreed and picked up the necessities that he needed to call for a backup.

The partners felt for their 9mm semi-automatic pistols tucked securely into their waist, and got ready to carry out their mission.

"It's time we left you two here. You can call your friends and inform them to start coming," Danny said.

Kasie looked at Skylar and smirked. "You sure look like a frightened chicken!"

Danny slapped his colleague on his back. "This is not time to make fun of someone."

"That is it for now. If you don't mind, my colleague and I are set to embark on this mission." They alighted from the car and began to stealthily creep towards the building.

## CHAPTER FORTY-FIVE

Flashback.

"Sit down here let me tell you the truth about yourself," the woman said, her eyes red from drinking too much alcohol.

"Throughout the years of your life, I have treated you like a mother should. I bought toys for you, fed you and clothed you. I saw you walk for the first time and I sent you to kindergarten. I always praised you when you came back with good grades. I have given you everything you could ever ask for in life. You name it. I have been nothing less than a mother. All because? Because I love you!"

Beulah felt weird about the way her mother spoke. She didn't understand why her mother was emphasizing so much on her love for her. Mothers were supposed to love their children, weren't they?

"I love you too, Mum," Beulah replied through trembling lips.

"I am not your real mother."

Beulah's face expressed nothing but confusion.

"Yes, listen to me well. I want this to sink into your thick skull that I'm. Not. Your. Biological. Mother!"

Beulah's eyes immediately watered as tears pooled out from her eyes. She did not understand why her mum was saying these things? Why was she hurting her? Could this be true? Certainly not!

She shifted uncomfortably on her seat. "But if you're not, what am I doing here? Where and who is my Mum then?"

"You see, your mother rejected you from the day you were born, but kept Ryan with her. Your mother was not alone in this as she and your father reached a consensus."

As young as Beulah was, she had grown brilliant enough to understand when someone was trying to drive home a particular point.

"Which Ryan are you talking of?" she asked in a whisper, her eyes narrowed.

"You dumb child! Who else if not your so-called cousin, Ryan Miller!"

"But Ryan is my cousin!"

"He's not! That lad is your twin brother!"

"But everyone sees you as my mummy. You have to be my mummy!"

"And I am, but what I'm about to tell you will unveil why people see me as your mother."

Beulah sniffled, holding back tears as she waited for her fake mother to unveil the secret she had kept from her for years.

"That fateful day at the hospital. Oh, that fateful day!" The doctor spoke as though she resented that day. "Your Mother was pregnant and her day of delivery was due. They came to the hospital where I worked, and I was granted the honor of helping my brother's children into this world. I never had children of my own, so a new surge of excitement bubbled inside of me when I held you two in my arms. I couldn't wait to give the good news to William. "

"After informing William that he gave birth to twins, a beautiful boy and girl, he felt happy but he didn't fail to express his disappointment over giving birth to you. 'What do I need a female child for?' he had said."

"At first, I thought it was a joke, so I asked him to stop. But he spoke again with a solemn voice, and I couldn't help but wonder why he would hate his female child. Why would you feel crestfallen about giving birth to a female child?"

"William scoffed. 'Never mind, I'll just go and put her up for adoption, there are still some people in the world who are crazily going after female children. They would be glad to adopt her.'"

"I was astonished with what your father said!" The doctor gestured with her hands. "This left me asking my brother questions.

'But what about me? I'm a successful doctor. Or do you think that female children have some barriers and are incapacitated.'

'Well, it doesn't matter what I think, the damage has already been done. We leave you with the responsibility of putting her up for adoption.'

"They paid their hospital bills and told the doctor that they were putting you up and I could sign the necessary documents since I was related to 'em. With your father's written permission, the hospital let him go. I called after William and I tried talking him out of his decision, but he wouldn't budge. I told him that I couldn't put you up for adoption but his reply was rather worse than what I expected."

'Alright, if you can't, then I'll go to the Head doctor's office and sign up for her adoption myself.'

"At that point, I snuggled you closer to my chest, ready to defend you."

'No, no! I can't let this happen. William, you cannot do this!'

"I persuaded Geneva if she could help convince William to take you, but she shook her head supporting her husband."

'We are not in need of a female child.'

"That was why I took you into my house and kept you away from their eyes. They didn't even look at you from birth, so they didn't recognise you when I showed you to 'em a year later. In order to protect you from 'em, I told them I had adopted you. Growing up, you thought I was your real mother and I didn't want 'em to make you believe otherwise. All my life, I did not get married, instead decided to give up my dreams of marriage and children to take care of you."

At this point, Beulah began to cry. "So you're saying my mummy and daddy rejected me?"

"No, they did not only reject you. But they detest you as well. To 'em, you're dead, and this is why I have kept your real identity away from 'em. It's up to you to either keep loving that useless twin brother of yours that took your place in your parents heart, or be filled with resentment, as your parents did with you. But as for me, I will never forgive 'em for doing this to you, because I love you. I care about you and you are a female like me!"

Dr Miller began preaching and indoctrinating Beulah with bitterness every day. By the time Beulah was sixteen, she became filled with hatred and she made up her mind for revenge.

Seeing that they couldn't carry out their hideous plans in Texas, Dr Miller convinced her brother about sending their kids to the University of Pennsylvania where Ryan would be out of his parents' reach.

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"So you see why I detest you and your family, Mr Ryan Miller, huh?"

Two other kidnappers left the room after they murmured to each other inaudibly.

Ryan was perplexed at what he just heard. He couldn't bring himself to believe that the parents he had grown to love could do such a despicable thing. This lady he had known as his cousin ever since he was a child was telling him that she was his sister and his parents were almost devils. God forbid such a thing!

"Sorry! I'm sorry!" Ryan said, trying his best to drag out the conversation with his captor whom he now believed was very delusional. She couldn't be right, but even as he thought that, he remembered times that people had mistaken his adopted cousin for his sister. As these doubts surfaced, he shook his head trying to dispel them, for the image that this stunning revelation would make of his parents.

How could he believe her over his parents, people who had showered him love. And not just him, but a host of other people. He recalled conversations with his mom, when she admitted to wanting to give him a sibling. A boy or girl seemed just fine with her whenever they had such conversation. His parents made him believe that he was their only child, and now someone was saying something contrary.

Even his doubt couldn't break through that wall of reason.

Reading his expression, Beulah continued talking. "Well, I knew you'd doubt me, but I'm not surprised. I also doubted my mother when she told me she was not my real mum. I used my privilege as a 'niece' to the Millers to steal some hair samples from hair brushes. You can take a look at the results yourself"

Beulah opened her handbag, and tossed him the different DNA results that showed that Mr and Mrs William Miller were her biological parents and Ryan was her biological brother.



Since Ryan was not a medical student, his sister collected the result and read it to him through and through. Realisation hit him like a hard rock. It smashed his reality to smithereens. He raised his eyes and saw his cousin in a new light. She might be his sister!

"No, no, no! This is not possible!" Ryan began mumbling.

"But it is!" Beulah bellowed, throwing her hands in frustration. "It is the truth. I am your sister!"

"Jesus!" Ryan exclaimed. This was too terrible, but it might be a mistake. What exactly was a mistake? he asked himself.

He knew that whatever was wrong did not matter to Beulah. She believed it was a hook, line and sinker. The pained expression on her face, the anger in her eyes said it all.

His brain was scrambled. He knew that something was wrong somewhere but he could not just get his mind to settle on solving the puzzle. Emotions coursed through him at the speed of light.

A sister? His sister. He knew that from her point of view she had been greatly hurt, but should he sit back and watch his sister shoot him to death? Would that pacify her? Ryan felt the cool steel of the gun on his forehead

"It is time for you to die. Mum, your aunt, had asked me to make your death slow and painful, but I've changed my mind because I can't wait to see you gone, and send your pictures to your parents just to enjoy the reaction on their faces, and the triumphant expression from my mother!"

"Wait! You can't do this to me please. I'm your brother, I have always loved you and always would!" He said, still bidding time and appealing to any sense of family loyalty that she might feel for her supposed dysfunctional family.

"I really don't care about your love, Ryan!" Beulah said through clenched teeth. "You took my parents' love away from me because you were a boy and I was a girl child. Secondly, I am doing this because my parents were bold enough to send me out of their lives to die. I am going to take away the treasure they think they have."

"I am almost more angry at my parents than you are, trust me, Beulah. And I promise you, that as soon as we leave here, we will get the cops to arrest them, and we can start off again

as siblings. But please drop the gun." He said, hoping to win some points for his promise to become an accomplice to the ruin of his parents.

"And why should I? I'm about to empty these bullets in your thick skull, and nothing's gonna stop me. Let me give you a message to pass on to your maker when you get to the other side. Tell him that your father rejected me because of how he created me. Tell him that it was all his fault that I killed you."

For the first time since hearing the truth, an emotion sprang up and remained at the fore of his person. In that instant, he felt pity for the girl he saw, who believed she had been unloved and unwanted by those who naturally should love her most, who was hurt by rejection, who was now fuelled by revenge against her brother and God into committing a crime. He knew the life of someone fighting against God held no peace. What great pain!

"Now, goodbye, Ryan Miller," she cocked the gun, "May your soul rest in peace or pieces, I don't care!"

The echoing sound of a gunshot rang through the room.

## CHAPTER FORTY-SIX

Ryan was dead, or so he thought, until he realised that he wasn't the one crying in pain. He wasn't the one who laid sprawled on the floor, moaning pitifully. He wasn't the one hit by the bullet.

Ryan slowly opened his eyes and saw the leader of the gang who had abducted him on the floor, wrestling with a man.

"Don't move, Miss Beulah Miller."

Beulah stared down at the pistol that had fallen off from her hand. She had dropped it out of shock. She made to pick it up again, but Kasie beat her to the chase.

"Don't touch it!" Kasie sped towards Beulah and slipped down beside her to pick up the handgun.

Ifes led the way as Mandy and her friends scurried in. Ifes bolted towards Ryan and embraced him tightly. "I'm so glad you are alright!"

"Thank you, Ifes, for coming through for me." Ryan's body shook violently as he cried holding her in his arms. He cried for his life, for Beulah's life.

The pain, anger and hurt she had to live with. Would she ever heal from it? And much more, he cried for the fact that as he sat there thinking these were the last moments of his life, he realised that she was his sister. His sister! How was that even possible?

"No!" Ryan yelled as Hunter verbally unleashed his fury on Beulah.

"Everyone stop it! No one should talk to her like that. She's my sister!"

"Of course, she's your sister," Anne-Marie chimed in sarcastically.

"Your cousin who wanted to kill you," Bradley added.

"No! I mean, she's my biological sister. My twin sister!"

To say that they were all shocked was an understatement.

"But what do ya mean by that? Ya have always referred to her as your cousin since I got to know ya," Skylar said.

"Yes, I have. I'm also as surprised as you are to realise that she's my sister!"

"Here, take a look at this!" He brought out the DNA results and spread it before his friends. Ayo and Avery, who were studying medical science, collected the results and read it.

Mr William Miller and his wife were her biological parents; the DNA proved it.

Ryan whirled around to see new faces. "Who are these people?"

"They are FBI agents. Chini helped us call them to come rescue you."

"Why is the FBI involved in a missing person case?"

"Don't worry, this is not part of our official duty. But we will have to involve the police at some point, because attempted murder is no joke."

"No, I don't want the police involved. I just want to go back to Texas and speak to my folks about this circus I had dropped into."

"Alright, but I won't let you leave without us," Danny said.

Ryan began to protest. "No! We can handle this all by ourselves. We don't need your help."

"For now, you are still in danger, and I can't let you go for the sake of your safety. If you know you want to keep this well away from the police, then you've got to listen to us and follow our instructions."

"He's right. We will all come with you if you want," Megan said.

"Okay guys, it's good you've all agreed on one thing. The next is that Danny and I will come along with you to Texas. We'll have to leave for Texas as soon as possible"

"Yes, first thing tomorrow, we'll have it duly registered in departments in school that we'll be absent for some days. Before noon, we should be on our way to Texas," said Bradley.

Danny and his colleague looked at each other.

"No. ASAP means the very next flight to Texas. Guys, we have official duties to return to after now. As it is, our supervisor will be as mad as a wet hen if he finds out we left the state without informing him ourselves," Kasie said.

They all looked amongst themselves

"So, are you guys ready to leave for Texas or to call the police into this case?" Kasie asked.

"We are going ASAP. The police cannot be involved," Ryan said. He turned to his friends and tried to dissuade them from following them to Texas since he could not let them risk their schooling.

Beulah watched in stunned silence as her brother defended her in front of the FBI agents. Since she was twelve years old, she had been made to believe that Ryan stole the love of her parents. But today he was doing everything to save her.

"There's no way ya gonna just dismiss us like that, cowboy. We are with ya all the way to Texas, though not all of us can go with ya now. Let's just delegate someone to go with ya and represent our support," Hunter said.

"I know you guys want to come along but this is a huge moment for my family. We need to be alone now more than ever."

Beulah was in stunned silence again as she stared at what she never had—true friends. Too consumed by her fear, hate, anger and hurt, she never reached out to other human beings.

"My parents have a lot of explaining to do, guys. Please, pray for us as we leave."

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Ryan called his parents to inform them that he was returning home that night with Beulah and two other persons.

Although Ryan's parents had been taken aback by the news of their son's return, Ryan's mother prepared her son's favorite food and arranged plates for three extra mouths.

The doorbell chimed. Ryan's mother stood and went to the door. Opening it, she embraced her son and gave him a peck on the cheek. "You surprised us with your sudden return. Hope all is well, son?"

Ryan gazed at his mother's face speechlessly. No one could ever imagine that such an innocent face was capable of carrying out hideous plans even against her own flesh and blood.

"Is Dad around or he has traveled for one of his business meetings?" Ryan asked, ignoring his mother's question.

Surprised at his tone of voice, his mother drew backwards, studying her son. "Yes, he is in the living room. We were together before we heard the doorbell. Are you ok, Son?"

Her gaze shifted from her son to her niece. "How are you, Beulah? And who are these men with you?"

Beulah didn't answer. One of the FBI agents stepped up and introduced himself and his colleague.

"Good day, ma'am. I am an FBI agent," Danny said, showing his ID card. "My name is Danny Lee, and this is my colleague, Kasie Opara. We are here to discuss something very important. If you don't mind, may we come in?"

Mrs. Miller's face contorted into both confusion and surprise. "How did my son and my niece get involved with the FBI?"

"Madam, this has nothing to do with the FBI. We would like to come inside and discuss with you."

Mrs. Miller's face tilted from the agents to her son and niece; she saw them glaring at her. Without another question, Mrs. Miller stepped inside and opened the door wide. "Come in!"

Ryan and Beulah held each other's hands as they walked slowly into the living room.

As his gaze darted around the living room, he couldn't stifle the abrupt stab of pain he felt inwardly. He was seeing everything from a different light now. The place he had grown up in and called his home was now strange to him. He had enjoyed this compound alone, but his sister had missed out for twenty-one years. No wonder she hated him. She hated his parents,

the same parents he thought he knew. His concept about them had changed a few hours ago. If he were in his twin sister's shoes, he might have done worse than what she attempted doing.

Ryan chided himself for harboring negative thoughts. He was now a Christian, and Christ said, he should forgive, and love those who hate him. But he was struggling to do that, he was struggling to forgive them. If it was this difficult for him, he wondered how it was for Beulah.

"I see you came with your cousin. You're welcome, boy!" William gave his son a pat on his back. "And who are these gentlemen with you?"

"They are FBI agents," Mrs Miller replied. William looked at his wife's face and noticed her troubled expression, then turned to his son.

"What's wrong and how did you get involved?"

Ryan didn't say a word; he might say what he would regret. The FBI agents re-introduced themselves and Mr Miller ushered everyone to take their seats on the couch.

"Mr William Miller, we would like to ask you a few questions, and we would be glad if you cooperate with us," Kasie started.

Mr William removed his spec and tossed it on his side. "Okay, I'm listening."

Danny leaned forward on his seat. "Do you remember the New Heritage Hospital?"

Mrs. Miller nodded her head while Mr William Miller replied. "Yes, that's where my sister works, and Ryan was given birth in that hospital."

"And did you only give birth to Ryan?"

Mr William Miller shifted uncomfortably on his seat. "If you don't mind, I would like to know why these questions are coming up?"

"Answer the question, William!" Beulah yelled, and it frightened Mrs. Miller.

"Please relax, Beulah. We've got this under control," Danny said and shifted his attention back to William.

"We would like you to answer our question, Mr Miller."

"No, he's not the only child. We had a set of twins, but we lost one."

Beulah gasped as Ryan shuddered and buried his face in his palms.

This wasn't happening. No! His parents hadn't just admitted to giving birth to a set of twins. He was expecting his parents to tell the FBI agent that they had given birth to him alone.

Despite the DNA results, he would have had a reason to stand by them and convince Beulah that she was mistaken about her identity. He couldn't believe it.

"Tell us, how do you mean you lost one, sir?"

William grew edgy. "Listen here, if you have anything to say, please say it. This is something that my wife and I have kept away from our son since he was born, and we have no intention of talking about it now."

"And why is that, sir?"

"Because, it is for his own good that we do not talk about it! And it still troubles my wife sometimes, so I don't like talking about it for their sake!"

"Because you knew what you did was terrible!" Mr and Mrs. Miller's eyes popped up as they heard their son yelling at them.

"Yes! Are you surprised that we know the truth about your terrible actions?"

"What are you talking about, Ryan?" Mrs. Miller asked, her face contoured in sheer confusion.

"You know exactly what I'm talking about, yet you pretend as though you know nothing!"

"And why are you yelling at your father and I?"

The FBI agents again succeeded in calming Ryan as they continued interacting with their parents. Danny brought out the DNA results and gave each of Ryan's parents a copy.

"We were told that you had a set of twins and gave one up for adoption, and that was your girl child."



Both Mr. William and his wife opened their eyes wider than they'd ever done, and sat up in their seats. Before William could respond to that, the FBI agent continued. "The DNA results you hold in your hands says that Beulah is your biological daughter and Ryan's twin sister."

Mrs. Miller abruptly dropped the paper in her hands to the ground as though it were an abomination. Mr. Miller opened and closed his mouth repeatedly.

For five minutes, the room remained in stunned silence. Mrs. Miller was the first to speak up. "What did you just say? Start all over, because I didn't make any sense out of what you said."

"We are saying that Beulah is your biological daughter and not your niece; she's Ryan's twin sister and not his cousin." Danny stretched out his arms with another paper. "This doctor's report interprets the DNA results in a layman's language."

Mrs. Miller quickly collected the paper and tore it open, then she shuddered upon reading what she would have never imagined even in her wildest dream. Beulah was her daughter? "No, this is impossible!"

William collected the paper from his wife's hand and his face contorted into surprise after reading the doctor's report. "How could this be?" Mr. Miller continued to mouth incoherent words.

Mrs. Miller stood and looked at the agents pointedly. "Listen, I still can't fathom what is happening here but you better not play pranks with my son and my niece!"

"But this is no joke, Mrs. Miller!"

"As you already know, Beulah is my niece because she is the daughter of my sister-in-law, and she is a month younger than my son!"

"Did Dr Sophia tell you that she adopted Beulah?"

"Yes, but she told us that Beulah saw her as her biological mother, and she didn't want to make her believe otherwise, so we never spoke much about it!"

"That was because you all gave up on me from birth, then she picked me and gave me the love of a mother," Beulah asserted. "The love you couldn't give." Beulah gazed at Geneva squarely.

Hurt and taken aback by that accusation, Geneva replied, "I don't understand what you're getting at Beulah. No one gave you up for adoption in the first place!"

"You liar! My mum told me everything!"

Mrs. Miller's eyes moistened. "Don't you dare call me a liar! What happened to my daughter is not what I want to remember. You are not a mother and you have never been, so don't you dare!"

"And why is that?" Ryan asked. "Is it because you suddenly feel guilty?"

Mrs. Miller shifted her gaze to her son. "Guilty about what exactly? I am telling you that no one gave anyone up for adoption!"

"Then, why did you hide this from me?"

"Because we figured it might affect you emotionally!"

"Very good, but try another line!"

"But what has come over you, Ryan? You've never spoken to me with that tone!" Ryan's mother bellowed.

"Because the truth about you has been revealed," His gaze flickered from his mum to his dad, "and I now know the real personalities behind those innocent faces of yours!"

"But how could you? How could you and Dad put up your own child for adoption?"

"I said I never put my daughter up for adoption!"

"If you never did, then why did you go home with your son since you gave birth to a set of twins? Why did your daughter grow up in another woman's arms?"

Mrs. Miller's body went rigid for a while as though realisation dawned on her. "Tell me why you think your father and I could put you up for adoption?"

"Because you hated me. To you, a female child would amount to nothing and that was why you detest me from birth. My mum told me everything, everything you did!"

Mrs. Miller's heartbeat went wild as she moved her eyes to her husband who had been swallowed with shock. Was he fixing the puzzle? Was he thinking what she was thinking, or she was messing up?

"Since you want me to tell you everything, I will. Maybe that would make you stop denying it!"

Beulah narrated all her 'mum' had told her.

Tears rolled down Mrs. Miller's face as her daughter narrated her ordeal. Indeed, she was her daughter, the one she was made to believe she would never see again for the rest of her life. She and her husband had never stopped mourning their lost daughter, and today she was alive.

She could not be dreaming; this was real! Was it possible that there was hope for the hopeless, life to the lifeless?

"My baby is alive!" she said under her breath as she tried to register it in her head.

"Oh, William! Our daughter is alive. Can you see she's here with us in flesh and blood?"

William gestured with his hands and opened his mouth to speak but couldn't utter a word. His mind was reeling and his world was spinning. A big lump had formed in his throat.

Ryan and his twin sister became more furious at their parents' expressions. The pretenders, liars, deceivers and most of all, gender discriminators!

"Yes, I'm alive. Does it surprise you? Well, all thanks to you that the FBI agents came here with us. Thanks to you, I grew up hating you and my twin brother. All thanks to you that the FBI agents stopped me from committing the worst mistake of my life, which was killing my own twin brother!"

"What! What did you just say?" Mrs. Miller asked.

The lump in Mr. Williams throat had become a hard rock, and he couldn't even cry.

After all he did for Sophia, how could she? The only sister he had in the world.

He had taken up a vital role in her life ever since they lost their parents to a car accident at a young age. William could recall that he'd gone out of his way several times to satisfy his kid sister. Why did she hate him so much because of that one mistake that he had remorsefully apologized for? He'd always loved her but he'd never imagine that his monstrous sister

would go as far as turning his children against each other. If this wasn't the pinnacle of wickedness, then he wondered what was.

"You can't possibly mean this, Beulah. You didn't attempt to kill your brother!"

"Well, she did, and it was whose fault?" Ryan asked.

The FBI agents decided to sit back and watch how the Miller family would work out the issue, while they made observations.

Mrs Miller made a shuddering sound at her children's remark. This was impossible. Had she become the mother of a daughter who wanted to take the life of another, all in the name of revenge? Unable to bear her children's accusation any longer, she yelled at them, "Believe it or not, we did not put Beulah up for adoption!"

"You liar! What did you do to me then?"

This was it. The camel's back had been broken. Beulah had called her and her husband liars several times now. Geneva knew how this started and she would have to put a stop to it now.

Mrs. Miller bolted away from the living room to her bedroom and returned, but not empty-handed. Everyone in the living room, apart from William, gasped in surprise when they saw the licenced rifle in her hands.

"Listen here, Beulah, or whatever you call yourself. I don't care right now! It's already too bad that you were heartless enough to take your own twin brothers' life. Now, you come here to accuse my husband and I for what we know nothing of. Well, it is not your fault. I know who has done this and why she did it. I have always been skeptical about my sister-in-law, but my husband's good heart and his easy way of trusting everyone around him always landed him in trouble. Yeah, like it was with the Nigerian who wanted to leave him bankrupt!"

"My sister-in-law did this to you. It had been her plan all along, to instigate you against your parents and twin brother. All this while, I've always had my doubts about her. Today, I will put an end to all this; she will never trouble my husband and I again!"

The FBI agents jerked up from their seats. "Please, calm down Mrs Miller, and let the law take its course."

"My colleague is right. If you do anything drastic, you might be the one spending your years in prison, instead of the guilty party."

"Do I look like I care? I'll send her straight to hell and won't mind spending all my life in prison!" Mrs Miller made for the door, but the FBI agents intercepted.

"Out of my way now!" she yelled.

"No, please listen to us, Mrs. Miller!"

"Listen here, officers. I appreciate the fact that you saved my son's life, but I think you ought to allow me to pay that woman back in her own coin. And eye for an eye." Mrs. Miller was breathing heavily.

"You said you know why she did what she did. Can you tell us? Plus, I'm sure Beulah would also want to know why she was deluded."

Mrs. Miller laughed humorlessly.

"Sophia is such a terrible person. I can't imagine that she finally did what she said she would do after all these years!"

The FBI agents guided Mrs. Miller to sit on one of the sofas as she began narrating her own side of the story.

## CHAPTER FORTY-SEVEN

Dr. Sofia Miller sat on one of the couches in her living room basking in the wave of the moment. Her dream for revenge finally came true. Beulah had sent her pictures from the time she slapped Ryan, when she hit him with a handgun on his head, even when Ryan cried. Dr. Miller had been drinking at the sight.

"Oh! poor child!" Sophia exclaimed as she leaned back and laid her head on the couch. Her plans to use Williams' daughter against him had worked out really fine. But the girl, Beulah, didn't know she had been a pawn in her hand all her life. Well, that was what she was meant to be, Dr Miller asserted in her heart.

Oh! How wonderful it would be when William finally realised that she had used his daughter to take the life of his son. The wound would be seriously inflicted so that they will never heal from it for the rest of their lives.

Just as she succeeded in deluding William and his wife, so she did with their daughter. They were such a foolish family. They see every good gesture as something great, and the next thing, they start trusting you. Was her brother that dumb, or was it that he never heard the popular proverb, 'never trust anyone'?

This night was great and she would enjoy every bit of it. When Beulah finally killed Ryan and sent her the pictures, then she would call her and tell her the truth about herself. She would tell her that her parents didn't reject her, rather she took her away from her parents for the sake of her revenge. She would explain everything to her and dash her off. Yeah! Like the way you use tissue paper and discard it. Sophia laughed hard at that thought. even Beulah would be broken and ashamed of her act that she wouldn't be able to face her parents. With this; William and his wife would live with the sorrow of losing their children for the rest of their life. Then, they would feel exactly how she felt the day John had turned his back on her. Just as she had not been able to forget, and won't be able to forget, so shall it also be for William.

Dr. Sophia Miller checked her phone for the umpteenth time, but didn't see another picture from Beulah. Maybe she was making the whole thing slow as she asked her to, so she'll just sit down and wait a little longer.

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Mrs. Miller glared at Beulah before she started talking. "This happened when William and I were still dating."

"Umm! Mrs. Miller, since you weren't married by then, please would you allow Mr. Miller who experienced everything to tell us himself?" Danny asked.

"No, at that time, I moved in with William and his sister, so I witnessed everything first hand."

Danny leaned back. "Okay madam, we're listening."

"Sophia lived a promiscuous life. She loved clubbing, always drinking herself to zero-level, came back home and left anytime it pleased her, and did a lot of other things that I don't want to say in front of these children."

"Her brother did all he could to stop her from living a reckless life, but she would always ask him to relax and face his girlfriend, that it was her life and she had it under control. Of course, Williams' parents died at a very young age, so he was like a father to her. She never listened to anyone. It was even a wonder she graduated with a second class."

"One day, Sofia came back home and proudly announced to her brother and I that she finally fell in love for real. After rejoicing with her, we asked her to come with the man and introduce him to us. She did, and this man never hesitated to declare his love and intentions for her. William was delighted with the news. At least, his sister would be under someone's control. Little did he know that his assumptions were wrong. The love she claimed to have for John did not stop her from clubbing or going out with other men."

"William decided to confront Sofia when she returned from one of her impromptu leaves. Once again, she asked her brother not to interfere, that it was her life and she would handle it."

"He threatened to tell John about her promiscuity if she didn't stop."

"Don't you dare mention a word about this to John!" Those were her words.

'He is the first man I have ever fallen in love with and I'll die if you tell him about this!'

'Then, stop living a promiscuous life because you might end up getting a disease and infect John!' her brother warned."

"Sophia wanted to reply to her brother when they both heard the voice they never desired to hear!"

'You don't have to tell me William, I have heard and seen it all with my eyes!'

John's eyes moistened. 'I heard your conversation. People warned me against her, but I refused to listen, concluding they were all baseless rumours. Even if they were true, I decided to leave it behind, believing it was all in her past. I had plans for us, big plans!'

'Not what you think please, John!' Sofia cried.

'And here I was thinking you truly loved me, Sophia. I was supposed to spend the rest of my life with you, but it's good I've finally known you. Take care, Sofia. This is the end of anything we ever had, that is, if there was something at all!' John said and stormed out of the room without looking back.

"Sofia stood dumbfounded. Her mouth was agape, but she couldn't speak. William followed John and begged him to come back so they could sit down and settle it, but John drove out of the compound without looking back. When he returned into the living room, his sister pointed a finger at him."

'You! You did this to me!'

'Oh! I feel so awful, I'm sorry!' William begged, but she kept accusing him.

'You destroyed me, you, my own brother!'

"Sophia bolted upstairs to her room and locked herself. William and I knocked on her door each day, begging her to come out and eat at least. She wouldn't say a word to us. At one point, we feared she was dead. Just when my husband was going to break down the door, she finally opened it, stepping out with her luggages. Prior to that, William went to John's house and workplace everyday to plead. Still, no amount of begging or explanation could pacify him."

'It is over between your sister and I. Don't blame yourself; it wasn't your fault.'

When we saw her stepping out with her luggage in hand William couldn't fathom what was going on; and when he finally did, he went on his knees and begged her to stay. He even asked for her forgiveness. But she looked at him with so much indignation, and said the words that dreaded me so much that day!"



'You have destroyed my life by taking away the one I truly love and you're here cohabiting with your girlfriend! You took my happiness away and you expect to be happy for the rest of your life. Be rest assured that as long as I live, your happiness will be taken away from you as well!'

"William continued begging. He did all he could but Sophia stubbornly trampled out of the house, wheeled her luggage into her car, and went off.

Days went by and William didn't eat. I feared it might affect his health and our relationship, and when he did, he ate little. I did all I could. It took me months to bring William back to his normal self, although his sister didn't return until a few years after. I was able to get a psychologist who helped talk him out of his misery. That was when William stopped blaming himself a little. He proposed to me, and we got married."

"When I was four months pregnant, Sophia returned to us and apologized to my husband for accusing him wrongly. She claimed to see the world from a different light, but William did not know that a different light could be either good or bad. She asked her brother to take me for an antenatal appointment in the hospital she worked at and she was the doctor who carried out my delivery when I was due."

## CHAPTER FORTY-EIGHT

Sophia was beginning to get impatient with Beulah. Why was she extremely slow about getting the whole job done? The last picture she had sent was about twenty-five minutes ago. Time was running out. Either way, she would find out after placing a call to her.

She dialled Beulah's number but it wasn't going through. She tried again but it was still the same outcome. The network must be bad, Sophia concluded.

She looked across the room where her luggage had been properly arranged, waiting to be scooped up. She had planned to leave the house, the country, and even the continent forever. Her plan was perfectly laid out. Nothing and no one could ruin it.

It would happen that when Beulah sent in the final pictures of Ryan's badly mutilated and dead body, she'd take them to her brother's house and display them, just to enjoy the expression on their faces. Before they would recover from their shock, she would bolt out of the house straight to the airport.

She had already gotten her visa to India. Of course, she had to go to a place where no one would ever imagine. Before coming to a conclusion on her next location, she had contemplated Africa, South America, and the Middle East. Now, she would go to India and spend her life loving John no matter where he was in the world right now. No one had ever captured her heart the way he did and no one would.

Her phone rang. It was another picture from Beulah.

Sophia smiled. Way to go, Girl!

But wait a second! Sophia brought the phone closer, and squinted her eyes. Why did this picture look somehow similar to one of the pictures Beulah had sent earlier?

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Ryan's mother continued to narrate her ordeal.

"I gave birth to twins but Sophia returned with only one living child. A bell of panic rang in my heart when I saw the somber expression on her face. I asked her about my second baby, but instead of replying, she started crying. To me, the crying didn't explain why she returned

with one of my children, so I asked her for my second baby again. Then she threw her hands in the air, still crying. 'Oh! The worst has happened. Your baby's dead!'

I asked, 'What do you mean my child is dead?'

'It's the truth, I tell you!' she had wailed.

"I don't know how she did it with the other doctor and nurses, but looking back now, I think she was not alone in her plan. I was hurting so much that I couldn't bear to look at the stillborn child, so William and I decided to allow the hospital to carry out the funeral after giving us the death certificate. My husband did all he could to console me, but nothing, absolutely nothing, could suffice. And that was when I understood how William felt when his sister walked away. I hated myself. I concluded that it was because I wasn't going to be a good mother to my girl, that was why she left. And that was also another reason why my husband and I decided Ryan would be our only child. We trained and gave Ryan all the love we had."

Ryan could affirm what his mother said. They loved him. They cared for him. He remembered his mother's face each time she saw him crying, and the dread crossing her eyes each time he fell ill.

"But today I'm surprised that everything wasn't as we all believed it was," Mrs Miller said. "My daughter is alive, and everything was a setup for revenge."

Beulah gave her mother an accusing look. "Are you saying that the woman that loved and cared for me for twenty-one years did all that just to have a pound of flesh?"

Mrs. Miller didn't reply.

Beulah gave her an incredulous look. "How are we sure you are the one saying the truth?"

Mrs. Miller's face contorted, showing the hurt that she felt from the accusation and unbelief of her lost daughter.

"You still don't believe me, right?" she said, and rushed up the stairs again to her room. She came down with the death certificate the hospital had given them.

"Here, take a look at this!" She waved it in front of Beulah and the agents.

"If your so-called mother was telling you the truth, prove it to us by showing us the written permission she claimed your father gave to the hospital? And about the area where you accused me of not loving my daughter; From what I can recall, Sophia didn't let you frequent our house, but each time you came over, I believe you can attest to the fact that I never treated you less than my son Ryan."

"You don't know how I felt and cried each time you visited Ryan. Each time I saw you playing with him when you were kids, the pain of guilt that I felt for not being able to hold my baby girl. I've always tagged myself careless for letting my baby slip away from my hands."

The tears were flowing freely now from Geneva's eyes, and William wanted nothing more than taking his wife into his arms right now. She was in this emotional mess because of him. She didn't deserve this. But when she agreed to marry him, she married William's family problem.

Beulah remained quiet for a while, looking for an answer to give Mrs. Miller. Indeed, Sofia did not present any proof to her that she was telling the truth, and when Beulah had requested to come ask William and his wife, she threatened her by telling her that they would kill her if they found out that she was still around them. Being but a child, she feared death. She had heeded her auntie's warning, so she didn't pry.

Everything finally registered in Beulah's head. Indeed, her real mother's testimony was more accurate than hers and Sophia's.

No! This could not be happening. Sophia didn't train her all these years to use her. No wonder Sophia spoke with so much resentment, and not like someone who accepted a child that was rejected. Beulah pondered this reality and fell from her seat with her face to the ground, crying with so much anguish.

Her parents immediately got up from their seats and reached towards her. "Please get up, Beulah, it's okay now!"

Tears streamed down Mrs. Miller's face as she patted her daughter's back. "My baby, please get up and look at me. Mummy is here now, and no one will take you away from me ever again!"

"No! I can't bear to look at any of you again, not after what I've done!"

William circled his hands on his daughter's back and felt a new wave of emotion. "None of this was your fault. My sister and I are to blame for all this. I'm sorry that you were caught up in the middle of all this. I'm sorry that you, your mother and brother were dragged into the tussle between my sister and I."

Beulah looked up from the ground to her uncle's face which was now her father's. "But how can you blame yourself? Judging by what you said, it was obvious you meant no harm for your sister. I'm the one who deserves to be thrown into the prison alongside Sofia."

"No!" both parents cried simultaneously. "We can't let you leave us," William said, "not after all these years."

"Your father and I will do everything in our power not to let you go. You won't leave our side again," Geneva said, shaking her head furiously with intense determination.

With that, Beulah didn't speak again and fell into her parents' welcoming arms. They both embraced her and the trio cried. Ryan stood from his seat and joined the trio who sat on the floor crying and embracing each other.

This family reunion moistened Danny's eyes as he remembered his late father. They were once a happy family till his death shattered his mother. It's been eight years, but his mother still visited a psychologist once in a while.

Noticing his colleague's emotional state, Kasie quickly cleared his throat. "I regret interrupting this family reunion but my colleague and I have to go now and get the cops to apprehend Dr. Sophia Miller. My colleague and I fear that she might elope when she learns about what happened."

"Yes, they might be right, especially as it has been a long time since I sent her photos." Beulah looked at the wall clock and gasped. "It's been three and half hours since I sent her pictures!"

Danny placed a hand on Beulah's shoulder to calm her down. "We knew. We have been sending altered pictures, doctored from the ones you had taken of Ryan before on your phone, to her every thirty minutes."

Beulah breathed a sigh of relief. These people were indeed geniuses, and really trained for their work.

"Still, we mustn't take chances. We have to go now," Kasie said as both agents stood from their seats and scurried out of the Miller's living room.

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Dr Sophia Miller, upon her arrest, exposed two other nurses and a doctor who helped her carry out her plans after the police arrested her just as she was about leaving her house for the airport.

She suspected something was up when she noticed that the timing of the sending of the pictures were evenly and widely spaced out, and that the pictures looked slightly similar. She had tried calling Beulah's number several times, but it was unreachable.

She had confessed everything without remorse, and had even sworn to do it again in her next life.

"Beulah was also my accomplice. If I'm going down, I'm going with her. We will both spend our years in prison," she had concluded her confessions.

## CHAPTER FORTY-NINE

"Good morning!" Mrs. Miller chimed excitedly after waking her children and husband up with kisses on their cheeks.

She had slipped out of the bedroom earlier to make breakfast for her family. Now she returned to call them downstairs for breakfast.

She and William had asked their children to sleep in their bedroom. The children slept in the middle, with both parents at both ends of the bed.

Beulah sat up straight. "Good morning, Mother," she said, a little conscious of the new way she had to address the woman she had always seen as her greatest foe. It still felt like a dream, a very good dream.

Geneva, on hearing her daughter call her Mother, was once again struck with awe at her lot. She indeed was grateful to the forces that brought this good fortune to her life. She would have missed out on all this. She'd missed out on a lot already, but she was grateful for now. The thought of that almost brought up fresh tears to her eyes, but she pushed it back and laughed instead. She was so happy she felt like a bubble.

Since the previous day, she had asked Beulah to start calling her Mother after the Miller family found out the truth. And it felt sweet, so sweet to see the dream you never imagined come true.

Geneva looked down at her husband and son whose eyes were still closed and shook her head. "Can you see that, Beulah? Like father, like son. I don't know how I managed to put up with them all these years."

Beulah couldn't help but chuckle at her mother's joke.

"You know what? I think it's good they are still sleeping because I made everyone's favorite breakfast exactly as they like it. You and I will go downstairs to the kitchen and eat everything. Isn't that great?"

William and Ryan quickly jumped up from their bed and started reaching for the door when Mrs. Miller's voice put them to a halt.

"Nah-ah, you two ain't allowed to touch my food until you've both washed your face, brushed your teeth, had your bath, and changed into something nice."

"Aw! But you can't possibly mean that, Mum!"

"I mean every bit of it. Only my daughter is permitted to come downstairs whenever it pleases her."

"But this is not fair!" William and Ryan pouted.

"Well, that's your qualm."

William stepped closer to his wife. "How about I go eat now, sweetie, and get you pizza later today"

"No, the kids, you and I would be going to McDonald's for some ice-cream today!"

Ryan gave his sister a puppy face. "You know I'm your brother. Won't you ask Mum to allow me to come downstairs with you?"

"Hey, Ryan, you can't bribe my gal. I think it's time Beulah and I went downstairs to the kitchen." With that, she held Beulah's hand as she whirled around and walked out of the bedroom, leaving her husband and son to do as she said if they were going to eat their favorite breakfasts.

William shook his head as he watched his wife and daughter ambling out of the room, and returned his gaze to his son.

"You fall in love with a pretty gal, then you are stuck with her for the rest of your life."

Ryan chuckled. "Yeah! Like I'm stuck with your mess, right?"

"What do you mean?"

"Isn't it obvious that I have taken over your habit of not waking up early? Turns out you're my father, so I'm stuck with you."

Ryan walked out of the room, leaving William sprawled in the middle of his bedroom. "Well, they have all taken their mother's side, and I'm now alone. I better get myself out of my pity-party, and do as I was told, before that glutton, Ryan, consumes what's meant to be mine."



Ryan and William did as they were told before successfully joining Beulah and Geneva in the kitchen.

"So, how are your studies going?" Mrs. Miller asked as they ate.

"Pretty cool, although it gets tedious most times, but we are getting along well," Ryan replied.

She studied her son before asking the next question.

"Who was the girl you said used her phone to trace you when you were taken away from her car?"

Ryan looked up from his food. "She's one of my friends."

Friend, not his girlfriend. Mrs. Miller didn't like that.

"You mean to tell us that she's your girlfriend?"

"Yes, Mum. I think that girl might be his girlfriend," Beulah chimed in.

Ryan eyed his sister from across the table. "Stop with your speculations, Beulah!"

"I'm not speculating. I saw the way they embraced each other before we came here."

William smiled at his son mischievously and wriggled his eyebrows. "Tell us more, Beulah. You mean like the way your mum followed me in my college days?"

Both mother and son blushed.

"Stop it, Dad. We ain't dating," Ryan said in consternation.

"That's because you haven't told her your feelings yet," Mrs. Miller chimed in. "When are you planning to introduce her to us? Do you have her pictures on your phone? I would like to take a look at it, son."

Oh, no! How did this conversation get to this? Ryan felt he ought to disappear. He should look for an escape route. Unfortunately, none was forthcoming.

"Just try telling her your feelings, and see how she comes running after you everywhere you go," William said, grinning.

Ryan wanted to reply to his parents when Beulah said something that made everyone look in Ryan's direction.

"I happen to also know this girl you are talking about. She is a Christian, brilliant and well-mannered as well."

"Christian?" William asked as realisation registered in his head.

"The other day, your mother entered your room to clean up shortly after you traveled for college. She saw a Bible in your room, but we concluded you had nothing to do with it. It probably belonged to one of your classmates who had asked you to keep it for them."

Beulah realised what she had just done and didn't know how to rectify it. Ryan had not been bold enough to tell his parents that he was now a Christian. Now, her big mouth had finally spilled the beans.

"No, the Bible has nothing to do with anyone, but it has everything to do with me."

"Are you saying you are now...?"

"A Christian," Ryan completed. "Yes, I'm now a Christian, and I'm sorry that I've not been able to tell you."

"But why did you keep something like this away from us? Don't you want us to continue to be part of your life anymore?" Geneva asked.

"No! Not at all. I swear it's not what you're thinking!"

Realising his mother was playing the classic paranoid Mom role that always made preposterous conclusions from a simple premise, he said, "I was going to tell you all when I mustered enough courage to."

William exhaled deeply. "But did you become a Christian for the sole purpose of getting this girl that saved you the other day?"

"No, that was not my purpose." Ryan went on to explain about how their ordeal with the Nigerian affected his relationship with Ifes since she also hailed from the same country, and how he planned exposing her when he saw her good grades.

But he realised that he was wrong in stereotyping.

"I was surprised at the way she swiftly forgave me, but she replied by telling me that God would forgive me if only I asked him, and it didn't matter what I'd done. I shook my head incredulously because I believed I couldn't be forgiven for what I had done."

Then, Ryan confessed what happened between him and Mandy.

Apart from Hunter who knew about it on his own, his parents and sister were the first people he had confessed to besides God.

"After my encounter with her the day she told me about God, I went back to my dorm room, but my heart kept nudging me towards receiving peace. So, I decided to go to church if I could get the peace of mind my heart was craving for. I came out to give my life to Jesus when the choir was ministering."

"Yes, I remember that song quite alright," Beulah said. "I was sitting on the last pew when I saw Bradley ushering you to the platform."

Ryan looked at his sister surprisingly. "Why didn't I see you that day?"

"I didn't want anyone I know to see me. I called your dorm room that morning, and your roommate picked the call, telling me you were planning to go to church. Suddenly, I started feeling curious about the reasons why you were going to church. And then, I don't know what came over me, but I dressed up and secretly followed you to church that day. I can clearly remember the song the choir sang. My only peace is you, Jesus."

"When I saw you moving over to the platform, I saw an image that looked like a light, stretching out his hands, beckoning me to come. I looked around me, but it seemed no one noticed what I was seeing. Thinking I had gone crazy or something, I slipped out of my seat and bolted out of the church. I entered my car, telling myself over and over that I was hallucinating, that God was not real, that I was having a visual illusion. At one point, I concluded I was running crazy because no one could see the image I saw."

"Somewhere inside of my heart, I still felt the beckoning. And then, yesterday, when Ryan acted with love and acceptance towards me after all I did to him, I knew that sort of forgiveness was beyond man. I remembered the beckoning light."

Mr. and Mrs. Miller watched their children like a movie. They did not want to break up their new found unity. Knowing looks passed between them. They were atheists, but they were also well versed in issues of religion. They knew very well how religious environments induced hallucinations, both auditory and visual hallucinations. They were well aware of the psychological effect of the leaders of these religious sects' words and actions—they were purposely designed to give the impression that their children are currently attesting to.

"So, are you telling us that indeed there is a God, and you have experienced him?"

"Yes Dad, God is real and I'm going to church tomorrow to give my life to him as I have seen Ryan do."

"No, Beulah, you can give your life to Jesus anywhere and anytime," Ryan said.

"Can I do it right now?" Beulah asked.

"Right now!"

Mr and Mrs. Miller watched as Ryan held his sister's hand and led her in the prayer of salvation.

"Just like that?" Mrs Miller asked after they finished praying. It was laughable that the child she had trained to decipher religious bull crap was so gullible. Well, why break his charmed life? She would leave him to it.

"Yes, just like that. Salvation is free, yet expensive. Free, because you only need to confess Jesus as your lord and Savior, but a lot of people wouldn't do that. Oh! if only the world knew that it would take just a few affirmations to save their souls from being condemned, they would dive into the opportunity."

Mr. William spoke up. "Well, son, I can understand you two have had your own encounters, but we still can't be sure of this. Even if there is a God, how are you sure that it is that of Christians? I should remind you that we have multiple religions and they all claim to have experienced the supernatural in their own ways."

"That's quite simple, Dad. It's faith, evidence of things hoped for and substance of things not seen. There is a witness within me that just knows, Dad."

Ryan gave his parents the Bible they saw in his room in the evening of the same day. "This is my gift to you, it has all the answers to your questions."

The next day, Mr. and Mrs. Miller, though unshaken in their beliefs, attended one of the nearby churches, and we're just plain perplexed at how many sane people believe religious hocus-pocus.

## CHAPTER FIFTY

Ifes sat in her room, contemplating what to do with the rest of her day. Her roommate had gone out with Skylar and Anne-Marie to the library to help them for their research projects.

Doing research and discovering new things had always been one of Mandy's hobbies. Sometimes, Ifes even wondered why she wasn't studying forensic science like Anne-Marie and Skylar.

It was already something that Mandy was also good at decorating. And now, she wasn't only good at making research, she also loved singing, cooking and sports activities.

Out of all these beautiful attributes of Mandy, Ifes could only boast of two which was, sports and music. She has missed watching her favorite club, Chelsea FC, play football, or soccer. Was that not how it was called here in America?

She hated research. And have always loved a serene life.

Well, enough of wondering about herself and her roommate. How about Ayo, Chloe, Becky, Hunter and even the other students who gave their lives to God? Were they preparing to go for their Bible study class today with the pastor and the Christian psychologist?

Since they gave their lives to Christ, they joined the Bible foundation class created by the presiding pastor. It was founded for the sole purpose of teaching new converts and ex-addicts the Bible, and this also involved some psychological exercise as well.

The Bible foundation class was meant to grow them spiritually, while the psychological exercise with the Christian psychologist was meant to build their intellect.

The two would help to keep their mind, soul and body busy from going back to what Christ had delivered from.

She ought to call them and know how they were faring now. She hadn't been doing that for a while because of the school's busy schedule. That was a lame excuse, but everything that happened to Ryan recently had drawn everyone's attention.

Talking about Ryan, he was supposed to return today with his twin sister. She hoped he hadn't decided against that. He had missed out on today's lectures, and it might not make sense for him to miss out on another one.

She finished contemplating who to call first and picked up her phone. Beating her to the chase, her phone rang. Looking at the caller ID, she smiled as she tapped the answer button. "Hello, Hunter, I was just about calling you."

"Hi! This is not Hunter, it's Bradley."

"Bradley! But why are you calling me with Hunter's phone?"

"You've got to come over here and help me out..." Before Bradley could complete his sentence, she caught him off with strings of questions.

"Why? What happened? Did anything go wrong with Hunter? Is he alright?"

"Take a chill pill, Ifes. Nothing's wrong, but the issue here is that Hunter's refusing to go for his Bible lessons"

Ifes heaved a sigh and exhaled deeply. "Oh! I see, and why is that?"

"He's here giving some dumb excuses. I called Alex to help me get him out of his bed to attend the Bible foundation, but he wouldn't budge, so I figured maybe a pretty gal might help talk him out of his decision."

Ifes grinned. "You know your brother can be so stubborn at times, but I can try my best."

"Okay, please come right away before he starts running late."

Ifes got up and dressed as beautifully as she could, then scurried out of her dorm room.

"Did someone say they are not going for their Bible lessons today?" Ifes asked as soon as she barged into the twin brothers' dorm room and spotted Hunter lying on a couch.

"Oh! So, you too have joined my brother and Alex, right?" Hunter asked.

"In doing what exactly?"

"You guys ain't good friends at all. Ryan's not yet back from Texas, and you are all flying around instead of doing the opposite."

"But Ryan doesn't have any problems with us carrying out our school activities till he returns."  
"

"No! I thought we were all supposed to sober up while we waited for him."

"Sober up ko, sober reflection ni!" Ayo teased and Ifes chuckled.

The twin brothers moved their gaze to Ayo before Hunter finally faced Ifes and asked. "What was the meaning of what he just said?"

"You see, we do not hail from the same tribe, so I don't know how to explain that to you."

Hunter turned towards Ayo to ask for an explanation, but Ifes darted close to him and started jerking him by his hand. "You've got to get up and go to your classes now."

"But I told you I'm not going anywhere. I'll remain in a sober mode until I see Ryan."

"You jerk! Get up right now!"

Ifes was beginning to yank him harder until his hand felt sore. It was as if it would dislocate from its socket any minute.

He definitely needed to do something to get these three off his hook. And fast!

"Okay, okay, stop yanking me. I'll go, but on one condition."

It was true Hunter was waiting for Ryan but that was not the main reason why he had refused to attend his Bible class.

He wouldn't deny that sometimes he felt tired. Adjusting to a new lifestyle wasn't easy, and most times, he failed at doing it. When he admitted this to his brother and friends, instead of agreeing with him, they would end up cheering him up, telling him he was doing well.

He would always hear something like:

"You know you can't do it on your own. Just allow the Holy Spirit."

"You don't have to try but the Holy Spirit is always around to help you."

"You only have to set your heart on him and he will guide you."

"Don't try living a righteous life on your own because you are the righteousness of God in Christ Jesus."



"Don't try pleasing God because you can't succeed, but the Holy Spirit is always here to help. Just surrender to him."  
Blah blah blah... Hunter needed a break.

He had been trying a lot of times, trying and failing. Yet, they ended up telling him he was doing great. He felt like they were coating his failures with sweet-talk.

Even the psychologist wasn't helping matters. Or so he thought.

"What's your condition?"

Yes! Good question. Very, very good question. Now, get ready to run. On your mark...

"Since you are insisting that I should go for the Bible class, my condition goes thus: You will have to come with me to the Bible class, and the remaining two classes I have this week."

"Aah! Don't you think that's too much?" Bradley asked. "How could you give such conditions?"

"She asked for it, so she will get it. Besides, I think this whole thing is simple. If she isn't coming along, then I'm not going. With this, it is a win-win situation for everyone."

Ayo had resigned and was now sitting on the seat that was attached to Hunter's reading table, playing games with his laptop. When they were done with their village meeting, they would tell him.

"No way, Hunter there's no way she's agreeing to that condition. And you! You must go for your Bible class without giving any conditions!"

Hunter looked at his brother shaking his head. "You seem to have forgotten that we are twin brothers, that you ain't my father, huh?"

"Well, I don't really care what's forgotten and what's not, but what I'm telling you is that she isn't..."

"I'll come along with Hunter," Ifes said and the room fell silent.

Hunter cried... no, wailed... no, bawled in his heart. It seemed this girl was a pretty harder nut to crack than he had predicted.

"What! What did you just say?" Hunter asked.

Ayo tilted his head and smirked at Hunter, whose face was contorted from the look of triumph to disappointment, before returning his attention back to his game.

"No! You can't come along with me. Sometimes I take my Bible and psychological class longer than the rest, and I'm usually the last to leave the psychologist office. You can't come along to continue waiting for such long hours. You might feel dizzy and hungry."

"Don't worry about that. if you can make it, then I shouldn't have problems."

"But I don't want you to starve because of me."

"That's no problem, I can always grab a snack at the church canteen."

Hunter gave several butts, and didn't succeed because she was prepared for him.

So, Hunter resigned and got dressed for Bible study for the new converts and ex-addicts. After all, it wouldn't harm to have the company of a pretty gal.

Hunter finished dressing up and intentionally started looking for his car keys in a bid to find one final excuse. Ayo promptly stood and offered to drive both of them to church in Ifes' car if he couldn't find his keys. Bradley even offered to drive them in his car.

"Never! There's no way I'm gonna allow you two to come along with Ifes and I. Not a chance. I think I know where I left my car keys. Already, two are is company but three's a crowd, not to talk of four bunches of..."

Ayo smirked again at Hunter, and gave him a thumbs up before spinning around and settling back on his seat. "Hey! Bradley, come let's check out some new games on this system. What do you think?"

"Oh yeah! That'll be pretty cool," Bradley replied ambling towards Ayo.

"You know what? I even looked up Hunter's favorite game last night. I think it is interesting."

"Wow! Are you serious? If so, I think we should take his system since he's going out for Bible study, so we can play games on it."

Hunter was almost at the door when he quickly whirled around and pointed at the duo. "See, no one should touch my baby and my games."

"Oh, Relax, budd, we ain't taking away your laptop. It's just to play games. I think you're running late already."

Hunter scurried back towards his reading table. "I think I have a serious need for this laptop, so I'm going out with it. You guys should fix yourselves."

Ayo and Bradley grinned excitedly when Hunter and Ifes walked out and slammed the door behind them.

"Yes! We finally succeeded," Ayo said.

"Good gravy! That douchebag! It's good he's out for a while," Bradley asserted.

The duo kept chatting happily until they heard a knock on their door. They both groaned simultaneously, thinking it was Hunter who had returned.

"Wait a minute, the Hunter I know doesn't have that courtesy to knock on the door of his own dorm room before entering, so I'll go check the door and see who's there," Bradley said.

And when he did, he saw Ryan standing in front of his door, smiling. "Hey, Bradley, I'm back! It's good to see you again."

## CHAPTER FIFTY-ONE

-Salvation is free, yet expensive when we refuse to take the price that Christ paid for us on the Cross of Calvary. We do not have to procrastinate because tomorrow might be too late; even the next second might be too late.-

Fourth, and final, session. First semester.

The new session came with its eagerness for the students of UPenn. It was a great session for the final year students, especially for Anne-Marie, because one of her greatest desires was granted. Ian was employed by the university after his graduation.

To Anne-Marie, this meant that she would continue to see him as often as she wanted. Although she and Ian weren't dating, she had succeeded in making them close friends.

Watching him go at the end of last semester had been a great pain to her. Even though she wasn't a Christian, yet she was hoping that God would do something, that Ian wouldn't leave her all alone in this college. And it happened even more than she expected.

He had been employed as an assistant lecturer. Few more students who graduated with top grades in their different departments were also retained by the school. Ian was her knight in shining armor, and she loved him so much that her heart beat just at the thought.

Anne-Marie had sat down all alone, analysing his attitude towards her, checking if she could decipher how he felt about her. Did he love her now or he still saw her as one of his Christian sisters? He loved her, he loved her not. He loved her, he loved her not.

Who should she approach and discuss this with, to know if Ian truly felt something for her. Maybe she should meet Bradley, Ryan or Hunter, or maybe Ayo who was Ian's closest friend. Ayo was in love with Mandy. He had known how it felt, he had experienced it, and surely he would know when a guy fell in love.

Megan was fighting with the turmoil she felt inwardly as she dressed up for lectures. To her, men were the most useless creatures in the world. Any guy that came professing his feelings just wanted to have all that is about you, both in and out.

By the time they finish sipping you dry, they toss you to the trash can like an empty container.

Even the rich dude she had rejected Hunter for had dumped her after terminating countless times for him. Of course, being the pretty girl that she was, she dashed him off and behaved

as though it didn't hurt her, and accepted one of the many boys who were constantly knocking on her door.

She knew Hunter loved her wholeheartedly, but her pride and ego wouldn't let her go back to him after all the words she had spoken to him. She and Skylar had been into this before. These days, she was alone.

Although Skylar had spoken to her several times to also choose the path that she had taken, Megan didn't feel the need to do so. Besides, why should she? To her, Skylar changed because she had nothing to lose again. Skylar lost her womb, but she hasn't. Instead, she had gotten pregnant again for one of her boyfriends who had threatened to break up the relationship if she didn't terminate.

She would have ignored him if not that he was one of her favorites. He was handsome, very handsome, and rich too. She also hailed from a rich family, but combining her own family's money with another man's meant a double blessing.

These days, Skylar's discussion had been only what chimed in her heart. No matter how much Megan had tried putting it at the back of her heart, she still couldn't resist Skylar's discussion about God.

But who was God? Was he real? She couldn't bring herself to give her life to an invisible being. Maybe she should ask her roommate and know her perception about God. With that, Megan tossed her hair brush on her table and turned towards Anne-Marie. "May I ask you some questions if you don't mind?"

"Sure, I'm all ears."

"Do you truly believe that there is a God?"

Anne-Marie felt weird. This question was being directed towards the wrong person. Anyway, she would give her honest opinion.

"Well, I must confess that even though I'm not a Christian, I actually believe that God exists. So maybe you could call me an agnostic."

"If you believe, why ain't you a Christian yet?"

"The thing is that I'm not ready. I'm not actually sure if I want to serve God, and I also don't see the need to."

"Well, that makes the two of us. I don't see the need to serve God although I still have this conflict in my head if he truly exists."

"But if truly there was a God, then why is the earth in her present condition? Poverty, hunger inundating some human beings, bad water and poor health facilities lacking in the third world countries, militant groups bombing here and there, abuses in relationships and marriages, people soaking their pillows at night with tears, people committing suicide and harming themselves because they've lost hope of living, our soldiers going out to the battlefield and returning with post-traumatic stress..."

"Well, I obviously don't have an answer to that, but I guess one of these days, you and I could ask Ifes, Ayo or Ian, so that they could give us a clear explanation."

Megan shrugged. "I doubt that God exists in the middle of this chaos."

"At first, I also doubted, but in my quest to get Ian's love, I have seen some miracles that can't happen naturally."

"Oh, okay! Thank you." Megan whirled around, picked up her hair brush and resumed combing her hair.

"But why do you ask, Megan? Are you in conflict over something?"

"No," Megan replied over her shoulders. "It's just that I feel I need to change my lifestyle. There are a lot of things I need to drop but I will do that later. I need to clear some of the mess I've made first."

She had to get rid of the feelings growing inside her before she could decide which way to follow. She would either go back to her cute, but devilish, boyfriend, or tow the line of Skylar, Avery, Bradley, Ryan, Hunter, and Mandy.

"Isn't this odd?" Anne-Marie laughed bleakly.

"What's odd?" Megan asked.

"Of all our friends, you and I are the only ones who have yet to be Christians. Maybe it's because we are roommates."

"Well, I have been thinking about that, but I can't be a Christian now. That would come later, but first things first."

With that, both ladies dressed up in silence and scurried out for their lectures for the day.

Skylar finished her lectures for the day and was now driving back to her dorm room when she received a call on her phone. She was too tired, and receiving a call while driving was certainly not what she needed.

She quickly connected the cord from her phone to her car's speaker before pressing the answer button. "Yes, Skylar Ford speaking."

The voice of a man which sounded like he was in his mid-forties spoke up.

"My name's Dr Jim Smith. I'm calling you from New Way Hospital. Your friend, Megan Ace, is here and she has asked us to call you. She is in critical condition as we speak."

Skylar's knuckles turned white as she gripped the steering tighter. "What? Did anything happen to Megan? I hope she is alright?"

"We need you to come right now, ma'am."

"Alright, I'm actually driving back to my dormitory, but I'll just make a U-turn and start coming."

Skylar prayed frantically that whatever it was, Megan would be safe.

But the prayer was too late because the damage was already done before she got to the hospital.

She drove into the parking lot, alighted from her car and hurried to the hospital lobby. She met one of the nurses who ushered her to the doctor's office after she finished introducing herself and telling her that the doctor had asked her to come.

She opened the door, walked into the doctor's office and noticed his professional, but somber, expression.

After much persuasion she finally sat down to receive the news the doctor had called her for. Pushing free strands of her red hair to the back of her ear, she leaned back and focused her gaze on the doctor whose mouth formed a thin line.

"I'm sorry to inform you that we lost her. Megan Ace died a couple of minutes ago."

If lightning had struck Skylar, her expression would have been better. She gazed wide-eyed at the doctor as though she was watching a horror movie. She was glued to her seat and she couldn't move. The world was spinning around her and she couldn't fathom anything.

"We advised her against having another abortion, but she insisted that she must carry it out. It wasn't within our constitutional rights to stop her, and that was why we had to do it. I'm sorry to say that she didn't survive it this time around."

"Nooooooooo...!" Skylar let out an ear-piercing shriek, so loud that the doctor closed his ears with his palms.

No! Megan didn't die. She was supposed to get saved before her chapter was closed. No! Megan's soul was not on its way to eternal condemnation.

She lifted up her face and looked at the doctor. "Did anyone carry out the prayer of salvation with her?" Skylar asked, not seeming to know how out-of-place the question was. But she didn't care. At the moment, nothing made sense anymore.

The doctor looked at her in confusion. "Prayer of salvation? I don't know what you mean by that, but we do not carry out religious activities here."

At a point, Skylar felt her heartbeat stop. She was dreaming. This could not be real. She had seen Megan yesterday and spoken to her on the phone this morning. A few hours later, Megan was gone.

Skylar was now acting crazy, and the doctor retained her in his office as he couldn't bear to allow her to do anything irrational. When it looked like she had calmed down a bit, she was asked to call Megan's parents. Skylar also informed the rest of her friends. They cried in pain because they didn't just lose a friend, but her soul was also lost from eternal life.

Hunter cried the most, not because he still felt the same way he did before and during their freshman year, but he blamed himself for Megan not getting saved before her demise.



If not that he was too cynical, thinking about himself and his feelings for her that were smashed, he would have helped in talking to her about Christ, his love would have won her over.

His friends tried convincing him that it wasn't his fault, but Hunter wouldn't have any of that. He blamed himself, tagged himself a failure. But no matter what he did, Megan was gone forever and would never return, and so was her opportunity of getting saved as well.

Megan's parents flew from Texas and asked that their daughter's body be cremated and buried in one of the cemeteries in Pennsylvania. Megan's mother was totally in a state of trauma throughout her only child's burial.

Megan had gone, taking her mother's essence of living as well. There was nothing to live for again.

A month after Megan's burial, Mandy and her friends received the news that Megan's mother committed suicide.

## CHAPTER FIFTY-TWO

Ryan and his twin sister stepped out together for lunch in one of the college restaurants.

Since Sophia was arrested and had confessed that Beulah was her accomplice, her father had, through their family's lawyer, gone to the court to receive an order to allow their daughter to be done with school before bringing up her court case, since she had one more year to finish college.

By the time she was done with college, they would get a good barrister that would be able to prove that Beulah was deluded from childhood. If the good lawyer would be able to prove that her child's psychological state wasn't right at that time, then Beulah could be discharged and acquitted. And this was still a prayer point in the Miller's family.

Entering through one of the swinging doors of the restaurant, Ryan and his sister sat in their preferred spots.

A waiter soon navigated his way to their table with a menu in hand.

"Thank you." Ryan said as he collected the menu from the waiter to study it with his sister before choosing their meal for the day.

"May I get you some lemonade while I await your order?" the waiter asked.

"Yes please," Beulah replied.

The waiter walked away and returned with two glasses of lemonade. "There you go. So, have you been able to make up your mind on what you want to eat?"

They were still contemplating. Finally, Beulah settled for buttered vegetable and chicken salad, while Ryan ordered for tomato soup and grilled cheese.

"I'll be back." The waiter smiled as he walked away from the duo and returned with their orders.

They ate in silence for a while before Beulah broke it. "So, how is Hunter? I hope he's recovering from everything."

Ryan's mouth formed into a thin line. "Hunter has had little improvement. Megan's death is actually hard on all of us, but I think it really hit Hunter like a rock."

"I can understand how difficult this might be for him."

"Somehow, he still blames himself, saying he could have done better. He hardly speaks to anyone, and even his twin brother is worried about it. He spends most of his free time reading his Bible or praying."

Ryan sighed as he dropped his spoon with a clang. "Beulah, I don't know. Megan's death is also hard on me. Right now, none of us have the right words for Hunter. I feel bad for him, you know?" Ryan's voice trailed off at that last word.

Beulah reached out and touched her brother's hand from across the table. "Don't worry. I believe God will console you guys for this great loss."

"Till today, it still disturbs us that we are saved, when one of us might be somewhere suffering endlessly."

Beulah winced. That was where she would have landed, even Ryan and all his friends. But God's grace and mercy was also given to those who did not deserve it.

"The other day we suggested that Hunter visit the presiding pastor of our campus church. Hunter came back with quarter eyes. Yet, after crying, and pouring out his heart to the pastor, Hunter is still withdrawn."

Sitting opposite her twin brother, Beulah prayed that God would give her the words to at least console her brother right now. Everything must have been hard on them, losing a friend you grew up with wasn't something to forget in just a day's time. She stared down at her brother who's gaze had returned to his food as he ate slowly, his eyes moistened and he couldn't bear to raise up his face to look at her.

She remembered people's remarks several times, when they said she and Megan looked alike. Now, sitting across the table from Ryan, she wondered if she reminded him so much of his lost friend. Was that the reason why Ryan wouldn't even look up from his food?

"You know, I know we are all hurting, but I really wish Hunter could return to his normal happy self. We do not like this quiet and sober Hunter." Ryan's words were beginning to choke him. He was struggling to speak past the lump in his throat.

"We really want our normal happy and carefree Hunter back. Maybe that could console us, because, in truth, we can't do anything about Megan's demise." Ryan wiped the moisture that rolled down his face.

"It's too late now, and none of us can do anything about it. Megan is gone. We can't revive her. But the thing is, it is really difficult to move on without her."

Ryan sniffled and looked up from his plate of food, with tears blurring his vision. "I really miss her. I wish she could come back to us again. I swear we would make things better, and we would all be good friends to one another, even more than we have ever been. Life is too difficult to continue when you lose your loved ones!"

Ryan returned his gaze back to his food. He had lost his appetite yet again. He hadn't been eating well since Megan's death. None of his friends were eating well. These days, they only manage to keep up with their studies.

But why? Why did she leave them? They loved her. They all loved one another despite the skeletons everyone hid in their cupboards. Wherever she was right now, did she see the effect her death had on them. Despite the pregnancy, they would have loved her still, but she wanted to do it her own way. Now look at what it was doing to all of them.

"We really can't forget her. It's so difficult!" Ryan said, but he didn't take his eyes away from his food.

Beulah looked at her brother and noticed his obvious agony. She couldn't bear to continue seeing her brother and his friends in such a state. She had to do something. They might also be feeling like they have lost their sense of living as well. She had to do something, do something for her brother and his friends. But what could she do? Which scripture in the Bible could she use to console Ryan and his friends?

Apart from Hunter, Skylar happened to be the worst affected. She had refused to come out of her shell. She could just be described as walking... Well, walking...

Oh! Her brother had lost a lot of weight since the demise of their beloved friend. All his friends had also lost so much weight that she feared that it wouldn't be long before they would all be confined to a hospital bed. But what could she do? These people had been Christians before her, and they knew all the right scriptures. What could she say that would

suffice. Even Ifes, who seemed to be doing so much, still wasn't able to get her brother and his friends to their normal self.

"Oh, Lord! Is there anything I can do to help these people who are dear to my heart? I cannot bear to see them suffering this much. It might not be their fault as they have all assumed, so what can I do?"

Like a flicker of light, the answer came to her. Smiling softly, she thanked God that she was going to do something to help her brother and his friends who also rescued her from doing terrible things. She wasn't doing this to pay them back because nothing could be enough to pay for the price of salvation. She was simply doing what the Apostle Paul said in the book of 1 Thessalonians 5:11.

She and her brother ate the rest of their meal in silence before walking back to their dormitories.

As soon as she entered her dorm room, she brought out her pen and a sheet of white paper and began writing down all that was laid in her heart. After writing, she prayed and committed it to the Holy Spirit trusting him that the sole purpose of carrying out this act would be achieved.

Before she slept that night, she sent a text message to Ryan and his friends to gather in one of the mini halls of the college church. When she finished sending the invite, her heart began to thud. She prayed that this would work out; if not, she might end up making a mess of everything she'd planned. "Not my plan, Lord. This is your plan. And I'm trusting you to make the best out of it. Not my will, Lord, but yours be done." Beulah finished praying and felt the peace of the Lord envelope her. She slept soundly.

The next day by 4:00pm, Ryan and his friends had gathered at the venue Beulah told them about, and were now waiting to hear why she had asked them to gather.

Beulah wasn't alone. Ian and Ayo were there, and they set out some instruments. Ifes was also there to contribute her own quota as Beulah had also called for her help last night. Surely Beulah didn't call them for a church service, did she?

Beulah mounted the stage she prepared in front of her friends and her voice echoed through the small speakers.

"First, I want to thank you all for making time to honour this invitation. It really means a lot to me. I do not take what you've done today for granted, because I'm well aware of the loss of your friend. Nothing can repair the damage. I called everyone here because this was laid in my heart to do."

Beulah gripped the mic tighter and closed her eyes, allowing the Holy Spirit to speak through her.

"No matter what we might be passing through, there is still somewhere in our heart where we are reminded of God's love. We love God, and he loves us even more. We may have lost a lot of things in life, even our essence of living, but we've got Jesus. He is our hope of living. He loves us. He's our Knight in shining armour. He tells us not to cry when we're crying. He gives us his peace when we are troubled. He tells us that we are strong when we are weak. And he tells us that it is possible when we think it is not."

With this, Beulah started singing the song that was laid in her heart.

*In Christ alone, my hope is found. He is my light, my strength, my song.*

Beulah finished singing and started speaking more words as she was led by the Holy Spirit.

"We've got Jesus who is more than gold. We have also gotten the promise of God, and that is the Holy Spirit. He's more than life, more than gold, more than diamond, more than anything most precious. A lot of people in the world have not yet gotten this priceless treasure we have."

"Oh! There are a lot of people like Megan who are on their way to internal damnation. And what do we do? Should we sit and mourn over one while there are a million others who still have the chance to hear about Christ from us? If we are crying a river over a lost soul, what do we do about the millions who are lost in the world? If we can't continue living because we lost a loved one, then what is our hope of calling? Who is Jesus to us?"

"When Peter was asked to step out of the ship by Jesus, he did, and he walked with Jesus upon the sea. But immediately he removed his eyes from his Maker and looked out into the storm, he began drowning."

"We are children of God, ain't we? But a lot of Christians in the world have forgotten that passage of the Bible which says that all things work together for good to those that love God and are called by his purpose (Romans 8:28). Of course, losing a loved one for life isn't

something to rejoice over, but perhaps this has taught us that no one can predict the next second. And as children of God, our job on earth here still has to be carried out."

"After Jesus died and resurrected from the grave, he gave us the right to carry out his mandate which is written in the book of Isaiah 61:1-2, Luke 4:17-21, and Matthew 28:18-20. So, the question is, should we continue crying over one soul while there are billions of souls on their way to the same dark tunnel? Jesus says that he's coming for the second time and he is coming with his reward. We might not get it hundred percent, but I'm sure that when we do our bid, we will be able to stand boldly in his presence at his second coming, and tell him we tried our best."

"But how will it feel like when you are held accountable for not reaching out to the gospel to that neighbour whose soul was lost, to that your course mate who didn't make it, and your friends? If we call ourselves Christ's ambassadors, then we must act as such. And what do we expect Christ to tell us at the end of our days on earth? I'm sure we all long to hear these words..."

'Welcome, oh good and faithful servant,' they all chorused.

Beulah smiled. "Although it has not been long since I started associating with you, I've been enjoying your company as though I started out with you from childhood. Now, I miss everyone, and would like you to return to your normal selves. It might not be as normal as before, but I know it can be better."

Hunter smiled for the first time since Megan's departure, and Beulah blushed. Ayo, Ian and Ifes were amazed at the work of the words of Beulah. This was something they could not achieve in seven weeks, but she did it in less than an hour.

"I'd pay a million dollars to watch you sustain that smile on your face," Beulah teased Hunter.

Hunter's smile morphed into laughter as he shied away from Beulah's perusal. "You better stop flattering me, young gal."

Beulah grinned and looked around. "You see? He's saying I'm not serious. He's calling me a jerk."

"I never called you a jerk, silly!"

"Did you just call my sister a silly gal?" Ryan chimed in.

"Hey! You, why do you act as though you are the only one who has a twin sibling here? Stop talking to Hunter that way." Bradley playfully came to his brother's defence.

"Oh! Just look at these douchebags. Because they are twins, they wouldn't let us take fresh air." Anne-Marie said, rolling her eyes dramatically. Ian's grin broadened, while Ayo and Ifes beamed.

"Yeah! I can't agree more," Skylar asserted and this gave Beulah more joy.

"Yes, I really love the fact that I was born alone. My single life is so sweet," Mandy said, sighing afterward.

"Look at you, Mandy. Stop lying. You are not single. You are in a relationship. You are as good as those two sets of twins over there!" Avery cut in, and everyone laughed, including Ayo. Only Mandy, who blushed to the core, was silent.

"Hey! I can't take it when I see anyone bullying my girl," Ayo said. "My baby is glad that she was born alone, and I like that too."

"But she just denied you right now, claiming she's single," Hunter teased and everyone laughed louder again.

"She was born alone and doesn't have to share her brain with another person like Bradley's doing with you. I love it that way because she doesn't get to act like a fool the way you do sometimes. I still wonder how Bradley manages to put up with you."

Everyone laughed again as Bradley removed his jacket and stoned it at Ayo. "My brother is the best thing that ever happened to this world."

Ayo wanted to retaliate when Ifes said something that made everyone turn Bradley's way. "Don't mind him, Ayo. I think he's quite jealous. You know he doesn't have a girlfriend."

Bradley blushed as Ayo smirked. "Yeah! I think you're correct. I never thought of that, you know?"

"Hey! Bradley, is this the truth?" Hunter asked, not coming to his brother's defence as Bradley had done for him.



Bradley's face flushed pink. "Just stop asking me those questions, good grief!"

"I think Ifes is right, and it looks like ya itchin' to get hitched up." Ryan winked at Bradley.

Avery jumped into a rescue mission before everyone bombarded Bradley with their words and questions. "Our course project is becoming more tedious by the day."

"You're correct," Ayo replied. "These days, I hardly get along with other activities."

"Yes, and our lecturers just try turning me crazy these days," Ryan said. "I'm still finding it hard to forgive Dr. Marcus."

"Wow! Look at these college students gossiping about their lecturers, not recognising one of 'em who's presently in their midst."

Everyone's eyes turned to Ian. "We are sorry then."

"Don't worry, Ian's a good man. I'm sure he wouldn't snitch on us," Anne-Marie said.

"Yes, I'm glad you reckon me a good man." Ian smiled at Anne-Marie and spots of pink appeared on her cheeks.

"Okay guys, since we are all settled, I would like to invite everyone out for a picnic on Saturday."

Everyone's eyes lightened at the mention of a picnic.

"That's brilliant," Skylar said. "So, what's the plan?"

"Okay, so I've written out the activities everyone of us will carry out to make this a success. Each person must pick out a paper from the box. Whatever is written on the paper is what the person will do."

With that, Beulah brought out a mini-box and opened it as everyone dipped their hands inside and brought out small sheets of white paper.

"Jesus!" Ayo exclaimed, placing his free hand on his chest after reading what was on his paper.

Everyone looked away from their papers to Ayo. "What's it?" Mandy asked.

"Cooking! I'm going to do the cooking!"

Everyone gasped, knowing how lazy Ayo was with cooking. Soon, everyone's surprise turned into amusement as they stared at Ayo.

Mandy, who didn't find it funny, clearly worried for him.

"Give it here, I think we should switch responsibilities," Mandy said as she reached out for the paper in Ayo's hand.

"Noooooooo!" the rest of them cried out.

"You can't switch responsibilities. It is not allowed," Beulah said, arms perched on her hips.

Mandy turned to the girl. "Can't you see he hardly cooks? He either goes to one of the college restaurants or eats when his roommate prepares something for the both of them. I'm sure we all can count how many times he has cooked his own food since he was accepted into this college."

"We all agreed that everyone would do what was written in their paper!" Avery said.

"But Ayo will burn down his dormitory if he tries cooking for a multitude."

With that, the boys in the room began laughing as the girls banter amongst themselves.

Anne-Marie and Skylar stood in support of Mandy, while Avery, Beulah and Ifes stood against.

The laughter from the boys started dying down when they saw what was written on their own papers. Swiftly, they joined the conversation and supported Mandy.

When Mandy, Anne-Marie and Skylar uncovered the real motives behind their support, they decided to stay together with Beulah's team.

So, when the day finally arrived, everyone carried out the activity written on their paper sheets.

Ayo carried out his cooking, but not without the secret help of his roommate, Kelly.

Bradley, Ian, Ryan and Hunter began humming excitedly as everyone sat down enjoying their meal at the picnic.

Hunter and Ryan served the food to everyone and they were to wash the plates afterwards. Ian and Bradley were to wash the sheets used for the picnic. Mandy was asked to make the sheets available. Skylar was to play any music they wanted. Avery and Ifes were to safely drive everyone to the picnic. Beulah and Anne-Marie were to provide any other refreshments.

"This food's great. It's been quite a long time since I ate something as good as this," Hunter said. Ian, Ryan, Bradley and Kelly nodded their heads in affirmation.

Ayo snubbed the guys as he continued eating. These people should not play with his intelligence.

"Yeah! You can say that again, Ayo is really cute," Mandy said. Ayo looked up from his food and smiled at Mandy.

"I'm glad you like my food, baby. Don't worry, I will do this often when we..." Ayo got himself before he could finish that sentence.

## CHAPTER FIFTY-THREE

End of second semester,  
Fourth and final year.

Mandy Parker and her friends had successfully written their final exams and it was time to graduate from the college.

As usual, the Christian Quakers arranged a bi-semester program. It was usually a two-day programme which was held on the last Saturday and Sunday of each session.

Students made proper arrangements for varieties of special performances. Hunter's name was listed amongst those who would carry out a special performance, and he eagerly prepared for it.

Since the day Beulah spoke to him and his friends after Megan's demise, Hunter had only been burning with the desire for soul winning. He might not be able to reach out to all the souls in the world at once, for if he could, he would do that in a split second.

But still, he would do his best and cover as much ground as he could for Christ.

And where better to start this, if not in a place where Christ had positioned him?

God brought Ayo and Ifes all the way from Africa to the US to preach the gospel, and they did. He also had to walk in that way, not because he feared being held accountable, but because of his love for God and souls.

The first day of the program, which was Saturday, finally came and started by 4:00pm, while the general Thanksgiving by the Christian students was to be held the next day, being Sunday.

Two hours before the program, Hunter went to his room praising and appreciating God for what had been laid in his heart to do. After praising God, he prayed fervently that souls would be won over to Christ.

After praying, he stood from his kneeling position, turned around and saw Ryan and Bradley smiling at him.

"What's up guys? Hope we are ready for tonight," Hunter said.

"Sure, and we really can't wait," Ryan said.

"I believe everyone will be blessed by this performance," Bradley added.

"You guys always say good things about me even when I'm not sure of myself."

"Well, that's why I'm your brother, to sweet talk you into doing things." He put his hand on his brother's shoulder. "You are a unique person, and you are dear to my heart, you know that, right?"

"Yeah, Bradley's right. Well, as for me I'm here to be the third wheel in all this brotherly mushiness," Ryan chimed.

They all laughed

"But jokes apart," Ryan said, suddenly looking like he meant business, "we know that everyone who listens to the performance must be blessed, and we believe that your heart's desire, which was the main purpose of doing this, will be fulfilled tonight even more than your expectation. We are praying for you."

"Haa! Guys, let's just get ready and go before your words make me over believe myself."

Hunter started walking towards his closet when his twin brother and friend stopped him. "Oh, Hunter! Don't worry about that, your clothes are over here." Ryan pointed to the spot where they had carefully hung his clothes.

Smiling, Hunter walked towards the spot. "I knew I could always count on you guys."

Hunter finished dressing up, and with some time still in their hands, they drove over to Mandy's room. They would all convey over there before leaving for the church program that evening.

The girls decided to wear a white blouse, blue jean skirt, and sandals. The boys were in the same outfit, with a black leather jacket and white canvas.

"These lads are looking cute," Ifes said as the trio scurried into her dorm room.

Mandy looked up from her phone to the boys. "Where is Alex?"

"How dare you, Mandy? You couldn't even compliment our boyish swagger that we painstakingly assembled, like your roommate did. You just popped out a question expecting us to answer," Ryan said, feigning annoyance.

"Ryan, do you know that this meeting today will be the greatest ever?" Bradley immediately cut in before Mandy could say a word.

"Wow! Sure, tell me more."

"You remember what Ifes said. Do you remember that on our way coming, some group of pretty gals saw us and started giggling, whispering pretty stuff like that?"

"Yeah! They were waving particularly at me."

"No! Not you. It was my brother, Hunter, that they were waving at."

"Whatever. I remember clearly now," he admitted reluctantly

"They know that he will be ministering tonight."

"That's right, and we will be backing him up."

"Do you know what people have been saying, the latest on campus?"

"No. Is it about us? Tell me."

"People say we are too handsome, and we have a lot of crushes."

Ifes blinked, not believing her ears at what these boys were spewing from their mouths. "Will you guys stop your talking in the flesh, or leave my room now. Carnal people!" Ifes retorted playfully. Mandy rolled her eyes and started looking for her earpiece, obviously aware that they were teasing her.

"Crush my foot!" Mandy finally said. "Are you guys not the ones that are supposed to be gushing about how simply stunning we look? Even you, Ryan, are no longer a gentleman."

"May I ask you a question, Bradley?" Ryan continued teasing like they did not hear Ifes' and Mandy's protests

"Yes, go ahead."

"What do you think about a brown-eyed girl dating a brown-eyed boy?"

Bradley's face contorted into disapproval. "That is absurd. I can't even imagine something like that."

"Hmm! That makes two of us. But do you know the weirdest thing about this?"

Bradley reacted as though he was seeing something that dumbfounded him. "I don't know, tell me."

"Do you know that only a handful of Africans have coloured eyes since black eyes are more common amongst the African race."

"Good gravy! Are you for real?"

"Yes, I looked it up the other day on the internet. It is somehow believed that people with different eye color are not of African descent."

"Aw! This is really something else."

"I think a good match would be the one between a red-haired girl with brown eyes and a blonde guy with blue eyes."

"Or a black-haired girl with black eyes and a blonde guy with blue eyes," Bradley added.

Mandy found her earpiece and connected it to her phone. She increased the volume of the music she was playing to drown out their teasing voices.

After a while, Ayo and Ian arrived. Mandy removed her earpiece. Bradley and Ryan started jesting again.

"Do you know that Ian's looking more handsome than Alex?"

"Well, I'm not crestfallen because that was how I reckon it should be."

Ayo eyed the duo. "And I can't remember competing with anyone."

"He's obviously looking more handsome than the two of you put together," Mandy added.

Ryan, Bradley and Mandy bantered for a while before Beulah stepped in. Oblivious to the conversation that had ensued before her arrival, Beulah rushed to Hunter and pecked him on the cheek. "Wow! you're looking pretty cute, I should say you're the most handsome of all the boys in this room. I can't wait to see you standing on that stage tonight. Everyone's attention was fixed on Hunter who had turned pink, and they started laughing.

"Hey! what's up man, cheer up, you look like a frightened child ready to bolt with the slightest opportunity," Ian said.

Beulah held his shoulders and squeezed gently. "What's up, Hunter?"

"Umm! uh! umm! Just that I'm feeling nervous about this whole thing." Hunter shifted nervously in his seat.

"You've got to cheer up. We all believe in you."

For a while the duo felt as though they were the only ones in the room as they continued conversing.

"Alright everyone, it's almost time, we should be on our way because Ayo and I need to be there on time to make sure that our crew have set the ground up and running," Ian said when they were all complete in the dorm room. They ambled out of the dorm room with their car keys dangling in their hands.

The program started and as usual, both Christians and non-Christians were in attendance. This was a program the Christian Quakers anticipated would bless their lives spiritually while for the non-Christian Quakers, it was mere entertainment.

Despite the massive publicity, there were still some empty seats in the auditorium that could accommodate almost double of the people present. So, as the program started, students decided to put out a strategy to draw more people to the program. They brought out their phones and started live streaming on their social media accounts using the hashtag, 'Jesus live concert.' They even made short videos and sent them into the school students' group chat.

The online publicity caught the attention of many. After a while, they started making their way to the auditorium to join the program. The auditorium was soon filled to its capacity.



After two more performances, it was time for Hunter to grace the stage.

"Praise the Lord!" the voice of the host echoed through the church speakers. "I know we've all had a wonderful time cracking our ribs. Now is the time to take a break from laughing and all to go into a musical ministration."

There was some low mumbling by the students, obviously showing their displeasure to stop the comedy entertainment for music.

"We would be taking a music performance from one of the most blessed singers the college has ever produced. Ladies and gentlemen, please join me to welcome Hunter Harper!"

Cheers, claps and whistles were heard across the church auditorium as Hunter stepped onto the platform with his brother and Ryan behind him.

Some of the students who were not Christians couldn't wait for the music performance to finish so that they could go back to their comedy, dance and drama. To them, a Christian musical performance was boring, but they will try to sit out the time.

"Hello, church!" Hunter's voice boomed through the speakers when the host had left the stage for him. "There's a popular question between both Christians and non-christians and that is when the end of the world would come."

Everyone in the hall was now quiet as Hunter had brought up an important topic which had continued to be debatable between the Christian and non-christian race from past centuries to the present.

"The answer to this question is what everyone craves for, and that is what I am here to speak about through this music with which the Holy Spirit has laid in my heart. I pray that as you listen, the Lord will open your heart and pass this message across to you himself."

With that, Ian took his place behind the keyboard as a group of choristers joined Bradley and Ryan to back up Hunter as he sang the song titled "*End of the world*" by one of his favorite artists, Frank Edwards.

Hunter finished singing and students stepped out onto the platform to give their lives to God as they always did at the end of most music performances.

The student pastor came up to the platform to lead the students to Christ. "I know we've all been touched by this music." The pastor continued, "This is the question that we have received the answer to. For those of you who are sitting in the pew and would like to make the same decision as the people who are standing in front of this platform already did, I want to say that there are still more chances for you."

Because of the high intensity of the song and the lives that were getting touched, Hunter was asked to repeat the song again and he did. And this time around more students came out even more than they did the first time. The most wonderful miracle about this was that Anna-Marie was one of those who stepped out to give their lives to Jesus.

It was time she ended the troubles that plagued her heart. She finally acknowledged that she needed God more than Ian. After Hunter finished singing the song *End of the world*, she wanted to end the world of her loneliness, the world of her depression and rejection, her empty world that was void of anything good.

Mandy gasped as she saw Anne-Marie making her way to the platform.

Before Hunter finished singing the song for the second time, almost everyone was on their feet, swaying as if drunk, but it was just purely beautiful.

Ifes opened her eyes and looked at the students who had come out to give their lives to God. She moved her eyes to Hunter whose ministry the Holy Spirit had used to draw souls to himself, then she remembered the Bible passage which said that, "If I am lifted up, I will draw all men unto me."

With that, she couldn't hold back the tears that rolled out of her eyes.

Indeed, God was worthy to be praised. He alone deserved all the glory. Looking back on her scholarship to Pennsylvania, it wasn't a waste. It had been utilised to the glory of God. Hunter, once an addict, finally turned to God and lifted him up so that all men who see him would be drawn to God.

## CHAPTER FIFTY-FOUR

After the close of the meeting, amidst a lot of congratulations and greetings, Hunter made his way to Ifes. He had a lot on his mind he needed to talk about and he needed to say these things now before he lost courage. He got to her and saw her mixed with a group of other students who could not stop talking about the excitement of the program.

Ifes was so engrossed in the discussion with the students that they inundated each other, making it difficult for Hunter to get her attention. She was currently facing a hispanic student and his sister, but Hunter wished she'd look his way.

When Ifes saw him, she broke out from the group, rushed to him and gave him a hug, startling him. Breaking away from the embrace, she reached up her hands and pinched the tip of his nose, smiling. "Aw, that was awesome. You were awesome."

Hunter was perplexed and ecstatic by her actions, but there was no time to analyse. "Would you mind skipping all this and following me home in my car. We could let Brad and Ryan drive Mandy home in your car, if you don't mind."

Ifes could hear the need in his voice and feel it roll it off in tangible waves. She couldn't possibly refuse him. "Yes, I don't mind," she said and Hunter intertwined his hands with hers as they walked out of the church auditorium to Hunter's car.

The drive was silent, but Ifes could feel tension. Not the uneasy type, but another inexplicable form of tension that made Hunter seem years younger than he actually was.

Ifes thanked him for the ride and made to alight when Hunter held her by the hand halting her. "If you don't mind, can we go somewhere and talk for a while."

She was confused. They had a quiet journey all this while and all of a sudden, he wanted to talk. They were in front of her dorm. Mandy would be back any moment and if she would leave with Hunter, she needed to inform her.

"Let me text Mandy," she said, pausing. "But Hunter, whatever it is, you have to talk to me. I can't read your mind."

After she texted Mandy, he drove her to the front of the school library before switching off his engine.

He ran his hands through his hair, it was what he and his twin brother did each time they were nervous, and he leaned back to his seat.

"Are you alright?" she asked, feeling the atmosphere in the car palpably thicken.

"Yes. The truth is I fell in love with another girl. I've been too scared to tell her because I fear that I might be rejected like the first time." Hunter rushed before a second thought would discourage him.

"You know, after I was rejected, I made up my mind never to emotionally attach myself to anyone. But I couldn't. I couldn't, because what I felt for her pulled down every fence that I built to safeguard my heart."

He paused, unsure if he was making sense with his words. "And that person is you, Ifes."

Ifes could feel her pulse change from reggae to high-life beat. She never knew that the feelings were mutual. A lot of times she had tried to talk herself out of believing that she loved Hunter. She thought he would never fancy a quiet girl like her. She had tried to keep her feelings for him at bay but it had continued to skyrocket with each passing day.

This man, this handsome man that she started falling in love with from their second semester, 300 level, was finally pouring out his feelings to her, saying the words she wanted to hear.

Oh! And the feeling of love, the feelings she had for him, was beautiful. She wished Mandy were here presently. What she felt now, was that what Mandy felt when Ayo confessed his feelings? Or was it because this was her first true love?

"One of the great lessons I have learnt in life is that there is always a second chance. One does not have to stop because it didn't work out the first time." Hunter continued, "I love you. I want you for me, for my ministry, for my forever."

Hunter held her hands. "Will you love and give me a chance with you?"

She composed herself. The Nigeria attitude of playing hard-to-get began working for her. *"You kept me waiting all this while,"* she smiled and remarked in her heart. *"I thought you would never ask. I will not make this easy for you."* She finally arranged her thoughts and spoke up.

"Mmm, Hunter, I'm so sorry. It's just that everything's happening so rapidly that I can hardly register it. Please give me some time to think about it."

Hunter, upon hearing those words, felt worse than he felt the first time he was rejected. But something gave him hope. At least saying she would think about it was way better than outrightly rejecting him. Well, he would wait for her, no matter how long it took.

On their way she tried her best to remember all her mom taught her about being the need to play hard-to-get, what her fellowship taught about cheap girls. But for the life of her, she could not hold on to all this teaching. Two minutes later saw her confessing to being in love with Hunter. She said it so softly and quietly that Hunter was unsure he had heard her correctly.

Hunter stopped the car and looked into her eyes, needing to bear his soul to her, wanting to confirm the truth of what she claimed to feel for him. As he gazed into her brown irises, he knew, as surely as there was night and day, he knew that she loved him too. It was as plain as a clear sky, clearly written in her eyes.

"I love you, Hunter." Those words echoed in his ears and brain.

And Hunter loved her too, so much that his heart ached with it.

"Okay, I'll confess. The truth is that you kept me waiting for so long, because I've also loved you for a long time now. Although not in our second level, because I started loving you after our third year."

Hunter hushed her from speaking as he released his hands from his steering and pulled her into his arms and whispered through her hair. "I love you, Ifes."

"I love you, too, Hunter. I could say it over a million times to you each day and not get tired."

They enveloped themselves in the warmth they felt with each other. None of them spoke a word but their eyes carried the message that spoke louder than their words could ever convey.

To Hunter, this was more than a relationship. This was the girl he wanted to hold in his arms for the rest of his life, the girl he would always whisper those three words to.

"Can you say those words to me again?" Hunter broke the warmth of the silence that encompassed around them.

She looked up from his chest to his beautiful blue eyes, the same eyes that had captivated her each time she looked at them, the same eyes that were staring at her now, the eyes she would always love. "I love you so much, Hunter."

"I love you, too."

Ifesinachi's phone chimed. It was a call from Mandy. She scooped up her phone and placed it on silent before tossing it back to its previous position. "Don't mind my roommate. She always worries about me even when she doesn't have to."

"Are you sure you don't want to pick that call?" Hunter asked after Mandy's call was missed twice.

"No, I'll answer her later. I'm sure nothings wrong. She's just being hyperactive."

Her phone stopped ringing and Hunter's phone started chiming with Mandy's calls.

Mandy called back and this time around, Hunter explained to her that her roommate was safe before she carefully disconnected the call.

"I better stop embracing you and return you to your overprotective roommate before I go past my boundaries."

Ifes smiled. "Do you want us to stay longer?"

"What I want has been given to me already."

Hunter started his car and they drove the rest of the way to the dorm in silence.

## CHAPTER FIFTY-FIVE

Everyone gathered in Mandy's dorm suite and discussed the success of the program. After the conversation, everywhere was silent before Anne-Marie spoke up again. "There's something I want to say."

Everyone's attention was fixed on her. "I'd like to say today is the best day of my life because of my new birth in Jesus."

"But I want to make an apology, especially to Ian. The thing is that I came into this college as a lonely soul. Despite the friends I had around me, I lacked the ability to be loved. At a time, I became envious of some of my friends, and started wondering in my heart what they had that I didn't. Despite my beauty and all, I was incapable of attracting the man of my choice, and this depressed me a lot. The people I fell in love with were either not interested or already had someone in their life."

"I laid my eyes on you for the first time the day you were assigned to Ifes as her guide. I saw something that I couldn't resist in you. I even wished you were my guide and not hers, believing that would have given you and I the opportunity to know more about each other. Before I knew it I started crushing on you, then I started loving you and no matter what I did to get you out of my heart, I couldn't. I came close to you as an ordinary friend but you didn't pay much attention to me, so I figured out that since you and I had mutual friends, Ayo and Ifes, I could use that opportunity."

"Being an atheist, I hated the fact that you were a Christian, because to me, you didn't deserve such a kind of life. I felt it was below your standard."

"You are handsome and possess great qualities any woman could desire with the man of her dreams. So, I thought to try and get you for myself and make you forget about believing in God, because I didn't see any need of watching someone like you believing in an unknown Deity. To me, those who claimed that God exists were those folks who were frustrated in life and needed something to lean on. A lot of times I came to church and felt the Spirit of God nudging me to come out and surrender to him, but I couldn't."

"It got to a point I made up my mind to allow you to continue with your Christian adventure, but I'd still do everything to get you to love me. Oh! Did I tell you that I was elated when I discovered that you didn't have a girlfriend?" Anne-Marie reached for her handkerchief and sniffed into it.

"That was what gave me hope with my persistence. A lot of times I tried to get you for me but as the years went by, I was glad you and I became close friends. So, I thought it was a matter of time before you start coming around."

"I also want to confess that I have seen God's hand in this. A good example of this is when you graduated and were employed by the college. If you had been employed somewhere else, I wouldn't have continued going to church, and I wouldn't have received my salvation today."

Anne-Marie was beginning to feel relieved as she confessed what had burdened her heart. After hearing this, it might crush any possibility of Ian ever coming to love her again, but she was ready to let him go, ready to run into the arms of the one who had always loved her, the arms of her Savior.

"But today, when I heard Hunter's ministration, I couldn't help but acknowledge the truth that laid in front of me. The truth is that I needed God more than you. I could end The troubles that gave me sleepless nights, that made me wet my pillow with tears. And I finally did, I can't deny the inexplicable joy and peace I have felt since then."

Ian stood from his seat, went to Anne-Marie, pulled her up, and embraced her.

She held onto him tightly as though her life depended on it. "Oh! I'm so sorry. I'm sorry I had to put up all that charade for the love I have for you!" She let the tears flow freely, truly letting go.

Ian hushed her. "It's alright now. I won't deny the fact that I was astonished when I saw you coming out to the platform, but you know what? Let me tell you this in front of everyone and God that I love you regardless."

Anne-Marie's body stiffened in Ian's arms. He didn't just say those four words to her, did he? No, she was definitely dreaming. But somewhere inside her heart, she long to hear those words from him for the rest of her life. Yet, she still convinced herself that she didn't deserve him. She was in his arms right now and that was all that mattered to her. She didn't want to think about her fears, she would relish this moment, and it would be a memory that she would forever cherish.

"I love you, Anne-Marie," Ian continued. "I was going to say this to you today anyways, and not even your confession would stop me. Before that, I must say I'm proud of you for making the right decision today."



Anne-Marie buried her face in his chest and sobbed. Was this a gift of her salvation from God? But how did someone like her ever get someone as beautiful as Ian?

"Oh! I love you, too, Ian. Thank you for taking me into your arms!" And that was where she had always longed to be.

Ian kissed her forehead and pushed back free strands of her hairs. "Don't cry, because you finally got me, and I'll stay with you forever."

She looked up to his eyes searching if he meant the words he spoke. Would he really stay with her forever or was it just a fluke? Ian shoved his hands into his side pocket and brought out the small diamond box he had kept safely with him for a while to do what was in his mind.

Everyone's eyes were so fascinated by the two lovers that they failed to notice Hunter's and Ifesinachi's arrival.

Ian went down on one of his knees, held Anne-Marie's hand and asked the question she never expected to pop out so soon.

"I love you so much that I couldn't imagine spending my life without you," Ian said and continued. "I want to sleep and wake up every morning beside you, your face being the first thing to grace my eyes."

"I have a lot of dreams and aspirations, and one of my desires is to include you in them. With you, growing old with you will be a great honor. I want you to be the mother of my unborn children."

"Will you marry me, Anne-Marie Carter?"

Anne-Marie felt the world spinning so fast around her that it almost knocked her off her feet. Feeling flustered, she mustered the simplest voice she could, and replied to him. "Yes, yes, I'll marry you!" Her voice trailed off with that last word. She watched breathlessly as Ian slipped in the engagement ring into one of her left fingers.

When he stood, she threw her arms around him in a tight embrace, laughing and crying at the same time.

Ian happily scooped her up in his arms and whirled her around, grinning cheerfully. "Yes! She said yes. She said yes to me!"

All the ladies in the room were all shedding tears of joy, while the men laughed and clapped excitedly.

"Did I tell you you were looking quite stunning today?" Ian said after he dropped Anne-Marie back to her feet. "Can't wait to see you in your wedding dress."

The girl blushed. "Aw, thank you."

## CHAPTER FIFTY-SIX

I can't believe Hunter did this. How dare he!" Beulah remarked when she and Ryan were well away from the rest.

After Hunter had announced his relationship with Ifes that day, Beulah had been crestfallen. She felt her brother had been betrayed by his friend. For all she knew, Ryan had been close to the girl. His feelings for her were obvious, so Hunter was too blind to see it. Even if there was a clash of interest, why couldn't Hunter let go.

"What did he do?" Ryan was clearly worried about his sister.

He had seen the look of disappointment on her face as soon as Hunter announced his relationship to Ifes. He had felt worried if his sister was in love with his friend. But she didn't tell him and he was too careless to notice. If not, he would have convinced Hunter for his sister.

"I can't believe he betrayed you. I mean, how could he go behind your back and confess his feelings to Ifes? He sure can't deny that he noticed your feelings for her, I'm going to walk up to that lad and give him a piece of my mind!"

Ryan was assuaged at his sister's words. "Oh! Beulah, you got me worried with the expression on your face. Come here little sis." He held her by the hands and drew her closer to himself then placed his hands around her shoulders.

"Bradley and I have always known that Hunter loves Ifes. It's just that he had been too afraid to tell her, fearing he might be rejected."

"But you love her too, right? I have always seen it in your eyes. You do love her."

"Yes, I love her, but not in the way you are thinking."

"Oh, no!" Beulah exclaimed, all this while, both she and her parents had thought that there was a chemistry between Ryan and Ifes. Her mother loved Ifes, even before seeing her, and she was waiting for her son to bring the girl home for introduction.

"In what way do you love her then, Ryan?"

"I love her like a dear friend just like the way I love Mandy, Anne-Marie and the rest of the girls in our crew."

"I don't agree with you, Ryan. Maybe you are finding it hard to admit it because you don't want to have a clash of interest with your friend, but everyone can see it. It is evident in your eyes. The way you speak to her, the way you look at her and the way you even hold her sometimes."

"So, how could you? How could you not love her? Well, I do like her and I have always wanted her for you, Ryan. And now you want to tell me that you're letting such a precious treasure go away because of your friend."

"I'm not trying to break your friendship with Hunter. I'm sorry if that is how it seems, but I've got to speak the obvious truth, because I don't want you living heartbroken for the rest of your life."

Ryan was amused, but his sister didn't see anything funny.

"Maybe you're correct. Maybe I'd have loved her if Hunter didn't speak up about his feelings first, but that's just about it. He's my friend, and I can't bring myself again to loving Ifes. Right now, I am most happy for Hunter and I wish him a great life ahead with Ifes."

"So, what about you?" Beulah's grey eyes stared right into her brother's blue ones. "Who do you love? I've not seen you with anyone. At least, none that I can remember."

"Come on, little sis." Ryan brushed his hands on her hair. "Leave it be. You like to worry a lot. When the time comes, I'll get myself a beautiful gal."

"Why, Ryan? Do you still feel bad about what transpired between you and Mandy? Is that why you are unable to get yourself another person?"

"No no! I'm not the least bit worried about that because I know my sins are forgiven."

"So, what then, Ryan?"

"Well, you act as though I'm the only single person in my crew. Bradley's still there."

"Bradley's not my problem. You are."

"Okay, don't worry about that. I don't want a relationship now because I reckon that there are still some areas of my life where I need to grow up. While I'm at it, I'll pray. Keep praying that God will send me the right girl when the time comes."

Ryan could see his sister's chin working.

"But I'm worried about you, Beulah," Ryan said.

"How?"

"You're a pretty young thing who needs caring and loving arms. Any man in his right mind would treasure your pretty heart."

Beulah freed herself from Ryan's hands and his perusal as he continued talking.

"When I saw your disappointed expression this evening when Hunter announced his relationship, I became worried about you. I thought you loved Hunter, but I can clearly see that it was not what bothered you."

A grim expression crept up Beulah's face. "I reckon some things cannot just be given to some sort of people in life."

Ryan stepped towards her. "What do you mean?"

"I can't really start thinking of love now. I still have a pending case with the court. What if I'm sentenced to prison? Will I get the chance to love and be loved by another man?"

"No! Don't talk like that, Beulah. Our father has promised to get you one of the best lawyers in the country. I am sure your case will be well defended."

Beulah faced her brother. "And what if he doesn't? Even if I'm discharged and acquitted, I'd still like to spend more time with our parents. All this while, I have been a niece to my parents and now that I am a daughter, I wouldn't let this be shortened by becoming a wife to another man."

Ryan watched as his sister's words registered. And understanding, he hoped it was not what he was thinking.

"You know what, Ryan? To be frank, I don't think I ever want to get married."

"No! Don't say such things I beg you. Sophia did it and you see what it resulted in."

"People have different reasons for staying unmarried, and mine is positive I assure you. I want to stay around and take care of our parents. It will give me joy serving them for the rest of my life. This is the only way I could show them that I'm sorry, and this is the way I could enjoy the lost years with 'em."

"No! You can't do that, Beulah. You can't sacrifice your happiness for the wrong you didn't cause for yourself."

"I caused it all. I caused it when I tried to take your life. I caused it when I tried to deprive my own parents of their joy. I caused it when I believed..." Unable to make herself call Sophia's name, she quickly paused and looked away, blinking back tears.

"I'm not sacrificing my happiness. Rather, this is what I can do to feel better about everything that took place."

"No way! I won't let you do that. If it gets to a point where I have to force you into a wedding gown and set you up with a good man, I wouldn't mind."

Beulah wanted to smile, but when she saw Ryan's solemn expression, she knew her brother meant business. "You will do no such thing to me, Ryan."

"Why not? You think I'm kidding?"

"I don't care if you are. You can't go around forcing me to do what you want. I'm all grown up, I know what I want and this is the path I've chosen for myself. Leave me be with it."

"You're punishing yourself, and trust me, this won't make you feel any better. I know Mum and Dad will not let you stay forever with them."

Beulah laughed bleakly, but her eyes showed the hope that she felt deep down inside her heart, hope that someone could do things that could make her stop feeling guilty, hope that her parents will indeed allow her to enjoy the gift of marriage as Ryan just asserted.

Indeed, she had always believed that her sins were forgiven, she had encouraged her brother and his likes from feeling guilty when they lost their dear friend, but she couldn't stop the foreboding that she felt each time she thought of that new and complete life in Christ Jesus.

She always remembered that if any man was in Christ Jesus, he was a new creature, old things were passed away and all things made new.

But she always heard that loud voice that spoke, whether in her head or heart, she couldn't tell.

The voice that always told her that her own case was different, the voice that always recited her old deeds to her from morning till night.

Surely, she knew it was the voice of the devil, and something could be done to shut up the voice that bellowed in her world. She had met the church pastor a few days ago to discuss it. The man of God had given her the solution he knew, which was constantly meditating on the word of God just as the Bible had instructed in the book of Joshua.

But now, here, standing in front of her brother and having this conversation, she could clearly hear the loud voice again, and could hardly recall her new identity, which was the Christ Jesus who now lived in her.

"Everyone deserves to love and be loved, Beulah. You can't continue to hide in your own misery. Believe me, none of us blamed you for what happened. I forgave you the instant you told me you were my sister, and our Mum and Dad do not hold this against you. You've got to unblock yourself from that shadow and accept the love we are all offering you."

"Besides, if you end up going to prison, then I'll wait for you before getting married."

Beulah sharply turned to her brother. "No! You can't do that. You must not wait. You must settle down, whether I go to jail or not."

"Why should I? You want me to be happy, throwing parties around, cuddling another woman in my arms, when my own sister is suffering somewhere?"

Moisture rolled down Beulah's face. "It's not like that, Ryan. I don't want to cause you pain or delay your life aspirations."

"And who says you are? I love you, sis, and nothing is going to change that. Now let's forget about this whole love and relationship matters because you are more important to me than all of that. Just give me a hug, baby sister." Ryan opened his arms but his sister did the opposite of what he expected her to do.

"You seem to be forgetting that I'm your twin sister, I'm no baby. You're only forty minutes older than me."

"Believe it or not, you're my baby sis. Now, come give your big bro a hug."



## EPILOGUE

One year later.

It was time for Ifesinachi Uzundu and Ayomide Alexander Balogun to return to Nigeria. Their student visa was going to expire soon, and they wanted to also use that opportunity to see the family they left five years ago.

Of course, Mandy Parker and her friends had arranged a send-off party.

After praying and waiting on God, Bradley Harper had proposed to Avery Reed. Avery had said yes to him after praying and seeking God's consent. As for Ryan, he was still growing and praying.

"I'm gonna miss you a lot," Hunter told Ifes when the duo arrived at the airport lobby with their friends.

Mandy was holding firm to Ayo. She didn't want to let him go but she knew it was the right thing to do. After all, he had promised to return to her. He would be attending his medical school here in America and she liked that. She was elated when Ayo showed her his acceptance letter into one of the medical schools in Texas.

She knew he would keep his promise of returning to her, not because he was going to further his studies in the States, but because he loved her. And she loved him too. She loved him in inexplicable ways. She had never felt what she felt for him for another person, not even when she thought she was going crazy about Ryan.

She had loved Ryan because of his attractive appearance, the same appearance that attracted a lot of girls to him during their highschool days, and even their college days. She wanted to be the girlfriend of one of the most handsome and brilliant students, but that was just about it. Ayo had shown and given her the true meaning of love.

What she felt for him went beyond physical attraction. She loved his heart, his smile, the warmth she felt with him.

"I'll miss you, too," Ifes cooed.

Hunter felt like sweeping her off her feet, spinning her around, taking her back to the apartment that she had rented after her graduation to ask the nice question a man should

ask the woman he loved. But he knew he must pray first. He must get his heavenly father's approval, like his twin brother and Ian did.

Ifes tapped him on his chest. "Hey! What's with that expression on your face? I am only traveling. I'm not going to die."

"But I don't even want you to travel at all. I want to keep you with me forever," Hunter wanted to say but he just placed one of his arms around her shoulders.

"It's time I let you go so you won't miss your flight. Take care of yourself for me, will you?"

The feelings were mutual. Ifes also wished she could miss her flight or something should just pop up, anything to stop her from traveling. At that thought, she almost felt bad because of her family. She should miss them more than this, but she just loved this man.

"And will you take care of yourself for me till I return?" Ifes asked.

"There's nothing to take care of because you're traveling with my heart. If you want me to survive, you have to return very soon."

Hunter couldn't stop himself from expressing his emotions. He had to tell her what he felt about her so she wouldn't go back to Nigeria, fall in love over again with the hometown she had grown up in and forget him. He had read a lot of novels, articles, newspapers, internet write-ups, and gained knowledge about how people in third world countries arranged marriages, especially for their daughters. He hoped it wasn't still happening in this century. Maybe not all but he hoped that they didn't practice something like this again in Nigeria.

"I will come back," Ifes said, her gaze matching his. With that, he embraced her.

"Take care of yourself. I love you," Hunter cooed.

"I love you, too," she replied before breaking away from the embrace.

Ayo and Mandy were also doing the same after having a brief conversation.

"Wait for me, okay? I'll come back as soon as possible," Ayo said when he let go of Mandy.

"I'll wait," she reassured him. Ayo promised to come back to her and she'd take him for his word.

Bradley darted to Hunter and Ifes. "Please go and come back soon before my brother starts freaking out. He's a piece of bog and I can't stand him."

"And I can't stand seeing you calling him names," Ifes replied, slapping him on his elbow.

Ifes whirled around and hugged Ian, Mandy, Skylar, Ryan, Avery, Anne-Marie. Ayo did likewise and the duo ambled away after receiving their emotional goodbyes.

"Welcome to Nigeria," the immigration officers said after checking their documents and allowing them passage into the country.

As expected, Ifes was so elated when her feet touched the Nigerian soil, the soil of her father! And the soil upon which she was given birth to and trained, the soil where God made her know him, the soil she was and would always be proud of.

"Oh! Thank you, Jesus," she cried out excitedly as she felt her heart bubbling.

"You look really excited," Ayo remarked.

"Why not? I didn't know I had missed home this much!"

"Yeah! That makes the two of us," Ayomide said as he felt the blood of his origin reigniting inside him again. Indeed, there was no place like home.

Ifes wanted to go to the nearest bus station to book a ticket to Awka. She suddenly remembered her family no longer resided there. She had almost forgotten that her dad already booked a flight for her from Lagos to Port Harcourt.

Yes, she had gotten a new home, a new life but the excitement of coming back home after five years had made her momentarily forget she also had a new love, the one she found with Hunter Harper.

Ifes wanted to sit back and the airport lobby to wait until the time her flight to Port-harcourt would be available. It was supposed to take off in six hours' time but Ayomide insisted that she come along with him to his family house since they resided in Lagos.

As the driver drove out of the airport into the noisy streets and highways of Lagos, memories from their childhood to the year they left the country flooded their minds.

Ayo's mother, Mrs. Tolani Balogun, dressed pretty as she, her husband and children eagerly awaited the arrival of their son and brother.

The airport cab drove into Dodan barracks in Ikoyi Lagos, navigated through a throng of schools, station offices, churches, and mosques, and made for Ayo's house. The houses, which were of almost similar structures, were designed with yellow and blue paint, and some flowers which danced around the buildings.

Both old and young were seen loitering around the streets of Dodan barracks.

Different languages could be heard flying through the air at once, all across the barrack.

Ayomide pointed over the car window to a football pitch that was adjacent to a primary school. "This was where my friends and I used to play football before I traveled. They must be all grown up now. I hope they are still around. If not all, some of them at least."

"You didn't stay in touch with your friends when you traveled to the US?" Ifes asked after taking a quick glance at the football field.

"I did, but some people are just difficult to communicate with. I'm still in touch with a few of them, though. A lot of them relocated when their fathers were transferred. Only a handful of them are still here, so I heard."

Ifes wanted to say something when he interrupted her with his loud exclamations.

"Yes! This is home. We are finally home."

The airport cab pulled in front of a three-bedroom bungalow with a Highlander and a BMW parked in a small, opened garage which was located at the left side of the building. Ifes concluded that these were his parents' cars.

Before Ifes and Ayomide could alight from the car, the entrance door of the building opened and Ayo's siblings bolted through the opened door to their big brother.

His sister jumped on him before his brother could get the chance to shake him.

"Big girl, you're now turning into something else." Ayomide said as he placed his sister at arms level, studying her.

"I bet you want to say something pretty right?" At his mother's remark, Ayo turned to see the middle aged woman standing a few inches away from him smiling.

Ifes also whirled around to see the on-air personality and her husband who was standing at the door post. She was swept off her feet by his mother's beauty. It was no wonder Ayo had swept Mandy off her feet as well.

The family pictures he had shown her didn't do justice to describing their beauty. Maybe even using that word, beauty, was an understatement.

They all looked beautiful outwardly. His mother, father and siblings extended such sincere kindness, the same kind Ifes had received from Ayo.

He had also been good, very good to her back in the States. They treated her like a special person. She began to wonder how they would treat Mandy if Ayomide brought her home.

"Food is ready," Tolani said, ushering everyone to the dining where she had set out pounded yam and okra soup that had the complement of stock fish, smoked fish, towel and beef. "I made you your favorite, Ayomi."

Ifes took a quick glance around the living room which was well furnished. The floral design that lined the walls was the definition of simplicity and beauty. Classy, multi-colored pillows, well stacked against the sofas that looked overstuffed and fluffy, gave life to the otherwise monotonous room.

The room was painted a deep shade of gray. Every other thing was in different shades of gray. The furniture was carefully and tastefully picked out. It gave the impression that the room was some sort of show room for the beauty of dark color.

The curtains and drapes were exquisite and they glittered slightly as light from the chandelier reflected off the silver threads tastefully interwoven into the light shade of gray that made up the majority of the curtain.

The center table almost went without notice, but for it's position and beautiful flowers arranged atop. The parlor was joined to the dining area by a wide archway with very expressive architecture that seemed to tell the tales of the Yoruba people. It was indeed a sight for sore eyes.

"I hope my son didn't finish you with his kind heart?" Tolani asked when they were all settled at the dining table. "And what about God? I hope he didn't defer once from his relationship with God?"

Ifes looked up from her food and smiled. "Your son is one of the nicest people I have ever seen in the world. I think he learnt quite well from you."

Tolani smiled proudly. "I know. I should say thank you, but I think that's where you're wrong because he actually copied it from his father." She pointed to her husband who was seated at the head of the table.

"He's got the nicest heart in the world, and it has rubbed off on his first son."

"Mummy, you forgot to add me," Shola, Ayomide's only brother said. "And me too!" Bukola, the youngest and the only daughter of the family, chimed in.

Mr and Mrs Balogun grinned at their two youngest children's comments.

"Yeah! Those two are good too," Tolani asserted. "But they could also bug the life out of you. I guess they got that part of them from me."

"But Ayomi and his father are the most wonderful and peaceful people I have ever met in the world, and I'm proud to have them in my life."

Ifes beamed happily as she watched the on-air personality speaking good things about her family. She could see obviously that the career woman had accurately managed both job and family.

"Mum, you better stop with your praises and eat your food before it gets cold," Ayomide said.

"Aw, my son now calls me Mum. I remember he used to call me Mother before he traveled," Tolani remarked. "You know what? I think I like the sound of that word, Mum."

Ayomide smirked and returned his gaze to his food.

Ayomide's father was also friendly at the dining table to Ifes'. When they finished eating, she thanked them cheerfully. She left when it was time to take her flight to Port Harcourt.

\*Port-Harcourt, Rivers State, Nigeria.

The airport waiting area was crowded with expectant family members, official drivers and a host of other people holding up placards with names of people scribbled upon it. Ifes dragged her boxes along stretching her neck to see if she could spot her family. She had been informed that her brothers would be the ones to pick her. She felt certain she would recognize them, though she had no doubt that they were not the same lanky-looking thirteen year old boys she had left behind. They had to be men... Scratch that, big boys now, if her parents deemed them capable enough to come pick her from the airport.

Though reason told her all this, she could not think of them as the young men that they now were. Her mental images of them were yet to change but she snapped out of that as the screams of "Sister Ifes!" echoed from a distance. Their words were almost childish, but there was no denying the masculinity and youth in the voice that uttered them. Her gaze was drawn to the two grown boys waving excitedly at her. Recent pictures did not capture how much they had grown. The broadness of their shoulders was unbelievable. Their faces had lost every semblance of childishness. What Ifes beheld at that moment were her own brothers that had morphed into men. Her eyes could not refute the time that had passed. And although she loved them and was beside herself with joy that she was seeing them again, she could not help but think of how much she had missed and would be missing in the near future if things worked out the way they seemed to be planning to.

Ifes half-walked, half-ran to her brothers forsaking her luggages. Her brothers had already moved from their position, and were making their way to her, with faster pace than she walked with. They drew attention to themselves, but they couldn't care less. They hugged each other and tears welled up in Ifes eyes but she did not let them roll.

"Ne ka unu ra! (Look at your size!)" Ifes exclaimed in Igbo, glad to know that from now henceforth she could now speak her native language as frequently as she wanted. She had never really taken cognizance or appreciated that fact so much, but after living in America without frequent Igbo-speaking company, she finally appreciated the freedom of speech that welled up inside her.

"Look at you, too!" Obinna yelled excitedly, scooping up his sister in his arms as Uche began to pack up her luggage. Ifes made a protest for her brother to drop her back on her feet, but if these were still the twin brothers she left five years ago, then she knew the protest would be fruitless.

They made their way out of the airport together, and when she saw the car that would be taking her home, she was awestruck. She knew her family's fortune had changed but she did not know how much. If this car was any indication, very much was what she would reckon.

The drive home was filled with excited chatter as each of her brothers tried to fill her in about their lives. Their claims ranged from believable to plain outrageous. They, at times, seemed to be in friendly competition of some sort, or co-operated cooking up stories. She knew they expected her to decipher what was real from the fables, but she did not want to dampen their spirit by telling them that she was at loss because of the speed with which things were happening. One second she was in America, the next she was in Lagos, and almost a split second later she was in Port Harcourt, seeing members of her family she had not seen for years. She would see her mom and dad that had labored so much for her. She did not have enough time to scrutinize all she heard from her brothers, or examine all the sights she saw as the vehicle cruised towards their new home.

She probably had to ask her mom and sister later, or thoughtfully process all she heard later to see from perspectives that had not been filtered through masculine lenses.

A lot of excitement had been building up months before her return home. Her final days abroad could be best described as a torrent of emotion, but as they drove into Rainbow estate in Woji Port Harcourt where their home stood, words could not describe her elation. The thud in her chest increased tenfold. Emotions were something Ifes had never been big on, but she felt as every atom of her was responded at this moment. She knew on any other day she would have been marvelling at the total "Wowness" of the estate they had driven into. It was a class of excellence. But not today, not the first day she was going to see her family in flesh and blood after so long. It wasn't going to be like watching some two-dimensional beings in pictures.

The horn Uchenna blasted at the gate seemed to attract everybody in the house. The remote controlled gate slid open after the gateman, who seemed almost as excited as her family and was seeing her for the first time, fumbled with the remote.

She and her sister, Udochi, latched onto each other immediately Ifesinachi stepped out of the car. They were separated only by their mother who wanted a piece of her daughter as well. It was a galore of wet eyes between the three women,

Obi and Uchenna seemed to have had enough as they left the women wading in the melting pot of past time and the present to pick up Ifes' luggage from the boot of the car.



"Nwam, o gi kam ne le Anya (My child, is it you that I am looking at?)" Ifes' mother asked, almost in disbelief of the fact that her first child was standing before her very eyes.

"Mummy, it's me, and I have a lot to tell you," Ifes replied amidst tears

"Don't worry. We will talk after you have eaten, freshened up and had a good rest," replied Ebube, barely holding her own emotion in check.

Udochi, who always seemed to know just when to break the ice, added. "I would have come with those bull-headed boys to pick you, but Mummy insisted that I stay back, despite all my pleading, bribing and cajoling."

"Shut up this girl. She wanted to run and leave work for me. Don't you know I am old, or is it because I dyed my gray hair yesterday?"

Ifes laughed at this banter

"My child, don't mind her. I prepared some mouth-watering dishes for you."

"Ehen," replied Udochi, playing the hype woman to her mum

"There is Pounded Yam, Akpu, Semovita to be enjoyed with egusi soup, Ofe Nsala or Ofe Onugbu or with all together. The more the merrier," concluded her mum, who had all the while been enjoying the background hyping of her younger daughter.

"There are also side dishes like Abacha, Ugba, assorted Isi Ewu, Nkwobi. My sister, there is no small feast there. The househelps are still setting up," Udochi chimed.

"So please, don't keep us outside. Let's go and do justice to the feast," Uchenna quipped.

Ifes had not even realised that they had returned from dropping the bags. She finally looked up to the house that she was walking into and could not help but remember the house they had come from, how she left Nigeria, what God had done in America for her and through her, her friends especially, Hunter. She could not help mumbling. "The Lord is good."

Her family echoed, "The Lord is good."

And they were all shocked when her dad, who they did not know had arrived, proclaimed, "Oh yes, he is good!" He stared at her mom for a fleeting second and Ifes could almost sense a tension but she did not pay heed to it as ahead leaped into her father's arms.

**THE END!**

## **AUTHOR'S NOTE**

There is so much trouble and heartache in the world today, and people are going through hell on earth. Disabilities, sickness, emotional problems, poverty and depression have driven a lot of people to giving up on life.

Thus, my main goal of writing this book is to tell people of the one who can deliver them from the problems mentioned above, the one who can also save their souls from eternal destruction.

The stories of the characters in *The Link To Light* are not intended to make you feel bad but to rather run into that widely opened arms of Jesus Christ.

Are you sick? He's the only one who can heal you and make you whole.

Are you emotionally wounded and torn apart? He's the only one who can mend you.

Whatever it is, Jesus is faithfully calling and waiting for you.

There is so much to say but let me not trouble you with all of it.

I would like to let you know that despite giving their lives to Christ, Mandy and her friends would still have a lot of troubling times in the future, but as a child of God, you can be rest assured that Christ makes the difference. With him, afflictions shall not come for the second time.

I'll be happy to hear from you through any of my social media handles or my Gmail address.

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