

Tainted Hearts

Sometimes it's not enough to forgive

By

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ISBN: 9789789523238 (Ebook)

ISBN: 9789789523245 (Paperback)

ISBN: 9789789523252 (Hardback)

Cover design: thecovercollection.com

To my mother and grandmother

No matter how much you were hurt, you always looked for an excuse to forgive.

PROLOGUE

Aleruchi

Aleruchi opened the wardrobe and started throwing clothes onto the bed. Then she brought out a vanity case, picked out a few simple pieces of jewellery from the collection she stored there, and laid them on top of the chest of drawers. She quickly emptied the first two drawers of clothes onto the ground, sat down, and divided the heap in two before placing one pile in her suitcase, hoping she'd have enough time to get something warmer when she arrived in Nottingham.

She was sure that the distance between Nigeria and England would do her some good – the need to get away from her husband Princewill was stronger than her addiction to chocolate eclairs. She felt like everyone was beginning to take his side: his relatives and even her friends and cousins were tired of her visits. Her only option was to go to her son, Victor. He was going to be twenty-nine very soon and hadn't yet mentioned a girlfriend, much less a fiancée. Her time could be better spent getting him a suitable bride.

She started jotting down a list of things she might need and dug around an old tote bag for her MasterCard. She was going to London and wouldn't make the mistake of informing Victor before visiting him this time. She made a mental note to tell Catherine though, just in case her plan backfired.

Princewill walked in after a long day's work. His shoulders fell just as his brows furrowed on seeing the

clothes and suitcase. He held his breath, and walked to his side of the bed before exhaling, gave her a hopeful look.

Aleruchi looked away and grimaced wearily. He should have been used to this by now. (For the past eleven years, she had seized every opportunity she could to escape from him. She hadn't been able to stand to be near him for very long after she'd seen what he'd done.) He had whined, cried, and even yelled that it had been his fault, demanding to know why she was still making him pay for it. He had said that it had only happened that once. It had been a mistake. How easy for him to say as he wasn't who had to bear the consequence of his action. How would he have felt if she was the one he'd caught?

Her one wish as she blew out the candles on her birthday cake last week was to find her son a wife so she could move on with her life. This contraption called marriage was a mirage she no longer wanted to live in. Seeing this adulterous husband of hers every day was fast leading her down the path of depression. It was a miracle she hadn't fallen into one yet.

"Ruchi please, let's talk!"

She rolled her eyes and hastened her packing.

He walked towards her and spun her around to face him.

She shoved his hands off, glared at him contemptuously, and went back to packing.

"Please sweetheart, we can't continue like this. How long will you keep this up? I have told you I'm sorry countless times, and I honestly meant it. It only happened once. There has been no other woman before

and after that, and I know you know this. Please -"

"The *before* or the *after*," she forced out through clenched teeth and walked out of the room, fuming.

He massaged his forehead and watched her leave before shaking his head. Picking up his briefcase, he tossed it across the room before jerking his shirt out of his trousers then plopped down on the bed but jumped up almost immediately. Closing his eyes for a moment, he groaned and left the room.

She heard him shut the door to his study from the dining room and quickly trudged back into the bedroom to continue packing. As she walked in, the scent of his cologne lingered. Irritated that it made her long for him, she walked out of the room, but his scent filled the bathroom too. Desperate for fresh air, she opened all the windows and the door to the balcony and inhaled the evening breeze. She leaned on the doorframe and stared out at the rush of traffic blankly.

A few minutes later, she walked to the rocking chair on their balcony and sat down to nurse her feet. Reclining, she unclasped her earrings, stared at the darkening sky and pondered. With a shrug, she went back inside to book a cab, then left the house to get a few more toiletries.

She had chosen a morning flight. Knowing that Princewill would be up early as well, she arranged for an even earlier cab; that way, he wouldn't see her leave and pester her. She lay awake all night on their king-sized bed. Each time she looked at him, she wondered if she had meted out enough punishment. She stretched out her hand to touch him but pulled back when her fingertips were just a few inches away.

She longed for him so much that she left the room. Two hours later, she was outside instructing the cab driver on the route she wanted him to take.

Princewill walked to the balcony and watched the cab driver load his wife's suitcases into the car with the help of their cook and her driver. He sighed dolefully. He had made so many mistakes. Now, a day didn't go by without an argument. It was better than when she stopped talking to him altogether.

He snickered remembering his father, who counselled him on getting a divorce and his mother wanting no such thing because they were staunch Catholics. 'Every marriage has different storms' she'd said, and didn't hesitate to remind him that she didn't want him to marry Aleruchi because 'she was bull-headed'. He found himself journeying back to the day he had complained to his parents.

"Do you think your mother was any different," his father had said to him before looking behind him to be sure that she wasn't there. "Do you know the last time we did it?" he'd whispered.

"Did what?" Princewill had asked in a loud whisper, frowning.

"Did it nawh, you know... what couples do behind closed doors," he had said, gesturing and croaking.

"Oh, Dad! I don't need to know that, please."

"Know what?" His mother had come to join them with a tray of dry melon seeds.

"How a goat gives birth," his father had cut in and winked at him.

He now watched as the cab drove off and exhaled. *I'll*

wait until she gets back, he thought. God give me strength.

Jacinta

Jacinta laughed hysterically after reading the letter from her mortgage provider; it was the third letter of its type this month. The first one had been from BT, and the second and third were from British Gas. All were threatening the same thing, but her primary concern was the British Gas bill because winter was fast approaching.

She picked up the next letter, checked the return address and set it aside: it was also from her mortgage provider – she had taken out a second mortgage on their home. She tossed the junk mails in the bin just as the phone started ringing. It had been buzzing all morning, but she had ignored it because of all the cold calls. Looking at the time, she realised it was almost two o'clock.

Those marketing calls should have ended by now, she thought but didn't get to the phone on time. I would dial... what's the number you call to find out who called you last? Was it an international call?

Still trying to determine how to get the last caller it rang again.

“Ajebó! Wow! How did you get this number?”

Ajebó hissed and sniggered. “Long time no hear from you!”

“Oh,” Jacinta murmured despairingly.

“Uh-oh, bad time?”

Jacinta rubbed her forehead; she could feel a

headache coming on, an Ajebó-induced headache.
“Hmm, no, just tired.”

“Hope you aren’t too tired to come and pay me a visit.”

Jacinta wasn’t sure if that was a question. “Are you in the country?”

“No, not yet. Soon.”

“Soon.”

“Yes, a week or two, depending on the person I’m going to see at Magodo now.”

Jacinta remembered hearing Ajebó mention that name in connection with a married man who caused her heartaches for months.

“You’re going to see that man again, aren’t you?”

Rogers, Jacinta’s husband popped his head in. “What man?”

Jacinta ignored him. “Are you?”

“Nope.”

“Convince me.”

“Look, what’s your problem? Why is it that you bring him up in every discussion we have?”

“Do I? I didn’t know o! Could you please stay *away* from him? He is a married man. What about the one you are with?”

“We’ve split. Signed the divorce papers two days ago.”

“What? You *dey crase*?” Jacinta exclaimed in horror before she calmed down and added, “Are you alright?”

Ajebó clucked her tongue. “I’m fine, eh? Worry about yourself for once. I’ll let you know when I’m in town.”

“Where will you be staying?” Jacinta asked desperate to end the call.

There was a short pause followed by a tapping sound.

“Not sure. Most likely, Edgware. When I’m sure you’ll be the first to know.”

Jacinta stretched and yawned. “Okay o! Take care of yourself.”

“I will!”

Jacinta closed her eyes and grimaced impatiently.

“Ehen, is that husband of yours still in that house?”

Jacinta not liking the direction of the conversation hesitated before answering, “Yes o!”

“Can’t he get a life?”

“My sister,” Jacinta snickered, on that, they agreed.

“He is a bloodsucker, you hear? He’s the one sucking you dry. Let him leave so that you can get a life.”

Rogers hovered.

Jacinta, not wanting him to listen in on their conversation feigned a cough and said. “My dear, we’ll talk when you come, eh?”

“Is he there?”

She watched him make his way to the chair opposite hers. “Yes o!”

“No *wahala*! I’ll try to call you later.”

“Bye, thanks for calling.” Jacinta exhaled and shook her head as she replaced the phone on the receiver.

“Who were you talking to?” Rogers asked as he plopped down on the sofa facing her.

She furrowed her brows and pursed her lips as she appraised him. Her eyebrows rose in reluctant curiosity as she noticed a difference about him; scent of expensive cologne, new shoes, and a blue leather bomber jacket she’d never seen. She steadied her breath, admonishing herself for letting him get under her skin. He didn’t care that they were late on their

mortgage payment three months running. She usually went upstairs when he sat in the sitting room, but she wasn't going to give him that privilege.

He looked at her, irritated. "I asked you a –"

She clucked her tongue.

Rogers grimaced and thinned his lips.

Abella, their tenant, walked in and handed her set of keys to Jacinta, trying not to look in Rogers' direction.

Rogers adjusted himself to sit comfortably and turned his back to Abella.

When Abella bade him goodbye, he mumbled his reply.

Jacinta nodded her thanks, saw her off, and wished her a safe journey then returned to her seat with a novel her neighbour had given her to give feedback. She wasn't a fan of biographical stories, but there was a first time for everything. Yes, a first time for everything, she thought as she absentmindedly scanned the pages. When their daughter Jackie leaves for University in October, she will get a smaller apartment, but she would have to sort out their separation so she wouldn't get dragged along with him and continue to have a damaging credit score.

Jacinta looked at her thumb; the nail had chipped and was a little discoloured. She placed her hand on the page she was supposed to be reading and squinted at it; maybe now was the time to spoil herself a little. Ajobó would be in England in a week or less – she was an impatient person. Not wanting to be picked upon about her looks, she made a mental note to go to the business park and see the beautician she had overheard Jackie recommend. However, she'd have to find their half-price

voucher.

She sighed heavily wearing a thin smile; she had nothing on Jackie, her baby girl was a model-size adult now, tall as a giraffe with the gait of a gazelle, but she was still sceptical about the modelling thing they had discussed.

Rogers adjusted the collar of his turtleneck t-shirt. She seemed oblivious to his change of clothes. He wondered what she would do if she ever found out he was sleeping with Abella, her tenant; he hoped she would be more concerned with the girl being a drug addict than his being her bedmate. He also disapproved of his discomfort – with Jacinta sitting adjacent to him, it was difficult concentrating on the news.

Catherine

Catherine stared at her left arm after the nurse removed the blood pressure monitor, sighed, and rubbed her forehead.

By the time she got to the hospital like a shadow does when the sun hides behind the cloud, the headache had gone. It always disappeared when she got to the hospital. She got up to stretch her legs but felt the wind in her eyes and abruptly sat back in the chair.

It didn't help that she was feeling overtaxed lately, throwing up at every given opportunity. She hoped Aleruchi would be able to come and visit as she had requested in her letter. She couldn't possibly tell Aleruchi what she was going through over the phone. Besides, she needed her best friend to be a shoulder for Amanda to lean on in case her medical report showed

oddities that weren't temporary.

She sighed again. Her to-do list was expanding rapidly. A few seconds later, she turned her wrist to check the time. She would have to do a walk-in, as she had forgotten to book an appointment to see the specialist twice already. She slanted her head to look at her reflection on the window just as the doctor excused himself. Her eyes had sunk and were embroidered with dark circles. She always wanted to be slender, she pulled her cheeks down with her hands and smirked. *Gaunt.*

The doctor walked in with various files. He set them on the table and sat down simultaneously before scratching the stubble on his chin, pursed his lips, and started with a small smile. "Mrs Osuji, we'll have to reschedule you for another series of tests. We are not sure –"

"I'm a registered general nurse, so straight to the point will do perfectly."

The doctor nodded politely. "There are too many false positives."

"What's wrong with me?" Catherine asked in a suppliant tone.

The doctor hesitated. He was young, new, and exhausted. Catherine knew that doctors like him were easiest to whiplash into divulging information, especially to a senior nurse, and the best way was never to ask a long or complicated question. So, she looked at the doctor expectantly.

"It may be cancer."

"Maybe."

The doctor looked confused. He didn't know if it was a

question.

“What do the tests say?”

“It’s malignant,” he said slowly.

“Type?”

“Cervical cancer... stage 2B. It’s important that we rerun the tests to be sure and as soon as possible because you may need -”

“Radical surgery, yeah I know,” Catherine muttered. She got up abruptly, grabbing her bag, and was out of the doctor’s office quickly, leaving the doctor aghast.

“I have work to do,” she said quietly.

She had to visit the pastor’s daughter, Ibitayo, to ensure the homebirth was a success. She needed to get to Falguni’s house to take her mother in for her therapy session.

She pondered on the easiest way to bring Falguni’s mother down the stairs, she closed her eyes, remembering the stench of urine and rat faeces the last time she was there. She had to get her car professionally cleaned even though she had just had it done the day before.

She let out an exasperated sigh: she’d almost forgotten that she had a circumcision to undertake, as Jonathena couldn’t afford to pay the cab fare for their Rabbi. She wondered if she would be back home on time to be well-rested before heading back to work.

On her way out of the hospital, she heard the sirens and saw an ambulance drive in, and her heart skipped a beat. She held her chest and leaned on one of the columns as she tried to steady her breath. *I’m strong. I’m strong. I can do this. I believe I can do this. O, God!*

She hastened to her sedan, rushed back to get a

ticket, then hurried on back to the parked car. She stopped briefly to catch her breath, then scrambled to turn on the tom-tom. Her patience was worn, so she yanked the pigeonhole open and brushed out its contents, only to discover that she had fixed the *tom-tom* that morning to find her way to the hospital. It was right in front of her; she would have noticed it if she bothered to look up.

I don't seem to see anything these days.

She looked up at the roof of the car with her hands raised in surrender. Tears trickled down her face. She opened her bag to retrieve a mirror, but her hands were so jittery that she pulled down the visor to see her reflection. Her mascara was plastered around her eyelids and had left a long hazy line down her cheeks. Sighing, she emptied the rest of her bag on the passenger seat and withdrew a wet wipe and used it to dab at the dampness of her face, blending the makeup with her fingertips.

She could still see the streaks the mascara left on her cheeks and hoped it wouldn't be noticed.

"God help me!" She murmured.

She hadn't clicked her seat belt but adjusted her weight in her seat with Amanda on her mind she drove a little above the speed limit to another hospital.

Is this punishment for what Alfred went through at my hands? All these years of self-sacrifice, I thought I had paid my dues with all the malicious, self-serving people I have worked with. I thought I would fall asleep and then die I've always wanted to join my husband. If only I

knew someone that could tell me of Amanda's whereabouts. I don't want to wait until it's too late; I don't need her to hear this from someone else either. I only wish to set eyes on my Pearl's beautiful face. Well, either way, Aleruchi is a strong woman and will be able to step into Amanda's life as her mother with ease.

Catherine yearned for her parents; the anger, pain, and hurt were now a thing in her biographical history, but since her parents had disowned her and went their separate ways, she couldn't find them. The last she'd heard of them was that they were back in Lagos two years after she left Nigeria, but that was twenty-five years ago. When she thought of how she was going to get in touch with her estranged parents and daughter, she let out a sigh of despairing hope.

Who knew worrying could be exhausting?

On arriving at the second hospital, she parked on the layby on the street that was close to it, reclined her chair and leaned back, but couldn't close her eyes. Feeling thirsty, she got out of the car and walked back the way she came to a grocery store she had seen earlier. She brushed past a woman who staggered hard into her.

"I'm so sorry!" the tear-stricken lady said.

"Are you okay?" Catherine asked as she pulled the lady out of another pedestrian's path.

"I'm not drunk," the woman snapped.

"Didn't think you were," Catherine said with a frown.

"Thank you. Excuse me!"

"I could help," *God knows I need a distraction.*

The lady gave her a questioning look.

"Let's go and sit down somewhere. I'll drive –"

The lady shook her head.

“It can’t be that bad?”

The lady let out a sound somewhere between hissing and clucking.

Catherine smiled and shook her head.

The woman looked down at herself and back at Catherine. “What?”

“What you just did, I had a friend who always did the same thing.” Noticing the woman had stopped walking, she gestured to the bus stop, which was a few footsteps away.

“Mh-huh!”

“She wasn’t a friend but a friend of a friend.”

When they got to the bus stop, Catherine stretched a hand towards the lady. “I’m Mrs Catherine Alfred...”

“Jacinta –”

“Nkiru Onuorah?”

“Nee.”

“Of course!”

They hugged each other, then Jacinta pulled away uncomfortably. “Spencer?”

Catherine nodded. “Nee. It’s Osuji now!”

They laughed in tandem.

“Wow, small world!” Jacinta murmured. *Of all the people to cross paths with, it’s the cause of my problems. Mm, this world is really small. After all these years I can finally have my pound of flesh.* “Wait o! You married Batrachian?”

“Yes o!” Catherine retorted with a giggle.

Jacinta suddenly seemed distracted. “This is good o! Long time –”

“No see.” Catherine completed the sentence with

another giggle. “What happened?”

Jacinta raised a brow “Hhm?”

“After JS1, you disappeared. I don’t even remember if you took exams with us *sef*. Ruchi used to be so worried about you. She wrote to you every day, but you didn’t reply. It wasn’t until we were in class three that your mother said that you’d been out of the country and that she’d kept the letters for you.”

Trust that woman. “How’s Aleruchi?”

“Ruchi’s fine o! She should be in the country in a few days.”

Very good. Oh, how long I’ve waited! It’s time for the cat dance. Haha, let’s see who cries first. The glint in Jacinta’s eyes and the sparkle in her smile had nothing to do with meeting a long-lost friend. “*Abeg*, give me your phone number. We need to keep in touch.”

“*Abi?*” Catherine gestured in agreement and dug into her pocket.

“It’s not easy to find friends in this big country o! Especially friends from school.”

“I agree.” Jacinta quickly dug into her bag in search of her phone.

PART 1

(PRESENT DAY)

CHAPTER ONE

Jacinta

Jacinta hated visiting London.

It was always crowded, she didn't know anyone, and the few people she did know worked the twelve-hour-shift to keep up with their established needs *and* most importantly, it took her hours to get home. She sighed deeply as she looked up at the red taillights ahead of her. It would be hours before she got to Nottingham. Hungry and tired, she hoped she could keep herself awake long enough to arrive at her destination safely.

A sound startled her, and she pressed the brake pad just in time for the light to turn green.

O for goodness sake! What is it this time?

The blaring horns were beginning to give her a headache. Her head pulsed, but there was no shoulder to park her car. She shook her head and looked up; she was in the middle of the M1. A few cars had overtaken her, and some were trying to manoeuvre around her, but she caught on quickly. Then the traffic came to a halt.

The sound came back again. She looked at the LCD.

"Oh God!" she cried exasperatedly.

It was from Rogers.

His calls irritated her, but if she didn't pick up, she would not hear the end of his nagging, and she wasn't ready for one of his episodes. There was a time when she picked up his calls out of fear of what he would do to her if she hadn't, but that was almost nineteen years

ago.

She pressed the green button. "What is it? I'm driving."

"*Ehen*, so, for the past two hours?"

"Yes, what do you expect? Or is London part of East Midland now?"

"No need to raise your voice," he murmured dismissively.

She grimaced. "You're talking as if I went for a walk..."

"I've been waiting for you," he grumbled. "What are you going to eat?"

"Eh!?" She yelped and almost matched the brakes.

"You heard me," he snapped.

"Since when did you start cooking?"

"I don't intend to start today."

"But-"

"I wanted to order some and thought I could order yours too."

"Don't bother, thank you!" *Order food for me! Why would he order food for me? When did that even start? God forbid o! That could easily be for me an early grave.*

"How long do you think it will take you to get here?"

Puzzled by his show of concern, she frowned at her phone but said nothing. She wondered why this was so important to him. Lately, he wanted her out of the house as often as possible. When she didn't go anywhere, he would grumble, go over to his friends', and then come back almost immediately.

She hoped it had nothing to do with their new tenant, not that she cared about what might go on between them so long as she didn't get to catch them. On the

other hand, she would have reasonable grounds for a divorce.

For the past ten years, all he did was visit his friends, go to work once a week, and expect that warm food would be sitting on the table while she waited for him in lingerie.

There was a time when she believed her world would end without him. Fortunately, the day her fear of him died was etched in her memory as a constant reminder of how much she had grown. While many people dreaded Friday the thirteenth, she regarded it a day of special reverence in herself, and she commemorated it with extravagance.

She had just entered her third trimester. It was a weekend. It had been humid the day before; the polished coal-tar road, flanked by copper leaves meshed together at the edges of the long stretch of road, the gleaming old relic of a car that had been parked in her neighbour's compound since she moved into the estate four years ago, and the glistening aluminium rooftops all held evidence of a torrential downpour.

The air was clean and refreshing. She wouldn't have known about the weather, as the family doctor had her sedated for three days. It wasn't the first time she'd been sedated, but it usually lasted a few hours, and she would be dozey for the rest of the day. This time it wasn't the punches on her stomach or the stinging slap on her face that made her head reel as she staggered. No, this time it was her contorted nose vying to view her left cheek, the cuts on her face, a dislocated shoulder, and persistent pain in her groin.

She had made a few calls. Only the one to her mother-

in-law's phone went through. The poor woman thought her daughter-in-law was drunk from her slurred speech and promised to come over to reprimand her for drinking while pregnant.

Fortunately, her mother-in-law didn't arrive alone the following day. She came at the same time as Jacinta's half-brother Thomas – the youngest of three boys - and his best friend Jermaine, a six-foot-tall albino who shaved his head and spoke with an adulterated American accent. While Thomas and Jermaine were getting off their okadas, her mother-in-law was getting out of her cab. Her mother-in-law paid their fares and attempted to coax them into leaving but was unsuccessful after they had seen Jacinta's swollen eyelids and blotched skin.

Seeing her so, they lost their appetite and watched a movie while they waited for Rogers to return.

As soon as Rogers' mother heard her son's car, she headed for the door, but Jermaine blocked her path and ushered her upstairs. Reluctantly, she obliged.

Thomas went to check on his sister, but she was fast asleep - at least, that was the impression she gave. Rogers walked in just as Thomas was returning to the sitting room.

Rogers clenched his jaw and then smiled politely. "Hello! I wasn't expecting you. Did my wife send for you?"

"No, your mother did." Thomas lied smoothly. He had come to get more pocket money from his sister, but her mother-in-law's appearance was a bonus.

"Really?" Rogers asked, a questioning look on his brow as he dumped his briefcase on the settee. "What would

you like to drink?" he asked as he headed to the bar.

Thomas nodded at Jermaine and Jermaine blocked Rogers' path.

Rogers laughed nervously. "What's this about?"

"Giving," Thomas said brandishing the billiard cue sticks Rogers had just bought.

"Excuse me? Oh, you want to play pool. It would help if you had said so -"

"Lie down." Jermaine ushered.

"Sorry?" Rogers turned abruptly, his hand paused on his half-loosened tie.

"Lie down," Thomas said, getting up and walking towards Rogers.

"Thomas, know your place," Rogers said, but he was looking at Jermaine, who was rolling up his sleeves.

"I do. Be a big boy and take this graciously, eh?" Jermaine grimaced impatiently.

Thomas kicked Rogers so hard he landed full-length face down. He raised his head, his nose bleeding. Jermaine laughed and held Rogers in place. Thomas flogged Rogers until he was tired. Then he and Jermaine went to the bar and mixed their drinks.

"I love jungle justice." Jermaine chuckled, and they clicked their glasses.

"You'll pay for this," Rogers said as he tried to get up.

Jermaine got up and gave Rogers a punch which made him stagger a few inches, stunned. Thomas raised a brow at Jermaine, who shrugged, nursing his hand.

All the while, Jacinta was watching through the keyhole of the door that separated the visitor's living room from the rest of the house. She covered her mouth so her giggles would not be heard. 'A respectable woman

should be protecting her husband,' she thought, then grimaced, 'a respectable man wouldn't hit a woman either, much less his wife'.

She watched with disgust; He can't even fight back. It was interesting to see her macho husband, placid. She made a mental note to increase Thomas' pocket money and also make sure he visited more often.

She heard footsteps. Knowing it was her mother-in-law, she hid behind the thick curtains. Her mother-in-law stopped a few inches from her and fixed her gaze on the curtains for a while. Jacinta held her breath. A few seconds later, her mother-in-law opened the double doors and went into the living room where her son Rogers was. As soon as Jacinta heard the door click behind her mother-in-law, she tiptoed briskly up the stairs to her bedroom.

Rogers was sore for weeks and wouldn't tell Jacinta how he got the bruises that ran from his neck to his feet. She was appalled when he claimed his injuries were made by armed robbers. It felt good to see him writhe in pain when she nursed his wounds. He couldn't sit down even after she buffered his chair with soft blankets. She was most certainly going to invite her younger brother over more often.

Two weeks later, on the thirteenth of March 2003, just before daybreak she left the house for the meat market. She returned a few hours later with the condiments for fried meat and ishi-ewu pepper soup which she had promised to provide for Veronica, Rogers's cousin's thanksgiving service. The morning was quiet, except for her neighbour's wife shouting at her salesgirls.

Jacinta still wasn't accustomed to the woman's shrill voice. The woman was the caterer whom she planned to hire to cook for Victor's birthday the following weekend. She winced as she made a mental note to discuss the design of the cake with the woman. Victor hadn't decided between football and a castle. Rogers had insisted that he gets both. Victor was, after all, his son. She had not produced a child yet, not with her almost consistent miscarriages.

She heard a car rev, gravel crunching, and the click of the door. Feeling that her imagination had got the better of her, she headed to the fridge for a cold drink to ease the taste of the medication on her tongue. She didn't bother to close the fridge. She leaned against the door, tossed the medicine in her mouth, tipped the juice carton, and closed her eyes before swallowing. She sniffed the air, raised a brow, and shook her head. He was supposed to be in a meeting and couldn't be back early. She shook her head to dispel her imagination.

Closing the fridge door, she arched her back, then stiffened when she felt someone's hand on her nape. Her hands began to shake so she closed her eyes. Her legs were no longer sturdy. Rogers was burly, his hands were as cold as his heart, and they were too close to her gullet. She stilled herself and assessed the room, in search of anything that would be viable for some defence, but she had put everything away in case he tried to use it to dispose of her.

"Relax, I came home because I miss my wife."

Jacinta squinted, fearfully looking for an exit. Rogers pulled her so forcefully that she had to hold onto the rails for balance. When they got to their bedroom, she did

nothing until he started removing his clothes. The plan was to wait until he was naked and make a run for it. As if on cue, the pain in her groin increased exponentially that she froze from the shock of it. It was like nothing like the previous ones.

“Relax!” he snapped. “Why are you so rigid?”

She doubled over the pain shot through her body. For comfort, she placed her hand on her groin and the other on her swollen belly, but the pain didn’t stop. She prayed fervently, tired of losing her pregnancies, then crawled to the bed in a bid to lift her weight.

Rogers glared at her. “What is this? Now you don’t want me? Well, it’s my right as your husband. Come and give me what wives give their husband and stop pretending. Besides, the baby is not due for months to come. That is if you don’t kill it.”

She slumped to the floor.

Rogers’ mean words tore through her. They stung so much; it felt worse than the pain she was suffering. Through blurry eyes, she saw him walk hurriedly towards her. She began to back away, but he was fast because he pulled her with one hand. The force propelled her into the edge of the door causing her to pass out.

When she came through, he was in her. Enraged she tried to push him off her, then decided to sit up but couldn’t. She laid back to gather enough strength to roll down the side of the bed.

Rogers rushed at her. Seeing his menacing approach, she jerked back and let out a long shrill sound then everything went blank. She didn’t know how long she had blacked out for, but she could hear people calling her name.

There were heavy footsteps around her. While some people came to view the house of the only person in the neighbourhood who wouldn't allow anyone in; others came to find out if he had finally killed her. Something shattered in the distance that made her wonder which part of the house her husband had abandoned her in. She heard a door close nearby and knew it was the bathroom door – it was the only door in the house that creaked.

Jacinta curled up for fear that he was about to attack her again when she heard heavy breathing beside her. It was followed by intermittent hissing and clicking. She frowned and blinked. Her eyes refused to show her a clear picture of her surroundings.

“What have you done to her, you this coward? What have you done to her?” The caterer spat as she bent over Jacinta and yelled. “She is here! Come o! She is here!”

People were talking all at once in pidgin English.

“Ey, see blood o!”

“Quick, quick, quick, carry her out of here. Eno, go and get my car keys.”

“Madam you should move out of the way so that someone can carry her!”

“What? Did I block your path?”

“It's enough! All of you, out. Madam, go bring your car.”

She could hear everything that was happening around her; trickling, tapping, whirring and squashing sounds, after a while, she heard shuffling of feet then whispers but this time it was slow and light. She flicked her eyes open slowly and sighed feeling sure she was already in

heaven because everything was white, the people standing close by were dressed in white, then the familiar smell of disinfectant overwhelmed her when another person in white opened the door.

Again?

She closed her eyes to hold back tears as she heard the familiar voice of Mrs Ikpeba, the matron. What luck she had, the matron always seemed to be the one on duty whenever she was hospitalised. She was now more frequent to the hospital than a child living beside a candy store. She saw the look on the woman's face and was submerged in so much shame that she hid her face in her hand and turned her back to her audience, she couldn't tell if the look she saw was of pity, contempt or disgust.

Then Rogers waltzed in like he owned the place with a large box of chocolate and flowers. "Honey, are you alright?"

Jacinta hissed.

"She lost the baby." One of the nurses muttered even though her friend was nudging and eyeing her to keep quiet.

"Oh my God, Jacinta!" He staggered then turned to the nurses. "Can I have the room, please? I need to speak to my wife alone."

"They will do no such thing," Jacinta murmured, her voice raising as she trembled. She tried to rouse herself but faltered. He attempted to touch her, but she recoiled as if burnt, she allowed a nurse to help her up, muttering. She nodded her thanks and wore a wry smile. "Whatever you want to say can be done now. After all, my linen has already been washed in public."

Rogers looked at the nurses who were eagerly waiting

for him to give an explanation. He twisted his mouth and turned to his wife. "We will talk when we get home then." He set the flowers down on the grey bedside cabinet, placed the box of chocolates on her lap which she brushed off immediately. He tried to camouflage his anger and failed as he watched the descent of the box to the ground.

The matron walked towards the door and turned around and signalled the other nurses to join her. The last nurse to leave left the door ajar and came back with two other colleagues to listen in.

Later, Rogers told her he was sure that they were waiting for her to die so that they could put an automobile tyre over his head and burn him to death, not for her death but because he had siphoned public funds, and worst of all stolen from Lagos state government though he wasn't even a Lagosian.

The room was quiet, and she could feel eyes boring into her. "I'm not going back with you. My mother should be packing my things by now."

"Your mother? In my house?" He asked with an incredulous look on his face.

"Our house, and yes she's in the house. Why shouldn't my mother come to the house when it's your mother's second home." She crossed her arms and glared at him.

"Have you thought about Victor? Have you thought about what this will do to him?"

"He is a strong child. A boy for that matter, he will cope."

"Jacinta, heal first, then think things through."

She summoned strength at last and was out of the bed. "Think things through, think things through. That's

what I've been doing for the past five years. How many miscarriages? How many pregnancies have I lost to 'thinking things through'? You want to kill me so that you can marry another wife finally. No, go and marry all the women you want but leave me alone. I want to live my life in peace, you hear me?"

"Eh, Jacinta, let us talk about it."

"There's nothing to talk about."

He knelt and hugged her knee.

She made a fist and hit him limply. "Just leave me alone!"

Rogers held her even tighter and began to cry.

She felt light and free. Now, he had lost everything. What was the point of the marriage when she hadn't even saved enough to rescue her daughter from Bootlegger. He had been sacked the week before. It only became public that day. He didn't have any money saved; his concubines and mistresses had gotten wind of the news before it hit the tabloid; two of whom were vying to be his wife aborted their pregnancies.

She knew that he knew of the savings she had managed to scrape together over the years and that he probably believed they could survive on that until he got another government employment or worse get a contract. Glad that he hadn't discovered how much she had siphoned from their joint account before he restricted her use of it, she rained praises on Ajebó for giving her that advise, or she wouldn't have stashed all of it in an account in Essex during her last visit. The money was what she used as deposit for the house.

Although she was glad that her daughter had escaped Bootlegger's claws, she wished she had been there to

give her solace. She wished she hadn't wasted time hoping to get enough money. It was all she wanted now. She didn't need her mother's help because she had already stashed away everything that was required to get her to England. She was going to spend the night in the hospital and then head to Victor's school and pick him up from there.

She looked down at Rogers with disgust as he grovelled; she hated nothing more than a man doing just that. She untangled herself from his grip. Though she believed in the sanctity of matrimony, she needed him to realise that she needed space. The money she had saved was for one thing only; to find her daughter.

The sound of screeching brakes brought her back to reality as she instinctively slammed on hers too. She straightened her neck to see what could have caused it but there was a long cue of scattered cars; it was an upturned lorry.

She quickly did a sign of the cross and hoped people weren't crushed underneath the vehicle. The time on the dashboard reminded her that she hadn't reset the time and date which still read January instead of July.

Speaking of July, tomorrow is Jackie's open day at Aston University.

Fortunately, the lane she was on was unaffected, and drivers started conforming to a straight line when the neon and foil jacket people appeared. Soon after she passed Junction 13, the traffic hold-up became much less, and she could now drive at seventy mph.

She sighed as she exited the roundabout onto Melton Road. Her journey from Edrick Road to Glebe Road

Carlton wasn't a total bust. She was going to use the money she had gotten from Ajebó to offset her utility bills then she remembered, they were out of milk. The closest grocery shop would be closed in less than an hour. She swerved the car in a clean U-turn and was impressed with herself.

She accelerated and almost knocked down a woman in a bright coloured sash around her head like a loosely tied hijab. The shocked stare the sashed woman gave her made her freeze and the woman too. She was too embarrassed to apologize to the woman. The way the woman's brows were closely knitted, Jacinta half expected the woman to cuss, instead the woman shook her head and walked on briskly.

Jacinta's hands were shaking so much that she killed the engine still clinging to the steering wheel. She huffed and puffed loudly until she felt relaxed. She wanted to recline but the horn of a commercial truck blared. She turned on the ignition just as it blasted a second time. Startled, she vied her sedan towards the kerb to make way for the truck. The driver's mouth moved but her mind was on the woman she nearly ran over. She knew that face, but where or who didn't come to mind. Her concern was not recognising where their paths may have crossed but the anger she felt towards the woman when she was the one who nearly ran her over.

That night, she dreamt of something she'd completely forgotten; the night she stumbled on a dead body.

CHAPTER TWO

Aleruchi

Aleruchi (or as her husband seldom called her, Mrs. O) arrived at the airport and was almost knocked down by Elfreda.

“Oh my God, Elfr-” Aleruchi exclaimed as Elfreda hurriedly wrapped her arms around her.

“Ruchi, wow!”

“I can’t believe my eyes! Where have you been? How are you? Are you still in the US? Who did you come to see? *Na wa* for you o! How is your husband anyway?”

“Babe, which one you wan make I answer nah?” Elfreda asked playfully. “I don even forget some, start again.”

Smiling coyly Aleruchi asked, “Going or coming?”

“Coming. Okay em... you know what? Let me go and finish with my luggage and then we can sit and talk for a while that’s if you are not in a hurry?”

“My flight is in two hours.” *Mh-huh, let’s talk about how you tried to steal my husband. Thief!*

“In two hours?” Elfreda’s voice rose with each word.

Aleruchi shrugged nonchalantly.

Elfreda frowned, opened her mouth and hesitated.

“Go on. I’ll wait!” Aleruchi urged, smiling sweetly.

Aleruchi and Elfreda had an unusual relationship - Elfreda had been married five times and was at the brink of yet another divorce. She was married at the time Aleruchi caught her with Princewill. Ever since she found out that Elfreda was her cousin, she welcomed her with abridged open-arms which made Aleruchi

detest her the more. Elfreda, though from a family of twelve, was a lone wolf who ran away from home at fourteen and never returned home except when her maternal grandmother died a few years ago.

Aleruchi watched Elfreda walk towards the contraption that rolled out the luggage from various flights and sniggered. She clapped her hands like she was wiping them and pursed her lips. *Look at this witch! She can't even hold onto a man. Latch onto the one that would love you nawh. No o! It had to be another woman's own.*

A while later, they sat by a vendor watching passers-by. Aleruchi had ordered water while Elfreda ordered a double dose of coffee with no sugar – there was nothing stronger.

Since the incident, Elfreda had an unsteady voice when they spoke, something always seemed to be wedged in her throat. She took a long time sipping her coffee, then sighed before asking, “So, who you dey go meet for *obodo-oyibo*?”

Aleruchi shrugged with a smug look on her face. She had sunglasses on so she could size Elfreda up. *I have a son, but what do you have? Nothing! Yes, nothing. Aborting for every tom, dick and harry. One day it will dawn on you how fickle you've been!* She savoured Elfreda's discomfort. It baffled her that after all those years Princewill could still find something attractive in Elfreda's bosom when she was the possum of every fleecable man's phallus.

Elfreda cleared her throat again and rubbed her nape. “So where are you going?”

Aleruchi drank her water slowly. “England.”

“England? Who’s in England?”

“My son--”

“Victor? Really? How is he? Married, I hope. He is so handsome.”

Aleruchi’s glare was hidden behind her glasses, but she raised a questioning brow before replying, “Fine and no!”

They talked a while longer. Elfreda asked to help carry Aleruchi’s suitcase, and Aleruchi obliged. Aleruchi held her bag up and waltzed to the aisle with Elfreda trudging behind with her head hanging low.

“Hello Son!” she cooed into her phone soon after her plane had touched down.

“Hi, Mom! I’m sorry I had to send you a cab, I couldn’t tear myself away from work.” She knew what he wanted to say was “I couldn’t come to pick you up because of your drama.”

“It’s colder than I thought,” she said suddenly.

“How was your flight?” Victor asked pretending not to have heard her last comment.

“Okay, I guess.” She grumbled.

“I’ll see you soon okay?”

“Okay.”

She didn’t want to be alone, and she hadn’t changed enough naira to pounds. The banks were closed now so she couldn’t even order a new bank card. She had one option: Catherine.

“Hello!” Catherine grumbled into the phone. Her chances of going back to sleep draining.

“Cathy, it’s Ruchi. I’m at the airport.”

“Okay. When’s your flight?” Catherine asked thinking Aleruchi was at MM2.

“I just arrived. I’m at Heathrow.”

“Eh!?”

“Come and pick me up *nawh!* It’s cold o!”

“What did you say?”

“Come and pick me up, it’s cold,” Aleruchi repeated slowly.

“I heard you before.” Catherine snarled. “Listen, you would need to get a cab. Wait, do you have a UK sim?”

“No. You sound as if I’ve offended you.”

“Yes, you have.”

“How?”

“Do you think this is Naija where you can visit someone unannounced? Aww, now see what you’ve caused.”

“Ew, sorry. Okay, I’m sorry,” Aleruchi pleaded and looked around. She was now uncomfortable with the unfamiliar faces that seemed to recognise that she was lost. “Please, come and pick me up.”

“I can’t! Aw! Mmmph!” Catherine nursed her leg.

“Ah, you are wicked o!”

“Na now you know?”

“Why *nawh?*” Aleruchi cocked her head at the sound of someone knocking, not willing to let go of the phone. She cradled it and curled up around it as if it could offer her some warmth.

“Because it’s about three hours to get to you another three to get back here.”

“Oh my God!”

“Take a cab.” Catherine retorted cradling her head.

Aleruchi looked around and whispered. “I don’t have

cash on me *nawh!*”

“Just take the cab.” Catherine almost shouted and calmly added. “I’ll pay then later you can transfer the money to my account.”

Humbled, Aleruchi said, “Okay.” Then called her son to tell him that she was going to spend the night at her friend’s house, she detected what sounded like relief in his tone but shrugged it off as her imagination.

CHAPTER THREE

Catherine

Catherine stared gloomily at the fish fingers that were already laid down in the baking tray, her eyes distant; *if I didn't kill Alfred he would be here, he was good at handling arguments.*

She pushed the tray aside.

Conflict resolution was Alfred's MO, a trait she hated because it made her seem so small. Their first argument as a couple was on their wedding day. She blinked at the chiming clock, which brought her attention back to the fish fingers. She gave them a piercing look, willing time to turn back to the day she fought with Amanda, the glimmer of sunshine in her bleak world, maybe she would have handled the situation differently if she could confide in someone.

Quite irritated, she exhaled and grimaced. A knock distracted her. It was followed by jangling keys and stamping of feet before she saw Aleruchi draped with bags of groceries. She slanted her head and exhaled deeply and as quietly as she could.

"I didn't know you went out." Catherine murmured before she could stop herself.

Aleruchi raised her brow and sniffed. After setting the items on the island, she turned her palm upwards in front of her.

Catherine grimaced. "What?"

Aleruchi pursed her lips and blinked, "Forty pounds."

“See this one o! Did I send you?”

“Oh, sorry for helping you out,” Aleruchi made to carry the bags she’d just dropped on the island.

Catherine placed her hands gently on Aleruchi’s and tried to sweet-talk her. “No vex nah. Okay, I’ll make you Eton Mess I know how much you love it.”

“With what?” Aleruchi asked grinning, her hands still on the bags.

“The ingredients you bought *nawh*.”

“I didn’t buy those ingredients –”

“You lie.” Catherine tugged the bag gently.

Aleruchi gave her a wide-eyed stare, gasped and placed a hand on her chest simultaneously and asked mockingly. “So, you don’t believe me?”

“Bring the bag please.” She shoved Aleruchi away nudging her towards the fridge. “There is a bottle of liqueur in the fridge.”

Aleruchi stretched her hand to the door of the fridge and turned to her friend. “Don’t see it.”

“The one in my room.”

Aleruchi shook her head vehemently. “Not climbing another step today.” She climbed the kitchen stool and dipped her hand in the double cream.”

“Fine. I’ll get it. Get the glasses.”

Aleruchi opened her mouth.

“Second cabinet beside you.”

Aleruchi shook her head again. She was never good with descriptions no matter how simple. She looked in the cabinets behind her and continued until she ended her L-shaped journey where she’d been sitting. Exhaling heavily, she set the glasses down and abruptly sat down.

Catherine pushed the bottle to her friend then slapped her hand off the tub of double cream. "Without the cream, *this* will be pointless."

Aleruchi unscrewed the cork and poured the tea-coloured liquid into the glasses. "You said there was something important you wanted us to discuss face to face."

"Please add more to my glass. I want something with a lot of alcohol."

"You came to the wrong place." Another voice said causing Aleruchi to spill the liqueur on her oatmeal-coloured knitwear.

The beefy red-head swiped the second glass and tipped it over her mouth before Catherine could get to it.

Aleruchi covered her glass briefly then she began to sip her liqueur, but a sudden look at the intruder's throat caused her to drink a lot too quickly; the intruder had Adam's apple when the red-head swigged her drink. While Catherine rubbed her back, she continued to stare at the intruder until Catherine tapped the newspaper she was holding on her head.

"Why?"

Catherine glanced at the intruder and mouthed. "You were staring."

"Is it transgendered?" Aleruchi asked in a loud whisper.

"No, it's not." The intruder set her glass down, with eyes fixed on Aleruchi she gestured at Catherine pushing the emptied glass to her. "More. It's not transgendered Miss...."

"Aleruchi... Misiz."

The intruder stretched out her hand, but Aleruchi

didn't seem to notice – one hand closed around a glass and the other between her thighs – the intruder twisted her mouth to one side and after looking at her hanging hand, wiggled it and lowered it.

Catherine patted the intruders back and walked out of the kitchen.

The red-headed intruder looked at Catherine for a while and turned to face Aleruchi “It’s part of a role I play.”

Aleruchi looked on, unsure.

“Is she new in town?” the intruder shouted after Catherine then lowered her voice. “I can take you anywhere you want to go hon. The name’s Doctor Wilkie but right now, I’m just Bernadette.” The intruder peered at Aleruchi for some time and sighed. “You’re a pretty one.”

Aleruchi feigned a cough. “You said, it was part of a role?”

“Mh-huh. I dance the pole. I didn’t have a choice, sister. I’ve got lovely skin, great physique and a great pile of debt which includes a hefty school loan. I need to work. Anyway, I only got this job three weeks ago, and I’ve already paid a third of my debt. Still got four weeks to go and I’m done for good.” The intruder took another gulp. “Scouts honour.”

Catherine returned with a frown. “You’ve covered a third within three weeks but these four weeks –”

“I’ll cope. I was just lucky. Cathy, imagine what my life would be like without you in the picture.”

Catherine gave a wry chuckle as she joined them with a bottle of Irish cream. She was oblivious to her ringing phone.

Aleruchi tapped her gently and placed the phone in her hand. She could see tears welling up in her friend's eyes, so she bit her lower lip to retain her questions.

After the fourth glass, Doctor Wilkie got up, staggered, and shook his head vigorously muttering, "student loan." He climbed into the purple pumps then stamped his feet once and said: "I'm going."

Aleruchi nodded.

He blew Catherine a kiss.

Catherine nonchalantly waved at him.

Aleruchi couldn't wait anymore as soon as Catherine's phone call ended, she blurted impatiently. "What's up?"

"Nothing."

"Oh, don't give me that," Aleruchi said, a little irritated.

"Give you what?" Catherine asked feigning ignorance.

"You were supposed to have made the Eton mess for a while now. You repeated everything you said on the phone at least three times. You're lost in thought and holding back tears. If your heart's broken, there's nothing wrong with pouring out your heart you know."

"What made you think my heart's broken?"

"I don't know. I guess that's the only thing that makes sense."

"It's all coming back Ruchi. The pain, the hurt, the guilt."

"But you were over that, start counselling again?"

Catherine said nothing, shook her head and thinned her lips.

"There's more, I know you, better not lie to me."

Catherine sniggered. "Let's just finish the Eton okay?"

Aleruchi looked at her friend with sympathy. She exhaled quietly. "What about Amanda?"

Catherine cleared her throat. "She's in school."

"How come? She didn't live in school her first two years so why now?"

Catherine shrugged. "We fought, and she moved out."

"Oh no, I'm sorry."

"I should have just shut my mouth, my big mouth! Now, I can't find her. The police say she must have gone silent because she wanted to punish me, but I don't think so. She was quite worried, practically hysterical the day before she left. I knew it had to do with money, but she has more than enough which doesn't make sense. If only..."

"If only' what?"

I was able to have a child for Alfred. "Never mind. Let's go watch some movie."

Catherine cussed under her breath when the phone rang.

Aleruchi cocked her head surprised but didn't say anything.

"Hello." Catherine cooed into her phone.

"Hello. May I speak to Mrs Osuji?"

"Speaking."

"Mrs Osuji, I'm calling from Nottingham University Hospitals, your test results are back. We would like to set up an appointment for you to come in to discuss the details with Doc-"

"Come in?"

"We would need to conduct further tests -"

"I'll call you back." Catherine blurted out.

"Of course." The voice sounded alarmed.

Catherine pressed the red button before remembering that she didn't get the woman's name.

Catherine was lucky to get an appointment within the same week. She had been given a seven-day leave on compassionate grounds which would lapse the following day, and she wanted to cut off all communication with the world and mourn her independence. She had finally found Hucknall Road and was irritated when she couldn't remember which ward she was supposed to be in and had circled around a few times looking for Service Road Two. A glance at her appointment letter was followed by her stamping her foot on the accelerator and the brake concurrently.

Why name a road North Road when it isn't even facing north?

She heaved a sigh of relief when she found the outpatient's parking lot then cussed when she couldn't find the ticket machine. She cussed again after seeing the time, she was already five minutes late for her appointment and the reception desk was probably empty because no one had picked up her call. For once she wished she could follow her instinct. Just as she gave up and turned around she saw the black stump with silver and blue sticker and grunted.

Just my luck.

Panting, she arrived. The doctor was out for a few minutes which turned out to be an hour to her advantage because she was about to sit down when she was called. She looked up to discover that the doctor was a nosy deacon in the church she attended and her

heart sank. She roused herself slowly and dragged her feet behind the woman in question. The woman didn't seem to recognise her. She hoped it was a good thing because she wasn't ready to be judged by the panel of sycophants or be played the sympathy card.

Moreover, she hadn't been in church for months, and the woman may also be pretending not to recognise her because she was equally a widow who shouldn't be with a man until she had finished mourning her husband, but then with being in the medical profession it might be easy to have an *immaculate conception*.

Catherine cautioned herself not to judge.

"Please sit down, Mrs Osuji." The doctor waved at a seat.

Catherine appeared sullen as she looked at the woman not sure she was ready for the news she was about to receive. She knew the woman was going to give her a lecture on how to lower her sugar intake and probably teach her a thing or two about cholesterol. She didn't like being at the other end of the pole – being a patient was annoying much more than a nurse forced to work with a furious patient.

The woman sighed, paused, and sighed again.

Good thing she wasn't in a lab coat. Catherine rolled her eyes, she knew something was wrong, but she wanted the woman to get straight to the point.

Her phone began to ring, her palms became greasy as the doctor's mouth moved, but she couldn't hear a thing except for the same word that rang in her ear repeatedly like a broken disc on a turntable.

"Mrs Osuji, are you alright?" the woman asked concerned. Not getting any answer, she came over to her

patient's side and tapped her gently on the shoulder.

Catherine stiffened.

Her temperature rose, from her feet to her head, making her uncomfortable. She blinked then tried to shrug it off. The hair on her skin rose. She didn't understand how she could be so unfortunate to be another victim of that cantankerous vermin of a disease. She always had organic food, never left food in the freezer longer than a day, never microwaved her food. So how could a woman who had gone through so much be given the opportunity to add cancer to her experience?

She felt naked and curled up like she was trying to make herself smaller, so people wouldn't laugh at her. If it was her late husband's way of getting her to join him, then it was a cruel joke. Opening the door felt like pulling a huge bag of rice yet she couldn't be bothered with shutting it. She cringed as the patients and nurses in the hallway seemed to be talking loudly in muffled sounds. Her vision was so blurry that she was stopped twice, not hearing what they were saying to her she nodded. She leaned on the wall near the exit for a while.

Soon after she made her exit, she heard a horn blare in the distance and looked at the blue salon car beside her and continued walking oblivious to the fact that she was in the middle of the road.

She opened the passenger door of her car and leaned on it. A nurse passing by approached her and asked if she was alright and she smiled sweetly at him, and he nodded before heading back to the direction she had just come from. She plopped her purse in the back but remained there staring at the distant silhouette of trees morosely.

She wasn't in the hospital she worked in but still felt exposed and wished she had taken her daughter's advice and bought a car with tinted windows. She sulked. *My daughter, oh my Amanda, my pearl.*

She was still contemplating her predicament when her phone rang. She looked at the LCD and snickered. She never liked the woman's timing, but the woman was certainly going to keep calling her until she picked it up. Sometimes she didn't know which person in the woman she hated more; her superior at work or the pastor's wife.

"Good day Ma," she looked through her organiser, closed her eyes and pursed her lips – she had missed the women's prayer meeting, four times in a row – she lowered her head, she wasn't going to hear the end of it, especially since the woman on the other line knew she was on leave.

"How are you?" a car horn blared. "Hold on, are you driving?"

"Yes, Pastor."

"Oh my dear, I'll call you later." The pastor retorted and then the line went dead.

Catherine sighed with relief. *Please don't!*

She turned the key in the ignition and exited the car park but just outside the hospital, a car light shone. She wondered why someone's car's headlight flashed and stopped then it blinked again. It didn't make sense for someone to do that because it was daylight. When the phone rang again, she synced it with the car's blue-tooth.

"Hello!" she muttered cautiously.

"Where are you?" Stuart, her supervisor, asked.

“Driving.”

“I know you’re driving, but you’re on the opposite side of town.”

“I know, I...” She looked at her rear-view mirror nonetheless couldn’t find the car. She should have known. It helped that her supervisor was so nosy, she drove a few yards and then turned on her trafficator as she drove around the meandering back in the direction she came from.

CHAPTER FOUR

Aleruchi

Victor stumbled into the house at eleven forty-five that night, glancing at his mother as he went by. He then doubled back and stared at his mother for a few seconds before recognition spread across his confused face.

Aleruchi tapped her fingers on the arm of the chair.

Seeming to sense that his mother wanted to start a conversation he yawned and stretched, “Mummy, can I take your things upstairs? Or better still I’ll do it in the morning. I’m so tired!”

“Aren’t you going to tell me? Or better still why didn’t you tell me?”

“What?” he asked reluctantly.

“That someone is in the spare room –”

“Spare room?” He slapped his forehead, “Oh dear, I totally forgot I’m sorry! You can stay in my room while I move to the loft...”

“Well, my things are at the landing, your girlfriend...”

Victor stiffened.

“What’s that her name again, hhm... *Ehen* Anita, nice girl, too *raz*. Nothing a little coaching won’t take care of.”

“Mummy! She is Andrew’s fiancée.”

“Oh!” Aleruchi tried to sound disappointed. “Small Andrew has a fiancée eh?”

“Yes, and he is older than me remember?”

“Okay,” Aleruchi sighed. “Whatever you say.”

“Mummy –”

“Ehen, Victor.”

“Mummy, it’s late. Good night!”

“Good night my son.” She sighed. *He is trying to evade me. Son, I’ll teach you that I gave birth to you, my dear. Besides I have had lots of practice on your father. Let tomorrow come.*

Victor prepared for work two hours earlier than he was used to in a bid to avoid his mother. He held his shoes in one hand, briefcase in the other and tiptoed downstairs, making sure to skip the two creaky steps halfway down. At the foot of the stairs, he slipped on a pair of trainers which caused him to skid across the large entrance and nearly miss the coat rack. Victor walked back to the stair and sat down to remove the film that was covering the sole thinking it was odd to find one there.

He heard his mother feign a cough a few feet away.

Standing abruptly, he hit his head on the bannister and gritted his teeth; scratched his head and made his way towards her slowly, “Good morning mummy!”

“Is that how you sneak around in your own house?”

He retorted in a rush. “No mummy, it’s not like that, the stairs creak a lot. I know you had a long flight, and I didn’t want to be the one to wake you up.”

“Don’t worry son, I’m up. Breakfast is served.”

“Mum, is it something I can pack? I’m sort of in a hurry.”

“Sure.”

She handed him a lunch box. “Have a nice day son!”

“I love you!” He hurriedly hugged her. Just as he was about to leave the house the phone rang. “Hello! Hey, dad what’s up? Yes, she’s here! Okay...” Victor stretched

the phone to his mother, but she shook her head vigorously. "Dad, she's okay. Alright, love you too. Thank you, bye!" As soon as he replaced the receiver, he walked to the door bidding his mother farewell simultaneously.

Victor was already gone for ten minutes before she realised that he didn't leave with his packed lunch. She decided to take it to him and possibly look around there to see a girl that could vie for the position of standing beside him as bride and mother of her grandchildren.

Her heart sank when she found out he hadn't been working there for over a year, her head reeled as she wondered how he had been coping with the mortgage, feeding, and clothing and hoped he hadn't joined *Yahoo boys*. She dialled his number but ended the call before it started ringing. As she walked towards the bus stop, she weighed the best way to broach the marriage topic with her son that wouldn't make him feel caged.

The day was sunny with no clouds, a day befitting of its name: Sunday. The Mass was short. Victor kept tapping his mother to prevent her from drifting off to sleep. He was equally struggling to stay awake. After the Mass had ended, Andrew came over to greet Aleruchi with his mum and his younger sister.

Aleruchi smiled politely, then her eyes fell on the birthmark on the upper left arm of the woman that was introduced to her as Jacinta as she reminisced; This Jacinta she was introduced to was strangely familiar. It couldn't be the girl she knew in secondary school because that one didn't grow up in Lagos State. Besides, if they'd known each other, the woman would have

remembered. Also, the girl she'd known was called Nkiru, and she had a crooked upturned nose.

Anita seemed like a fifth wheel as she tagged along. She shielded her eyes with her hand as she watched the children play. Andrew's sister stared at Victor with starry eyes while both mothers tried to find common ground for a conversation, but the boys were oblivious to their companions.

"How are you going to spill it? I mean the *circs*." Victor murmured as he brushed off a little green insect from his brocade.

"What *circs*?" Andrew asked stretching.

"The marriage stuff, *nawh!*"

"Oh!" Andrew replied nonchalantly.

"You don't care? I thought you loved her."

"Nope, her money." Andrew said, looking at Anita, "Even though she is very likeable."

"Touché."

"I'm sorry, I'm just irritable. I will not lie, I totally dislike the choice that's been made for me."

"Oh-oh!"

"What?"

"I thought you liked money." Victor chuckled.

"Guy, this is marriage o!"

"Same difference."

"Imagine, momsie just debunked me last night."

"Which momsie?"

"My real momsie *nawh!*"

"Hhm!"

"They are going to pay her dowry tomorrow."

"Your consent not required I presume?"

Andrew nodded.

“Good luck, I want to stay above water.”

They laughed.

“What happens if you say no?” Victor asked.

“Well, I’ll be disowned financially. The girl in question’s popsie is my step popsie’s business partner and best friend.”

There was a short pause.

“You know Anita can’t stay in my house forever, you didn’t even tell me before installing her there, *na* because I give you key?”

“No dey talk like this nah, abi na because you get house? You be my guy o!” He looked back at their mums. “How did your mum receive her?”

“I told her that Anita was your fiancée.”

Andrew almost choked. “Fiancée? Ol’boy u dey crase? You no say I no go marry that girl! Which kind *wahala* be this one nah?”

“Why are you so worked up about it anyway?”

“Can’t you see those two?” he said gesturing at their mothers “What if she spills eh?”

Victor shrugged. “How did your mum react?”

“She was disappointed, I think. She is keen on getting me a wife and Anita would have been her pet project.”

“Come to think of it, Vic, you’re always dodging the ‘women’ topic especially when it’s about commitment.”

Andrew’s sister walked towards them. Victor cleared his throat and faked a cough. Andrew takes a hint, and they started discussing a topical issue.

“Yes Jackie, what can we do for you?” Andrew asked, ruffling her hair.

“What is your problem, Andrew? I’m no longer a little girl, so stop doing that!” She said flustered, tiding her

hair she added, "Anyway, mum's calling."

"Excuse me!"

Victor nodded bemusedly. He watched his friend tug his sister to go along with him, but she fought him, and he reluctantly let her go. He watched her waltz towards him and raised a brow.

"Hi, Victor!"

"Hi, Jackie."

"Did I offend you?"

"Why would you think that?"

"You've been avoiding me and my calls, may I ask why?"

Victor's phone began to ring. He raised a finger in gesture. It was a cold call, but he answered it and walked further away from her. He thought it odd that they would call on a Sunday, but it was good timing all the same. He slanted a look at Jackie. She was twisting her locks around her finger, and her weight was on one leg. He started walking towards the others and didn't calculate accurately because the call ended with Jackie beside him a few feet away from the others.

As soon as the call ended, Jackie clasped her hands and asked, "Why?"

"I heard you the first time. What calls? I don't avoid my calls, are you sure?"

"Yes, I'm sure," she lowered her voice, pouted her lips and toyed with her locks again.

"I'm most certain I didn't receive any calls from you."

"I did call you, I promise!" She stared down at her feet frowning.

"You don't have my phone number."

"I do, I really do!"

“How did you -”

“From Andrew’s phone silly.” she giggled but paused almost immediately, “Sorry!”

“Really? Hmm, well I’ll pay more attention.” His phone rang again just as his mother called him.

On their way back, Victor tried to pry information out of his mother concerning her conversation with his friend’s mother. It was fruitless.

“Son, the air smells nice and clean. You can head on home. I think I’ll sit in the park for a while.”

Aleruchi walked into the park alone and sat on the bench closest to the watercourse listening to the chirping birds with her gaze following a yellow butterfly. She frowned when it perched on a dry branch and then fluttered away. She felt calm but not at peace in the serene environment, so she decided to concentrate on the sound of the water finding its way down the stream hitting the rocks alongside the annoying sounds of quacking ducks and grimaced. *What is missing?* As she watched the ripples, her mind wandered to memories she had long forgotten.

It was a chilly dusty day in October in 1988, and she was supposed to attend a conference. Exams were fast approaching. She needed the extra five percent to make up for her assessment records. She squinted as she studied her environment, it was an unfamiliar room. She squeezed her eyes shut and opened them before tapping her friend. She reminded her friend Shadé of the conference; they had thirty minutes to get to the venue. With fifteen minutes to go home and five minutes to

change, plus the Lagos Island traffic, she couldn't risk it. Though she disparaged Shadé's fashion sense, she asked her for something to wear.

When they got to the venue she felt the urge to relieve herself but there was no time, and a bus had just stopped, so she hopped on the bus and tried to distract herself by staring out through the window until something she saw startled her: a man peeing. She wished she hadn't seen it as it reminded her of her need to use the loo and mainly because any man that passed by her caused the scene to flash through her mind, so much so that when they arrived at the hotel, she ran into the loo without looking. It was the wrong one.

She had only taken a few steps in when she bumped into Princewill. He'd had to play 'watch the door', his now familiar voice echoed 'the toilets are flooded' to anyone who came in until she was decent. They didn't talk much, but he gave her his business card.

Unfortunately, she misplaced it.

September came. Aleruchi was dispatched to Lokoja for the 1991 national youth service.

She went job hunting as she'd been doing for the past two months, sweating profusely and praying fervently that rain would fall the following day because she'd used up the last of her deodorant as she ran to the next street to join the queue of interviewees at First Bank. The Manila file that held her document was now tattered, but it was better than nothing. She clutched her laminated certificate and 'lean' CVs in one hand and fanned herself with the file. She pulled her off-white shirt over her nose and exhaled.

She was already frustrated with the job hunting, but she needed to be optimistic and count her blessings because most of her friends didn't have the privilege of getting two days off every week from their primary assignment. At about two she heard someone exclaim but she was too far to see what caused the congregation and wasn't about to lose her place in the line, it was as if the interviewers had been looking for an excuse to send them away because right after that they told everyone to leave and come back the following day. Some people sat on the ground with folders over their heads, a boy hawking sachet water walked past, and some of the boys dunked their hands in the basin and took water for themselves without paying and when the hawker started to complain they came menacingly towards him, and he ran away raining abuses on them.

Aleruchi looked at the United Bank for Africa across the street. She had been looking for a branch since arriving in Lokoja then she riffled through all the cards in her wallet and finally found the account details. She crossed the street, knowing her account was in the red but went into the bank. She would have kicked off her shoes, but that would have been inappropriate in an office environment, so she sat in the lobby enjoying the coolness of the air inside.

The security guard had been eyeing her suspiciously since she came in and was about to ask her to leave when Mr O came in. He had looks that would take even a nun's breath away, and the air around him suggested his authority. He was either pretending or was actually oblivious to the women who were ogling him. One of the cashiers gaped at him, and her friend had to tap her on

the chin up.

Aleruchi was staring at him not only because he wasn't easy to ignore but also because she had a nagging feeling that she knew him though she couldn't place a finger on it. Due to the 'distraction', the woman holding a baby accidentally knocked down the magazine she was perusing. She bent down to pick it up and didn't realise that he was walking towards the lounge area; on her way up something struck the back of her head. It was his face.

"Ouch!" she rubbed her head and glared at her attacker.

He groaned and nursed his nose then turned to face her squarely. The frown on his face transformed into a smile.

"Hi! I'm so so sorry!" she pleaded with her lips twisting to a corner.

"What are you doing here?" he asked, grinning.

"I..."

"You do remember me, don't you? Princewill?" he asked stretching his hand out to her.

She shook her head and tucked her wiry hair behind her ears, lost for words.

He leaned forward, whispered and stared down at her with a crooked smile.

Her heart skipped beating for a few seconds as she realised he remembered her. "Oh my God, wow! Eh..."

"Why don't we go to my office and talk?" He straightened his jacket and curtsied.

She followed him feeling a little dazed and filled with the air of superiority that came from knowing the boss in an establishment plus every female staff she came

across glared at her with envy and pride welled in her.

They bumped into a fair lady in the elevator on their way to his office.

“Oh, I’m sorry!” he said, not looking at her.

Fortunately, he didn’t need to cancel his appointments because his clients had done so. She wanted to cling to him, her head fought with her heart, but she didn’t want to lose the opportunity, a second time. She remembered going on dates and striking the men off because they didn’t seem to measure up to Princewill. When he suggested they talk, she was over the moon with excitement and hoped for more exhilaration when they dined out. She checked her pulse which was at an unnatural speed, but she was sailing so far as she was concerned.

They left the office and went to a restaurant. They talked until the restaurant closed, then Princewill’s chauffeur took them to her one-room apartment where they talked until morning. He insisted that they bring ‘life’ into her apartment, so they went shopping that morning for the essentials; paint, carpet, etc. he hadn’t been paid his first salary yet, so he had to pay from his stipend which was enough to feed a family of five for at least six months.

Princewill doted on Aleruchi after he’d made her promise to forego job hunting for a week; through the weekend he organised a 3-day spa treatment for her in Abuja, then a personal development workshop for three days and a complete change of wardrobe. Aleruchi had never been on an aeroplane before. She felt a bit awkward asking the air hostess for help. It was only until she saw a little boy fasten his seatbelt that she

fixed hers. The cloud was so close it looked as smooth as pap and as fluffy as cotton wool.

She felt on top of the world, as the houses underneath looked like specks and giggled, wonder woman go para eh? This kin guy go get anything wen im want. Na wa oh! Enjoyment galore! See levels meeen, from here upwards oh! "See life, see wetin big man dey enjoy!" she smirked.

"What would you like to drink ma'am?" an air hostess cooed.

She looked at the tiny white teacups, "Nothing, thank you!"

In the ensuing weeks, they hung out together during his lunch breaks, at the end of the day's work and even weekends. She was a little concerned that the attraction would fizzle out especially since they weren't sleeping with each other. She may have been a daughter of a wealthy man, but she didn't know luxury. Besides, she had divided all that her father owned between herself and her relatives. Except for the one that was tucked away until she was thirty on her aunt's insistence. He took her to every tourist sight she didn't know existed in Nigeria. He was well informed and doted on her so much so that her entire existence was based on what Princewill wanted and needed.

It was only four months, and she felt like they'd known each other for years and was ready to spend the weekend at his house, in his bed and give him her most precious treasure, it was after all his birthday. She arrived earlier than him to surprise him. He had given her a set of keys at the start of the relationship, but she had never been to his house on the weekend.

As soon as she let herself in, she was greeted by a woman clad only in a towel. From the day she set her eyes on the girl in the lift to Princewill's office, she knew that the lady was of questionable character. However, she welled with jealousy because she hadn't the audacity to try on his t-shirt when her washing was drenched in rainwater. She had resolved to take everything she saw with a pinch of salt after she'd witnessed a similar event in a scene in a Nigerian movie, the only difference being that the man in the film was in a compromising situation with his best friend's wife.

'More information before reaction', she repeated in her head. She sized the fair lady up, sighed, walked to the fridge and poured herself a drink. The fair lady, no longer watching was already beside her trying to play hostess. Aleruchi smiled and said, "I know my way around. Thank you."

The fair lady placed her hand under her chin for a while then blurted out. "I take it that we are sharing the same man!"

Aleruchi had so much to say but opted to tell none while she tried to suppress her anger, holding her glass very tight she walked over to the sitting room and turned on the TV.

"Suit yourself, but you're not staying because as you can see, tonight is mine."

Aleruchi raised a brow, crossed her legs and squinted at the fair lady. "Are you trying to piss me off?"

The fair lady fell silent, surprised at the calmness of her competition's voice and chose to tread carefully. "Hi! I'm Elfreda! Where are you from?"

Aleruchi stared at her and casually answered, "It

depends.”

“Hhm?”

“I’m Rivers, grew up in Cross Rivers and now live in Lokoja,” Aleruchi replied with her best fake smile.

“Sorry, which part of RS?”

“Ikwerre!”

Elfreda exclaimed. Her frown only lasted a few seconds. She wondered if Aleruchi was the Ruchi she was supposed to meet at an eatery all those years ago. Elfreda audibly gulped before saying, “Well I’m a marketer with Oil League Industries!”

“Funny, I’ve never heard that name before.”

“So, you know the name of every company in Naija abi?” Elfreda taunted.

Aleruchi looked at her coldly, and the other woman shuddered and readjusted her towel.

“Can I go get dressed now?” Elfreda asked and covered her mouth frowning and wondering why she felt the urge to explain herself to a woman who was standing in her way of getting an eligible bachelor.

“Please do. That is if you came with any!”

“Very funny.” Elfreda murmured and before she could stop herself added, “I’ll be back in a jiffy.”

Elfreda continued to psych Aleruchi, but no information was forthcoming, and so she talked about herself for two hours. Aleruchi was drawn to her like a mother is drawn to a lost child though she didn’t like it she was sure it wouldn’t last. Aleruchi went upstairs to empty her suitcase. She was on her way out of the room when she heard a car rev. She knew it was Princewill because he revved his car three times before turning off the ignition and she always forgot to ask him why. Decidedly, she

waited upstairs.

She heard the jingle of keys, and the door groaned. She now understood why she didn't like action movies: she lacked patience. In a blink of an eye, she was at the landing watching them.

"What are you doing here? How did you get in?" Aleruchi heard Princewill ask in an unpleasant tone.

"Is that how to greet your love?" Elfreda sauntered towards him.

"I beg your pardon?" Princewill sounded startled.

"Why do you treat me this way? Aren't I more beautiful, even more, beautiful than..."?

Princewill frowned with mock curiosity.

Aleruchi covered her mouth as she gasped: Elfreda had dropped the towel. She had to admit, Elfreda wasn't carved by the carpenters at the backwaters but moulded by royal artisans, and it most certainly wasn't a day's job. She was beautiful and flawlessly fair.

What surprised Aleruchi was how casually and leisurely Princewill dropped his suitcase on the nearest couch, then his keys and phone on the side table and walked towards Elfreda and bent down. Princewill picked the towel, roused himself and wrapped the towel around her and tucked his hands in his pocket.

"You can pull your silly stunts at the office, but this is my house. It's out of bounds, so that's the door."

"Why are you acting like this?" Elfreda asked in an unpleasant tone.

"I'm in love with another, maybe in another lifetime." He paused. "No, I don't think so either." He waved her to the door.

"I love you."

“Look, I’m not and will never be interested in you.”

Elfreda moved closer to him and wrapped her arms around him.

He untangled her arms. “I’m trying my possible best to be a gentleman so leave quietly, please.”

“It’s not fair! Why wouldn’t you just -”

“Leave now!” Princewill said, his voice gentle yet firm.

Aleruchi felt proud as she watched them and then she came down towards them. She hugged Princewill and said, “Princewill, that’s not the way to treat our guest.”

“Oh, she was just leaving, and she isn’t our guest.” He snapped and stared sternly at Elfreda.

“I’ll never forgive him that’s for sure.” Aleruchi squeaked.

It was only when an elderly man asked if she was alright that she realised that she’d said it out loud. She nodded and turned her attention to the raised voices of a couple arguing then the lady walked away, after a while the man went after her, each time he came close she would walk away.

Aleruchi dusted a few dry leaves off the skirt of her dress. Got up sighing simultaneously and headed home. She went straight to her son’s phone and dialled her husband’s number. Without exchanging pleasantries with her husband, she told him how much she needed and cut the call once she could tell he was excited to talk to her. She cried herself to sleep that night and didn’t come out until it was time for dinner.

It was the first time she didn’t cook for her son.

CHAPTER FIVE

Jacinta

“Can I use your laptop for a bit?” Catherine asked, unhooking her tote from her shoulder at the same time. She tried not to gawk at her environment because Jacinta’s made her entire house look like a shoebox.

“Sure. What would you like me to get you? As in snack o! I haven’t done any cooking in months.”

Catherine chuckled. “That bad, eh?”

Jacinta handed her laptop to Catherine.

“You still cook?”

“Cook *ke*,” Catherine laughed. “I don’t know how to cook but baking yes, I’m really good at that. You know Ruchi loves Eton mess.”

“Really,” she heard Jacinta say from the kitchen.

“Who’s that?” Jacinta asked leaning over Catherine.

“Jesus Christ! Don’t do that again!” Catherine screeched and jumped simultaneously. She gently dropped the laptop on the chair and checked her trousers between her thighs and sighed with relief.

“That bad?”

“My sister, my bladder now has a mind of its own o!”

They chuckled.

Jacinta placed her hand on her lower abdomen.

“Menopause?”

“No, funny enough,” Catherine answered absentmindedly.

“So... who’s that?” Jacinta asked gesturing at the computer screen before resetting the cushion behind

her for support.

“Oh, it’s Eduardo.” Catherine paused then added. “We used to be pen-pals.”

“Why did you pause?”

Catherine grimaced. She had forgotten how nosy Jacinta used to be back in secondary school. “Just that he was asking about her. I mean Ruchi’s Facebook name.”

“Surely there’s nothing wrong with that.” Jacinta raised a brow.

“Ruchi is not on Facebook. I’ve told him, and he doesn’t believe me.”

“Oh,” Jacinta said tersely.

Catherine slanted a look just in time to see her shrug. “I’ve tried to get Ruchi to join Facebook, but you know what she is like when she isn’t interested in something.”

“That means she doesn’t have any connection with Whatsapp, Viber, and so on.”

Catherine chuckled. “Na today?”

“Well, let him call her as normal people like us do.”

Catherine laughed humourlessly. “You mean old people like us.”

“Ah, come on, you know I don’t mean it that way. What’s amusing you by the way?”

Catherine still smiling replied. “He used to have a crush on her you know. Back then, he would send her boxes of chocolate. A poem always accompanied it.

“Aw, that’s so sweet.”

“He copied the poems, my sister. Ruchi at the time didn’t mind *sha*.”

“Hmm,” Jacinta muttered, lost in thought.

Catherine got up abruptly. “Where’s your toilet?”

“Upstairs, first door on your right,” Jacinta said getting up.

She listened until the thud of footstep grew quieter before going through Catherine’s Facebook page. The problem was she didn’t use Facebook and didn’t know what she was supposed to do so she typed Eduardo Casimiro on her phone and sent a text to herself. She had to find the right Eduardo as they were three of them, she smiled to herself as she remembered she had just seen a picture of him. She skimmed through her phone looking for where the camera was situated and found it just as Catherine walked back into the sitting room. In her mind, she gave Catherine a black eye.

Catherine raised a brow when she noticed that the laptop was not in the same position as she’d left it nor was it on the page she had left it on. She was glad that she had left the picture of a different Eduardo on the screen before going to ease herself - Eduardo had broken a lot of hearts back in the day, so he didn’t use his real name on Facebook – besides, she had never really trusted Jacinta.

“So why did you decide to be a nurse?” Jacinta asked.

Catherine was taken aback by the question. She’d never really thought of it. “I missed my husband too much, so I decided to have a feel of what he did.”

Jacinta snickered. “You sound like he is dead or something.”

Catherine nodded and cleared her throat noisily. “Thirty-two years today.”

“Ey-ya! I don’t miss my own. He can be in this house, and I wouldn’t even know.”

“Your husband!” Catherine’s voice was raised then she lowered it as she leaned forward. “Your husband is in?”

Jacinta sniggered. “Where else would he be? If he’s not out with his buddies, he’ll be here sleeping.”

“It’s your husband you’re talking about like that.” Catherine retorted, still whispering.

“Tell her. Finally, a sane friend visits you.” A tired voice spoke causing Catherine to jump again.

Catherine looked at Jacinta questioningly.

Jacinta nodded with a grimace.

Catherine looked up at the man in a mismatched pyjama. “Good evening.”

“Good evening and welcome. I hope my wife remembered refreshments.”

“Yes, she did,” Catherine replied half smiling, feeling guilty for some unknown reason. She picked up her tote but not before signing out of Facebook. She gestured to Jacinta then turned to Jacinta’s husband, “goodnight.”

He mumbled.

Jacinta looked at Rogers head to toe, hissed and went after Catherine.

“Andrew, how do you people socialise these days?” Catherine asked, staring at the animation on the TV screen.

“It depends.” He said and swore when his friend knocked down his warrior.

“Don’t swear before me.” She said in mock anger.

Andrew tapped vigorously at his gamepad, and his warrior started running again. “Mum, I’m in the middle

of a crisis here, do you mind?"

Taken aback, she shrugged and left the room, but before closing the door, she muttered, "No dinner for you."

Soon after she shut the door, his stomach rumbled. He paused his game and opened his door slightly which was a mistake because his mother had intentionally left the kitchen door open, so the smell of lasagne drifted into his room, assaulted his nose and his stomach retaliated with a growl. He hurried down the stairs forgetting to sign out of the game.

"My special mummy!"

She smiled mischievously; her back was still turned to him. "Just leave the kitchen now. Go back to your game."

"But you're more important than that game."

She loved it when he tried to win her over.

"You're the apple of my eye o!"

"Isn't that what you tell all the girls you sleep with?" She asked, feigning annoyance.

"But I don't sleep around. You don't believe me, *abi*? Wait, I'll be right back."

Her eyes trailed him as he bounded up the stairs. She raised a brow and shook her head. *He's going to finish his game*, she thought.

Andrew came back with a small shopping bag. "I didn't have time to wrap your gift up. Happy birthday, mummy!"

"Oh, my goodness, we're already in February. Thanks, son. May God bless you and richly reward you." She sighed and blinked to stop the tears that were beginning to blur her vision.

Andrew had bought the perfume for his birth mother and soon-to-be step-father. Since his father took the one meant for his step-father he didn't see the need to send just the female scent. Their flight would be arriving at 5a.m. the following day, and he didn't want to meet them alone. He would have to come clean with Victor if he was to go with a friend. He wasn't going to continue living in this shack when his mother had a lot to offer financially, and he could have the best of both worlds.

He wondered what the girl they wanted him to marry looked like. Although the girl's father was his stepfather's best friend and business partner, it was more his mother's idea than his stepfather's. Andrew has been able to keep his relationship with her close to his heart but marrying their choice of a wife was sure going to cause a lot of tension if his step-mother was to find out. She had after all been his birth mother since she married his father who, in his opinion, was worthless and wondered why the poor woman would not just divorce him and be free.

Andrew sighed. He never used to keep things away from Jacinta, but when he overheard his father argue with her over his going to school and the things his father had said to her. All he wanted to do was find his birth-mother. Now he could console himself with the fact that his birth mother had the finances he needed, and she was willing to give him the earth if only to clear her conscience for abandoning him. His conscience sent him on guilt trip regularly as he tried to figure out the best way to tell Jacinta about his birth mother. Soon, he hoped.

“Are you alright?” Jacinta asked Andrew, tapping him lightly.

Andrew crossed his arms and legs as he propped his tall frame on the counter. “Mum, let’s order something to eat, today’s your birthday.”

“Let me finish cooking-”

“No, forget the cooking. I’ll place the order.”

She touched his hand lightly and gestured that he replace the phone.

He frowned.

“Please honey, I’ve used all I have to pay for the heating, your sister will be coming tomorrow so she wouldn’t come back to a cold house,” she said quietly.

“Oh-oh not again. So what’s my so-called father doing?”

“Don’t talk about your father like that.” She said sternly and waved a warning finger in front of him.

He picked up the phone. “I’ll pay for the food.”

She thinned her lips still holding onto his arm. “Andrew, my right hand, my prince, the eyes I use in seeing, my man! Don’t worry, eh! You need to be saving so that you’ll be able to pay off your student loan at least until I’m back on my feet. Oh, Nwokem! My heartbeat! Don’t be angry, oh! Let’s manage the food I’m cooking, and there’s meat inside oh! I even put *okporoko*.” she rubbed his chest tenderly and smiled her eyes conniving.

Andrew nodded, overwhelmed with emotion. How on earth could he tell her that he didn’t owe the government a dime - he had been refused a school loan and had to blackmail his birth-mother into paying his

fees until she told his stepfather of his existence? Or that his stepfather who didn't have a son, was now keen on Andrew taking over his business.

"My son, a man after my heart, are you alright?"

Andrew nodded again.

"Okay, go set the table. After dinner, you'll teach me how to use Facebook."

"Facebook?" he asked surprised.

"Mh-huh, Facebook." She answered, her back turned to him.

Andrew nodded his approval. Facebook wasn't a bad place to start having a social life, she was still young and fetching. A life without his father would be appropriate for her.

Jacinta browsed Facebook they were so many 'Eduardos' and the two she recognised from Catherine's page she got in touch with. One told her that he hated 'trolls' and told her not to get in touch with him or he'll report her to Facebook. She was so worried that she stayed away from Facebook for an entire week and closed the curtains of the house, the last thing she needed was police knocking on her door for harassing someone.

Like bees to honey, she was back on Facebook. With the help of Andrew, she went for a photoshoot after an adventure at the spa. She got in touch with the second Eduardo who just happened to be in Nottingham. They agreed to meet at Tilt on Pelham Street on Friday.

The meeting didn't last three minutes as he started groping her almost immediately after they exchanged pleasantries. She shoved him off. Nearly falling off his

stool, he said, "You like it rough, don't you?"

Feeling humiliated, she slid off her stool and was out of the pub with eyes half closed. Outraged, she picked her buzzing phone. "Yes?"

"Did I call you at a bad time?" the voice asked melodiously. It was Ajebó.

"No, it's fine."

"I'm in London town!"

"You don't say," Jacinta muttered.

"You don't sound happy to hear from me."

"It's not you, abeg, you fit call me later? Pesin just make me vex now."

"Okay, no wahala."

As she closed her phone it hit her; she had been trying to get in touch with them with her Facebook page and not Aleruchi's.

She smiled at herself.

Since Ruchi doesn't have a Facebook page, I'll create one for her.

She sneezed, then sneezed again and again.

Whose calling me? If it's not for good, back to sender. She looked up, the grey clouds had dispersed, and the night sky had started to reveal itself; she began to walk briskly to get on the bus before the rush-hour-crush would start.

It was Monday. She hated Mondays. It only served to remind her of her joblessness.

It was different this time; not only did she wake up a few hours earlier than usual, but she had also been paid for the inconvenience by a lady who needed her help in editing her debut novel. Although sceptical when

she found out Ajebó made the referral. The lady wanted her to draft a memorandum of understanding and the like and was willing to pay her £2000 plus £1000 for the inconvenience of making her *read*.

She already had the required information in her desktop and a floppy disk and prayed the desktop would still work. Fortunately, it did, but she still had to wait until Friday, the day she told the woman to return. The woman had already paid her the £1000 which the bank greedily gulped in the name of credit card debt. She wished she had cancelled the card when she found out that the man who called himself her husband had bought a few too many clothes with the card.

Jacinta fumed.

Rogers wasn't there for her to vent her frustrations on. She perused all her bags until she recovered £10 which she used to pay for a day pass, a bottle of Sprite, and a box of doughnuts. She went to the bank to close all the accounts she was sharing with Rogers and was glad she didn't have his name on the mortgage papers. Satisfied with what she had achieved, she went home.

Angrily, she called the landline company and cancelled all outgoing calls, put a pin in her handset, called the water and energy company to change the name of the occupier because Rogers' name was on the papers but then changed her mind when the customer service lines turned out to be busy.

When they didn't get their money, they would cut them off - she didn't realise they'd cut them off already.

She shrugged after reading the letters she picked up as she stepped into the house - there would be no water or light in the house.

Fortunately, her tenant was going to be away for another week. She took the only debit card that was in the clear and headed out of the house again, this time to buy hot water bottles. She saw an old couple holding hands to cross the road and smiled wryly and wondered what life would have been if she hadn't married Rogers. She was used to seeing this, initially, she was in awe of it until she came across a lot of them who'd been divorced a few times.

As she joined the queue at the cash machine, she caught a glimpse of someone that looked much like Rogers, she squinted to get a better view but it was too late - the person had entered a metallic blue sedan with tinted windscreens.

"Excuse me, are you in the queue?" A lady with a baby in a large trolley asked.

"I'm sorry, yes, but go on."

"Thanks. No really, thank you!" the lady retorted in a surprised tone.

Jacinta sighed as the woman made her way ahead of her, checked her balance and decided to get more edible groceries that wouldn't require cold storage. She caught sight of her neighbour in the store, and they spoke briefly.

The woman seemed happy to be cleaning a grocery store. Jacinta had already ruled out working as a cleaner and couldn't be bothered with acting pleased for the woman.

A few minutes later, she felt the urge to pee and quickly scrambled through the aisles, picking and tossing in what she wanted. Overwhelmed by her suddenly full bladder, she heard a child suck its straw

noisily. In confusion, she moved backwards and bumped into someone. Her basket capsized into the basket of the person she had bumped into. Some of the contents of hers had fallen to the ground. The person bent down to help her, and she said. "Oh, no thanks."

He stopped what he was doing, her items still in his hand. "Nkiru?"

Jacinta froze not sure if she should look up. She knew the voice well.

"Nkiru?"

She held her breath and slowly looked up with a plastered smile. "It's now Jacinta."

Adetunji nodded and rose slowly dumping her items in her basket. "You look good."

"Ade, you went to the wrong aisle, but I've -" he stopped when he noticed Adetunji talking to a woman he'd never met and smiling sheepishly. He walked over to Adetunji and tapped him on the shoulder before clearing his throat.

"Eduardo, this is my friend back in the days Nk... Jacinta. Jacinta, Eduardo, my business partner. So, Em, give me your number before anything else."

Jacinta's head hesitated briefly, her heart won because she was already dialling it on Adetunji's phone.

Smartphone, mmm...

Adetunji gave her his card and smiled apologetically, "We're hosting a few of our associates, and since Eduardo has some unfinished business, we'll be in town for a little longer." He shrugged. "We'll talk." He said, but his eyes asked.

Jacinta nodded and noticed the card was bulky then she looked underneath his card and smiled again.

Oh, Tunji!

He'd folded a few fifty-pound notes underneath the card.

As she made her way home, she couldn't stop smiling. She was unaware of the cab driver talking to her or that she was in front of her house until the driver opened the door of the side of the car she sat and tapped her shoulder. She paid him, and he helped her carry her ware to the door and murmured goodnight.

She carried her shopping bags to her bedroom and sprawled on her bed then began to do her version of snow angels on the bed ignoring her ringing phone. She could feel the draught and dreamily waltzed toward the open window. Then came back to the bags and took out her water bottles and sauntered down the stairs counting them. She hummed and walked to her neighbour's house through the kitchen to boil water and then slid into her house and locked the bedroom door.

She could hear the slamming of doors and knew her husband was back. She got off the bed and checked the door and hurriedly tiptoed back to her bed, turned off Jackie's rechargeable torchlight from when she was four years old.

Humming, Jacinta picked her earplug just as he began to knock on her door.

"I know you're not sleeping. No one can sleep in this cold, open the door," Rogers growled and banged on the door harder.

Jacinta couldn't be bothered. As she lay on the bed, her thoughts were about Adetunji. He didn't seem to age except for a sparse mass of grey hair. She remembered her first night with Adetunji, how he had begged her for

more and hoped he would still be the same. Startled at how vividly she'd remembered their time together, she relished in it until she fell asleep smiling. She woke up several times through the night, each time dreaming of Adetunji.

It was now morning.

Jacinta wrapped the blanket around herself tightly as she tried to remember what she had planned to do, reprimanding herself for not writing it down. She kicked off the duvet and slid her feet into her slippers, froze when pain passed through her midriff.

Sighing, she rested her hand on the bureau and frowned. There was something flat, hard and cold under her hand. She realised it was a floppy disk after opening the curtain. She hummed as she dance-walked into the bathroom and turned the tap. There was a belching sound, then a light hiss but nothing came out. She slapped her head remembering the letters from a few weeks ago.

Still humming, she threw her wardrobe open, she wanted to dress up the way she felt: sexy. After a long search, she settled for a V-neck red cable tunic, dark brown knee-high leather boots she seized from Jackie.

It took her one hour to finish combing her frizzy hair before she could French-braid it. She hadn't worn makeup in a long time and hoped they weren't expired.

She was still applying her lipstick when her phone rang. It sounded distant. Unable to pinpoint its location she scrambled around the room. By the time she found the phone, she'd had four missed calls. One was from Catherine, then an unknown number, two from Ajebó but none from Adetunji.

Though disappointed, it was too early to lose hope.

Ajebó called again.

"Babe, how far?" Jacinta asked assessing her reflection.

"Since you have a lot on your plate, I've decided to come see you. I'll be in Nottingham in an hour."

Jacinta wasn't given a chance to explain the situation. She shrugged and set the phone down and glanced at her reflection again at the far distant the clock showed it was nine-fifteen. She got up threw on a jacket and started walking to the town centre to look for an office supply store. She finally found one that could copy a floppy disk two streets behind hers. She was now hot and beginning to sweat. She had forgotten to use her deodorant. Something tickled her. It was her phone. Thinking it was Ajebó calling her, she grimaced and reluctantly pressed the green button.

"Hello."

"Hey Jacinta, Tunji here."

Her heart skipped a beat. "Hi!"

"When can we meet? You know it's been a while."

"Mh-huh."

"Are you busy now?"

"Em... sort of." Jacinta frowned at what she'd said.

"Okay, let's do it this way, yeah? I'll call you later in the day then we'll come up with something."

"Fair enough," She mumbled sounding a little disappointed.

"Are you alright?"

"Mh-huh."

"In a few hours, I promise."

Jacinta heard the ding of the end of the call and

sighed. Her mind drifted back to when they first met, and she wondered what he could be expecting. She could hear the excitement in his voice; she was too. She'd spent last night seething in the fire of his touch.

She was also concerned; she wasn't the same Nkiru he once knew. A lot had changed over the years. Besides, she was nearing menopause. It was a surprise she hadn't arrived there yet.

Catherine talked about going out with a bang. Perhaps this was it.

Birthdays had never been Jacinta's thing except when it came to Andrew and Janet.

She sighed through the faint hope that something could come out of visiting Tunji even if it was for old time sake.

CHAPTER SIX

Catherine

Friday the thirteenth. She used to wonder about the obsession with that date until it gave birth to tragedy, the tragedy of Alfred. It's been almost thirty-four years but she looked at the time and the door – she always seemed to know when he would be back from work, how he always used the kitchen door instead of coming in through the front door.

She smiled as she remembered how he would sometimes drop his suitcase on the deep freezer, roll up his sleeves, and washed the dishes in the sink. Tears rolled down her cheeks.

He never complained or hassled me. Why was I so bitter? It wasn't his fault that I got pregnant in school? Why? Oh, why didn't I love him back? He wanted to wait! He was willing to wait for me!

She wasn't one of those who went to the graveside of their late spouses with flowers and talked for hours. No, she was the Catherine who pushed Alfred to death. The man who stuck to her even with the pressure of her childlessness and yet she would chide him for not doing enough to spend more time with her, or keep his father at bay.

She looked at her dress, a simple black dress. She chuckled at her figure in the mirror as she remembered a time she used to worry about her weight. She reminisced again. *She'd groan at her reflection and Alfred would wrap his arms around her and tickle her*

until tears spilled from her eyes. Then he would whisper sweet-nothings in her ear until she shooed him away.

She started laughing hysterically, which turned into crying then muffled her screams with her clothes. Later, she started rocking herself and muttering, "I'm sorry." She blinked remembering last night was All Saints day and looked up at the time. Mass was in two hours, and she had to be on time for Alfred's sake, and tears rolled down her cheeks: *whenever they arrived early, she'd wait in the car until she heard the opening prayer before slipping into the church. For her sake, Alfred would sit close to the back and reserve a seat for her with her missal.*

Sober eyed, pursed lips, benign smile and shuddering breath she entered the church, paused by the entrance, and dipped her hand in the oyster-shaped bowl by the door and made the sign of the cross. The priest was not yet out, and the old people who were the only people in church sat in semi-clusters. She could smell the dust in the air. She looked to her right at the figure of Saint Anthony and noticed that beside it there was no space for her to light any candle, so she decided to sit closer to the Joseph's statue, so she could use anyone that became free.

Catherine straightened her back and went to the feet of the statue of Saint Anthony right at the end of Mass. Seeing that she only had two-pound coins, she decided to light more candles.

For me, Ruchi, Amanda, Jacinta and for any other person that couldn't afford a candle. She was taken aback by her last thought. Sighing ruefully, she watched the candle for a little longer and frowned. She

had no idea what to pray for. As the draught seeped in through the opened doors, she remembered she had somewhere to be.

The wipers didn't seem to handle the slush of rain that flooded the windscreen. The car struggled to remain in its lane, the wind roared, a mile ahead and it was hail pattering her windscreen and the cars on the road came to a halt. She twisted her wrist to check the time and grimaced. She couldn't risk being late not with the matron on duty that day.

Her phone rang, and she remembered she forgot her earpiece was on the seat in church. She answered it anyway just as another driver tried to enter the space that had just been created by the moving truck and she accelerated. The person in the car gestured a swear-word. She gave him a sarcastic smile and waved back and turned off the ignition.

"Hello!"

"Finally, I wondered what happened to you." Aleruchi hissed.

"Oh, it's you." Catherine exhaled heavily and synced the phone to her car's Bluetooth.

"What happened?"

"Traffic o! I don't late *sef*. God help me but the matron on duty today absolutely hates me and she no hide am at all."

"*Ey-ya* didn't know you were going to work this evening."

"Oh-oh, that wretch!"

"What?"

"Ruchi, no vex, I'll call you first thing in the morning."

She had parked on the double line and rushed inside. She had just finished signing in before the matron came in then she turned around to face the matron. Jenna, the intern, pulled the board Catherine had just written off the counter and placed it on the file she was working on before the matron would notice and nodded at Catherine.

“When are you going to change?” The presumptuous woman asked.

“You are –” Doctor Wilkie started to speak to Catherine and stopped when her eyes fell on the stout, burly woman then she smiled. “Penelope, you look good. You should go on holiday more often.”

The matron grinned broadly, fluffing her silvery blonde hair. “Really? Well, thank you!” She turned to glare at Catherine. “Go get changed, you’re making a mess,” she said pointing at the map created by Catherine’s dripping clothes and walked away briskly.

“Right away, Ma’am,” Catherine said slowly.

“Your car, double line?”

Catherine lifted Doctor Wilkie’s arm and placed her car key in his palm before closing it back. “Please?” then ran to get changed. Doctor Wilkie and Catherine started working at the Queen’s Medical Centre in Nottingham at the same time. Although Catherine was an intern at the time they fast became friends, especially as their religion was never an issue - Hinduism and Christianity; it was never a topic for discussion.

Catherine returned in her uniform but ran back to get her stethoscope. Soon after she returned, Penelope was waiting for her with a thin-lipped smile. Penelope wasn’t always mean to Catherine until Catherine turned down

going on a date with her son last year. It was rumoured that it was because Catherine said he was fatally fat. He actually was.

“Welcome back.” Penelope handed Catherine a file and fluffed her hair again. “Catheterise these.” She hummed as she left.

Catherine immediately felt nauseous, and she hated this part of nursing. She placed the file on the counter before she discovered that they were three files. She opened each and cussed under her breath – she had to catheterise three patients – she didn’t know which one she hated to catheterise more, a male patient or a female patient.

Misha smiled solemnly, her eyes darting to the door from time to time; she had just taken over from Jenna who was going home an hour later for the umpteenth time because of Misha.

“Expecting someone?” Catherine asked as she unclicked her pen and began to scribble.

Misha shrugged slightly but struggled to hide a coy smile.

“I hope he’s worth it,” Catherine said handing Misha a file.

Misha’s mouth went agog, her cheeks flaming red.

“Close your mouth dear.” Catherine matter-of-factly and dramatically clicked her pen again.

Misha’s breathing increased as she squinted her eyes at Catherine. She was now sure she didn’t like the woman.

They weren’t friends and barely spoke to each other. Jenna had once told her that Misha thought she was rude “*for a Christian*”. The phone on the reception desk

rang, and Misha reached out to answer it. With her hand on the phone, she exhaled loudly before lifting it to her ear.

“Hello, Jai Medical!” Realising what she said Misha covered her mouth and replaced the phone as if it was hot. “OhmyGodohmyGodohmyGod! I think I’ve just lost my job.”

Catherine closed the second file and held them to her chest. “Yes, you have.” Catherine sniggered then pursed her lips as she saw tears well in the girl’s eyes. When the phone rang again both of them reached for it.

Misha withdrew her hand when she found Catherine glaring at her.

“Geriatric Medicine, Queen’s Medical Centre, how may we help you, please? Yes, this wing of the hospital will not be open tomorrow. It’s a bank holiday ma’am. Thank you. Bye!” Catherine made a show of replacing the phone.

Misha looked at Catherine inquisitively, her hands behind her.

Catherine shrugged. “Pull yourself together –”

“Hello!” Doctor Mackson said cheerily and waved as he walked past them.

Misha shrank and put her shaking hands between her thighs.

Catherine turned to face him squarely. *He must be the reason why this poor girl has been edgy.* “Hello Doctor Mackson, wasn’t expecting you today?”

“I.. eh got stuff to pick up.” He said, clearing his throat and walked back towards the exit trying hard not to stare at Misha, his betrothed.

As soon as Catherine left, Misha exhaled with relief. She didn't have a reason for disliking Dr. Mackson, but she did. She couldn't stand the way he put people down and the way he nagged about the waiter's clumsiness at their first date. She was tempted to start pinging her friends that day, but he beat her to it. Her friends told her she had a choice; move out of her parent's house for starters, but that would go against everything she believed in. She would have taken the risk if one of her neighbours felt the same way about her as she did for him.

"Hello, dreamer!" Joanna, a student nurse, tapped lightly on Misha's head.

Misha shook her head and sighed.

"About your handsome neighbour, right?"

Misha nodded then shook her head.

"Which one is it? Yes or no."

Misha shrugged reluctantly and sighed. "My neighbour and –"

Penelope glowered as she saw the two girls whispering. "This is a hospital, not your dorm room," Penelope said sternly. "Where is Osuji?"

Misha and Joanna stared at each other and raised surprised brows at Penelope who grimaced and stalked away.

"What's her problem?" Joanna mumbled.

"Whose problem?" Catherine asked with a clipboard in hand as she propped on the counter.

"Phew, what a day!" Catherine sighed as she stretched her hand to the bottle of water Joanna set on the table. "I hereby requisition this water."

Before Joanna could protest, Catherine had gulped half of the bottle's content, grimaced and said "Hmm, this water tastes funny. Thanks!"

"Cath... I will need that water back."

"Oh, don't worry I'll get you a new one."

"I want that one, the one in your hand." Joanna held onto it.

Misha wanted to tell Joanna to wait for a new one, but the desperation in Joanna's voice clipped her tongue.

"Joanna, it's just water. I'll buy you a new one besides..." Catherine removed Joanna's hand, suddenly hot and thirsty. "Oh-oh, this is not good. Misha, how many hours do I have left?"

"At least four hours," Joanna muttered, looking around surreptitiously.

"Oh dear, I don't think I can make it," Catherine said, her voice diminishing.

"Why?"

"I feel tipsy. I think I need more water." She retorted unscrewing the bottle.

Joanna swiped the water, dug the cover out of Catherine's other hand and thinned her lips. "I really am sorry but this water you can't have anymore. It might be best you go home before anyone discovers that..."

"Hi," cooed a petite blonde with an overpowering perfume.

Joanna staggered in fear.

"Hello, how may I be of help?" Misha asked cheerily.

"I have an appointment for four-fifteen with Dr. Mackson."

Joanna raised a brow and growled silently. She knew that voice, it was Cheryl, the girl that had been her only contender until Misha came into the picture. Everyone knew Dr. Mackson didn't attend to patients at that time nor did he come into work on Fridays. Joanna mourned her predicament, she used to be the only one in the doctor's life, or so she thought until she saw him on top of Cheryl at his house in Ruthwell Gardens. Sure, she wasn't supposed to be there, but she only wanted to surprise him when she found out he lived just two blocks away from her cousin.

Misha got up and said quickly. "Doctor Mackson is not on call today. I could get another doctor for –"

"That's alright. I think I'll book another appointment to see him."

Joanna cleared her throat and said quickly. "I'm afraid you will have to call tomorrow to book an appointment." She had forgotten about Catherine who was already slumped against the wall.

"Well, alright then. Thank you!"

"What was that for?" Misha asked, arms crossed.

Joanna shrugged and picked at her nails.

"Joanna don't." Misha spun her friend.

"Just that she's looking for your man. I don't want your heart broken by... well the likes of her."

Misha eyed her suspiciously. "Mh-huh, I think there's more, but I wouldn't pry. Just don't undermine me again besides, I can take care of myself."

"But –"

"Save it!" Misha snapped with a hint of irritation.

Joanna twirled her hair and twisted her mouth in tandem. "Okay, I think I've overstayed." *But I'll cling to*

you until I get my love out of your hair.

Misha didn't want her to go but she wasn't going to apologize. Joanna has been keen on protecting her since they found out she was betrothed to Dr. Mackson. She knew there was something they were keeping from her. Even Catherine disliked him, and she never disliked anyone. The phone rang again, and as she absentmindedly picked it, she caught a glimpse of the petite blonde's reflection and followed it to see Dr. Mackson locked with the blonde in a conversation in a way that told her they were intimate.

Misha was only too glad about this discovery that she became elated until Jackson signed in to take over from her. As she stepped out to the exit, she saw Dr. Mackson walk out of the car park, but she quickly ducked behind a crowd of people and slipped into the cab she had ordered.

She watched him through the corner of her eyes as the cab slowly drove beside him. She could now daydream about her neighbour and swore to find out his name. Her parents were going on a bus tour which gave her six weeks to get to know the man in her dreams even if it meant stalking him. She had tried to get his phone number when she found out his landline was unlisted.

Arriving at home, she dumped her bag on the floor, ran up the stairs and into the bathroom. She heard a buzz of the doorbell and wrapped the towel around her body, hoping it was the pizza she had ordered. She was going to detox herself of all the garlic, curry and shrimp her mother had ever fed her.

When she reached the landing, she knew it wasn't

pizza but Dr. Mackson – no one she knew left the engine running to knock on the door. He was the only one who came into her house wrinkling his nose for everyone to see. Just to be sure, she tiptoed down the stairs hugging the bannister to make sure she made as little noise as possible. He looked angry under the glare of the porch light. She looked away from him and stared at the man who was taking groceries out of his car.

Misha peered closely when she saw a woman climb out of the same car. The woman was as tall as the man in her dreams. Her bag rested in the curve of her arm, and her fingers played with a necklace. Her head had something that looked like a turban.

Who could she be?

A few minutes later another car stopped behind the car, and a couple of girls came out, they were not scantily dressed, but Misha was jealous of their hour-glass shape.

She loosened her towel and looked at her breast and moaned but was startled back to reality when Dr. Mackson started thumping his fist on the door. She hissed and climbed the stair making her way to the bathroom. She played with the water and smiled dreamily as she planned her wedding, but the only groom she could muster was her neighbour. She had met him in the store when she escorted a friend, and a drill fell on his feet when she caught him staring.

He made her giggle and made her bosom palpitate with longing for him to kiss her. She was tired of stalking him and was glad that his backyard neighbour was always out of town. Her father didn't like him because they were lots of women visiting the house

which she believed until she found out that his mother was the person they had come to see. For all, she knew he could be sleeping with the girl she always saw around him and his friend, but it didn't deter her feelings for him.

She wondered what a Nigerian wedding would look like as she'd been told that it was loud and colourful like an Indian wedding. What would she wear? Yes, red and gold with loads of embroidery. Would she be allowed to wear red? She would have to learn how to tie sarong the way they do, and the large headpiece that they wore to weddings.

She continued to fantasize on her dream wedding and ended up sleeping on the couch only to be woken by the sound of the phone.

She rubbed her neck and stretched out her hand to get it.

Dr. Mackson had called her father.

Catherine felt lightheaded and stumbled into Dr. Mackson. She shook her head and squinted, her vision was blurry. As Dr. Mackson broke her fall she wondered why she was feeling groggy especially as she didn't experience any side effect to her medications a few days before. Was it possible for side effects to happen after the last dose of medication is taken?

She knew she was moving as she passed doors, but her legs were numb. She wondered what she was leaning on. It didn't sound like a stretcher. She was beginning to fall asleep when she heard Doctor Bernice say, "I'll take it from here."

Dr. Mackson mumbled and walked away. Bernice examined her and whispered in Catherine's ear. "You're as high as a kite. What..." she paused and inclined her head towards the door when she heard light footsteps.

"What is wrong with her?" Penelope asked grimly with a bundle of files clasped to her chest.

Catherine who was moaning choked from the smell of Dr. Bernice's musky perfume and gazed at her friend dreamily.

Frowning, she straightened "She is exhausted."

Penelope squinted suspiciously. "Really?"

"Let her rest."

A few hours later, Catherine woke up. She stared at her friend who had dozed off on a chair beside her. Sulking, she wiped her face.

Bernice gazed at Catherine intensely then sighed. "Up, I'll take you home."

CHAPTER SEVEN

Aleruchi

It was eleven-fifteen, and it had snowed. Aleruchi already had a cream sweater on and a throw as thick as two blankets covering her legs as she reclined on the three-seater sofa. She raised her brow trying to find out where the sound she'd heard came from. It was the doorbell. The colour drained from her face, her eyes darkened when she opened the door.

“Cass Hello! It’s been a while.”

Aleruchi turned away but said nothing.

“Are you alright?” he asked, his eyes probing.

She gave him a wry smile with her arms folded.

“May I come in?”

He strolled in before she had a chance to step aside like he owned the house; the world was always under his feet in his mind. They took a cursory handshake and shoved their hands in their pockets coincidentally, hers in the back pocket. She watched him give her son’s house a look of appraisal. She lagged for a while to regain composure. She refused to bring her hands out of her pockets because they were shaking. She shuffled into the sitting room, and she grimaced when she saw him on her favourite settee, leaning back, legs and arms crossed and nodded his approval.

“What would you like to drink?”

“You,” he said casually and smiled.

Aleruchi’s eyes widened.

“It was only a joke. You didn’t have to go goggle-eyed

on me.”

Feeling stung, she asked again, “What would you like to drink?”

“A can of Coke.”

She was taken aback with his request but kept mute. As soon as she got into the kitchen, she looked for something strong for herself. She found a bottle of brandy behind the microwave, but it was empty, there was a bottle of vodka, however, and she impatiently drank almost half of the contents. The vodka going down her throat made her shiver, she produced the strawberries from the fridge and threw them in her mouth and then exhaled heavily into her cupped hands to check her breath, then plucked a few sprigs of mint leaves from the pot at the window sill and popped them in her mouth before going back with two cans of Coke.

She passed one can to him, her head reeling, “What are you doing here, Eduardo?”

After a long silence, “I came to see you, you know, to be right by you. I wasn’t good to you, but I want to make it up to you now that I can, therefore, I will.”

“I’m married,” she said sternly, showing off her fingers and hid them behind her when she remembered she wasn’t wearing her wedding band.

“I know. Where is he anyway?” Eduardo asked solemnly.

“In Nigeria,” She mumbled when he gave her a querying look and added quickly, “This is my son’s house. I came to visit him.”

“He got his looks from you.”

She nodded in agreement.

Eduardo ogled her. “You’re beautiful. Wow, you didn’t

age one bit.”

She beamed, averted her eyes, and started rubbing the nape of her neck.

They fell silent for a while.

“Can I take you out for lunch one of these days?” he asked getting up.

She rolled her eyes.

“Nothing wrong with it, it’s just lunch.”

Aleruchi sighed deeply.

“Please...”

“Alright!”

“Tomorrow?”

“Oh no, Monday.” *Victor would be at work then.*

“What are you afraid of?”

“I’m not afraid of anything. You’re... not trustworthy.”

By the end of the discussion between Aleruchi and Eduardo, Anita was no longer bent over the bannister but smiling to herself, elated as she sauntered back to her bedroom to get her library card.

Opportunity at last!

Andrew, her boyfriend, had been out of the country for close to a week. Victor’s mother had been an obstacle to her getting his full attention.

Aleruchi went back into the kitchen. Feeling light-headed, she bent over the sink, shook her head and gulped the remaining content of the bottle. Straightening, she took a step forward and staggered back to her primary position. Her throat felt so hot that she regretted taking all that alcohol. She walked briskly to the stairs and held on to the wall feeling her way

against the bannister until she got upstairs.

She bounded to the bed and collapsed on it, arms and legs spread out. She could hear the ping of her phone but could barely keep her eyes open. The landline rang twice before the answering machine beeped in readiness to take a message.

“My love I know you heard the phone ring, please pick it up. Ruchi, please answer the phone. I miss you! I have never loved anyone as I have loved you, and you know this. Give me a second chance to make it right.”

Aleruchi frowned, her husband’s voice sounded husky, and she could also hear sniffing, “I will not betray your trust, it’s a promise. Tell me anything you want me to do...” his voice dropped to a whisper “except stopping me from talking to you because I can’t live without you.”

The room was silent after the call, she blinked and steadied her breath then let out a laugh, scornful with anger. “Who does he think he is? How am I supposed to forget? Eh? How? He thinks, he thinks...” She burped and started sobbing until she fell asleep.

Three hours later, she opened her eyes and squinted as she tried to recollect where she was. The bed smelled of a mixture of curry, lemon, and sage. She lifted her head, looked left and right and bolted upright with such force she felt giddy. The window was a lot smaller than she was used to, the wind brought in mouldy air, she checked herself and sighed with relief that her clothes were intact. She held her head up with both hands still trying to recollect her journey to the room which was haphazard for a woman with near-perfect attention to

details.

She roused herself, opened a door which led to an ensuite, there were several hair products, facial cleansers, feminine perfumes, cleansers, body lotions, and hand creams. She looked at herself up and down and frowned, she seemed to have missed her bra.

“Where am I? Oh God help that loser.” Then sighed with relief as she found her bra. It had disposed of its position to seek warmth near her diaphragm. Feeling tipsy, she strode to the second door and opened it.

There was a short hallway of no more than two feet which led to a staircase, she peered down but couldn’t see anything through the misguided attempt of a spiral staircase. Tiptoeing down to the floor underneath, nothing seemed familiar until her eyes caught sight of her son’s distorted eye painting, followed by the distinct scent of lime, orange and woody musk. She let out an exhilarated sigh and made a mental note to make a proper assessment of the house.

While she tiptoed down the stairs, she heard a key turn and knew someone was back, so she took off her slippers and slipped into her room just as she heard footsteps on the staircase. Then she heard the doorbell but not expecting anyone she ignored it, looked at the time and blinked. It had to have been wrong. It meant she had dozed off in the clothes from the night before.

Moaning, she walked to the bathroom and took a shower even though the water was cold, came out minutes later shaking like a leaf, and lathered cream onto her skin carelessly. She hurriedly pulled on a pair of faded jeans, a light green tank top and her son’s slippers, before remembering that she hadn’t opened the

door for her guest. Reprimanding herself, she dug into her shoulder bag for her ringing phone and ran downstairs.

"Hello," Jacinta yelped.

"Welcome," Aleruchi said smiling. *I didn't know she knew where I stayed.*

"Ruchi!" Catherine came in followed by Anita.

"Good morning Ma," Anita muttered.

Aleruchi and Catherine hugged while Jacinta twitched her mouth and scratched the back of her ear.

"I didn't realise you two knew each other," Catherine chirped. "I didn't realise you were in touch either."

Jacinta scoffed.

"In touch?" Aleruchi frowned in confusion.

"Yes, you remember Jacinta from St. Francis High. Probably not, she decided to leave after JS1."

"As I live and breathe!" Aleruchi walked briskly towards Jacinta and wrapped her arms around her. "You never replied my letters."

Jacinta reciprocated awkwardly and quickly disentangled herself. "You didn't recognise me?"

"No, I never thought... I just knew you were Victor's mother. I never... what happened to your nose."

"Oh, had to be restructured after an accident," Jacinta said dispassionately.

Aleruchi nodded, feeling sure it was purely cosmetic. "Where are my manners? What would you like?"

"Nothing, let's go out," Jacinta answered quickly, suddenly feeling uncomfortable.

Catherine raised a brow and shrugged.

"Let me get my bag." Aleruchi retorted. *I need a breath of fresh air myself.* As she climbed up the stairs,

she felt a draught, and she shivered and tried to shrug it off. She quickly completed her trip to her bedroom and hopped down the stairs. She was a few steps to the landing when she felt like someone had hit her and all she went through in the hands of her step-mother came flooding back like a tsunami. She held the balustrade tightly feeling nauseous.

Aleruchi appraised her jewelled tube dress and felt it was too revealing, then a red twist front dress which accentuated her figure even more. She finally settled for a navy-blue skater dress. She was about to take it off for the black A-line dress when she heard the doorbell. It was Eduardo, and he was early, over ten minutes early.

"I didn't want you to change your mind." He responded to her raised brows when she opened the door.

She pursed her lips. "Hmm."

He tilted his head eyeing her eagerly.

She opened the door wider and stepped aside muttering, "come on in."

He walked until he got to the sitting room then turned to stare at her. She stepped into the light, and he gasped. "You haven't aged a bit."

She giggled as her heart started beating faster.

He did a mock bow.

"Excuse me," she mumbled. She hopped up the stairs and exhaled noisily when she got to the room then picked a gold-and-cream-striped shawl, slipped into a pair of black sandals and surveyed her profile on the mirror. Closing her eyes, she inhaled deeply and with a shaky hand, she picked her purse and walked out of the

room.

Meanwhile, upstairs Anita listened and impatiently waited for them to leave the house. She had taken her bath while Aleruchi took hers. She was already in a new lingerie. She smiled and tilted her head up in her reflection and quickly turned off the light when she heard the house rattle from the closing of the main door. She watched the car leave the driveway and promptly wore her bathrobe patting her silk robe.

Anita checked the time. It was almost time for Victor to be back from work. She scrambled for the kitchen with a little sachet in hand. She warmed the food Aleruchi had prepared for her son and stirred in a grey coloured paste then went back upstairs to wait. She tried to concentrate on waiting, but she couldn't sit still.

Eduardo pulled out a chair for Aleruchi and unbuttoned his jacket. A waitress appeared just as he was sitting down. She lowered her head. It felt like everyone was staring at her with condescending eyes, who wouldn't? She was, after all a married woman, on a date with another man.

Her dress suddenly felt shorter and no matter how much she pulled it down it never found its way to her knees.

She could feel his eyes on her and wondered why she bothered to accept going out with him. Her heart had risen to her mouth. It was a struggle to control her breathing. She shuddered from his touch when he

tucked tendrils of her hair behind her ear.

He was for some reason tucking and untucking his hands in his pocket.

She was so distracted that he ordered the wine for her.

By the time they were ready for dessert, Aleruchi had calmed down, and they were already halfway through their second bottle of wine. He had tried earlier to hold her hand in his, but she withdrew and tucked them under the table. Feeling tipsy, she didn't resist when he held her hand. More so, she was struggling to control her breathing as the heat of his touch coursed through her veins. She smiled briefly, enjoying the touch of another man and disparaging the duty of being a faithful wife. Her mind instantly flashed back to 1999, the seventh year of her marriage.

It was quite windy after a heavy rainfall. She looked back at the house not seeing Princewill appear and not in the mood to go after him. She hummed and wiggled her leg simultaneously. Her stomach churned, and she hissed irritated, before looking at the door pondering on the wisdom of leaving the car.

She wound down the window by her side of the car. The smell of clean grass was masked by the scented bloom of the queen of the night trees. She pulled the seatbelt away from under her breast and grunted when the belt nudged back there. She tried to spread her leg apart for more comfort in the tiny car. Her stomach made it impossible for her to reach forward.

"What are you still doing inside the house?" she yelled.

"Let me lock the door." Princewill snapped back and grunted when his shin met the wrought iron chair which

she had left on the verandah.

She smiled, satisfied that he could feel some pain after forcing her to join him to his conference. She hated the snobby participants and their pretentious wives who had more skeletons in their wardrobe than a mausoleum.

“Ruchi,” he said coolly with a tight grip of the steering wheel. “Please keep things the way you found them.”

Aleruchi cleared her throat and bit back her tongue.

“Ruchi, it’s polite to respond,” Princewill said tersely.

She gritted her teeth then murmured. “Let me go back inside and raise my feet up for a few hours before I head to bed.”

“Why are you behaving like this?” Princewill asked, quite irritated.

“How am I behaving? You disappeared for weeks then appear today just to tell me you have a conference which I have to attend? In my condition,” She dug her hand under her left breast to retrieve the seatbelt. “I’m too far gone to be travelling by road, in the night. If you didn’t come back late, we wouldn’t have missed our flight.”

“I told you I wanted to drive.”

“Yes o! You want to see everything green at my expense. You’re so inconsiderate, look at me.” She struggled with the seatbelt yet again. To ignore him she decided to turn on the radio but couldn’t reach it. So, she gestured to him, but then he didn’t notice. She stepped out of the car.

Princewill let out a frustrated sigh and asked. “What is it this time?” When she didn’t answer, he walked over to her side of the car. “For goodness sake, what is it?”

“Please don’t raise your voice at me!” She stormed.

He let out another sigh and waited.

“Push the chair back and turn on the radio.”

He wanted to demand she say, ‘please’ but stilled himself as he wanted to ensure she didn’t whine throughout the journey. He moved the chair on the passenger’s side back and straightened. Waited for her to say something, when she didn’t he started walking away then she tugged his shirt.

“Recline it.” She gestured to her seat.

His shoulders fell, and he held his breath and bent over the chair. “Satisfied?” he asked, appraising her.

She ignored him and entered the car. By the time she was done adjusting herself in the car seat, the radio was on. A few minutes later she drifted off to sleep. She woke up startled to realise they had skidded off the road. She started screaming, and Princewill struggled to gain control of the car at the same time.

The car came to a halt thrusting her forward. She was shocked by the pain that followed; her legs were hot; her hands were stuck against her body in a twist she couldn’t untangle, but she was more concerned about the wetness between her thighs because she was sure it wasn’t urine. She yelped Princewill’s name. Not hearing his voice, she tried to raise her head, something slippery touched her eyelid causing her to shut her eyes tightly. She couldn’t feel her limbs. Realising she was on a flat surface, she rolled onto her back.

She finally opened her eyes and screamed at the dark figure looming close to her. Her hands were now free but weak as she tried to parry herself from the stranger who pulled her into himself. It was Princewill covered in mud; he raised her to a sitting position. She looked around and gasped. A few metres away from them the ‘x’ wheel-cover

of their 1984 Ford Tempo was in the air.

"What happened?" she whispered.

But he kept muttering, "I... I'm sorry." and surveyed every part of her body.

She moved closer to him when she heard rapid footsteps.

"Ha, this people don die o!" someone said looking down at the squashed upturned car. Beside him were about a dozen other people.

He nodded to the two younger burly boys with wooden poles that came to stand by him. "Check the car first."

A few minutes later one of them yelled. "Nothing inside o!"

Just as someone else motioned to the muddy couple. "Make I... see them here o!"

Hearing that, Aleruchi passed out. Finally, waking up in a dimly lit room, she limply tried to ward off any offender until she made out the figure of an old woman standing over her.

"My daughter, sorry o. I know you are tired, but you have to push the baby out now. My son has gone to get you 'manpower' to give you strength." The old woman raised her head and placed three tired, dirty pillows under her head while an even older woman tried to push a gourd-bowl of tea-coloured water between her lips. It smelt like flowers.

The younger of the old women twisted her mouth and shrugged. "The hot drink help soothe you eh. Let me go get help. Drink up."

She blinked when she felt something coarse on her face. She opened her eyes to see Eduardo looking at her intently, his hand on her face dabbing her cheek.

Aleruchi blinked and stifled a sigh. The stiffness of the cloth must have brought her back to reality, and the napkin would reward her with rashes by morning as she was allergic to starch. She looked at Eduardo who met her gaze with concerned eyes, then she slowly withdrew her hand from his and got up.

He got up with her and watched her walk to the back of the restaurant before he sat back.

She returned a few minutes later, shrugged lightly to his questioning look and tried to keep a straight face, but he knew she wanted to leave.

CHAPTER EIGHT

Jacinta

Jacinta pressed the bell and turned to face the road with her back turned to the door.

“Oh hello, hey,” Catherine came out.

Perceiving Catherine’s perfume Jacinta turned around. “This your place is hard to find o!”

Catherine shrugged. “Come in. What can I offer you?”

Jacinta sighed disconcerted. “Anything my sister, anything.” She looked around, impressed and envious. It wasn’t as big as her own house. It was clean, modern and it also was the first time she had seen a house with a teal-mocha-silver themed sitting room.

“You have a beautiful house like this, and you stay alone?” Jacinta asked tersely.

“Well, I didn’t exactly plan it that way. My daughter... is away in school.” Catherine said and kicked off her shoes.

“Were you going out?” Jacinta asked curiously.

“Coming in,” she said matter-of-factly.

They plopped on the chair in tandem.

“How many bedrooms?” Jacinta asked and got up.

“Two, it used to be three, but my daughter and I needed walk-in closets, so...”

“You this pretender, after you act like you don’t have any money. Wow, this your house is lovely.” She said picking up an ornamental statue in jade.

“Please be careful with that.” Catherine snapped, yanked the statue from Jacinta and held it close to her chest.

Jacinta raised her hands up in surrender and ambled to the centre of the sitting room. "May I sit down then?"

"Sure. Em, I'm sorry for my outburst, it's just... it's of sentimental value to me." She placed a hand on her diaphragm and exhaled. "Excuse me."

Jacinta twisted her mouth and watched Catherine climb the stairs. She huffed and blinked when her eyes fell on some of the pictures on the cabinet beside the television.

Jacinta gasped. *Oh, my days! Amanda and Abella are one and the same person!* She also saw another picture of a wedding, a lanky fair girl in pink ruffle dress caught her attention. She'd seen her somewhere before, a familiarity she couldn't quite shake off. It had to do with the polka-dotted shoes. She patiently watched a Nigerian movie while Catherine baked. Soon after they'd eaten, she checked the message she had sent to herself, when it started beeping she roused quickly.

"Catherine, I have to go."

"Is everything alright?" Catherine asked, showing concern.

Jacinta tried to be contrite. "I hope so."

"Let me drop you."

"Oh no," Jacinta waived. "I'll be fine. Besides, you need to rest. Thanks for hosting me but I have to run."

"Okay, thanks for coming. Good luck with whatever it is."

Ah yes, luck is all I need. Jacinta wasn't pleased with getting nothing incriminating or scandalous on Catherine or Aleruchi. It was early days and she was hopeful. They had stolen her choices just because they came from money. They'd pay for their actions; she'd

make sure of it. She cursed inwardly as she waited impatiently for the bus and also in the bus because the drop-offs were painstakingly slow – she was the only passenger leaning on the side of youth.

She sighed with relief when she saw the *new* Eduardo across the table with a petal-pattern shirt like the stereotyped tourist. He was leering at a waitress. She shrugged and headed towards him and turned away almost immediately when she realised, he was her neighbour's son whose name was Jasen. She walked out briskly and stamped her feet in frustration.

Jacinta peered into Amanda's room and saw a little mountain of white substance on a small mirror she'd been searching for. She had watched enough movies to have an idea of what the substance might be.

Amanda looked pensive.

Jacinta was shocked that her tenant was a drug addict. Catherine never mentioned it as she was probably embarrassed to admit such a flaw in character. With a wicked glint in her eyes, she grinned; luck was definitely on her side. Now, what she needed was an idea on how to use it. She brushed past the girl and picked up the mirror and raised it at an angle.

Amanda pleaded that she shouldn't turn the mirror.

"Ama...Abella, Why? What is this? Is this...?" Jacinta lowered her voice. "Is this cocaine?"

"No!" Amanda denied vehemently but pleaded with her eyes.

"I have something for you to do and I'll let you live here and possibly feed your habit, if, you do a good job."

"Okay," Amanda scratched her arm impatiently.

“Anything.”

“Good, I’ll tell you when I’m ready.”

Jacinta waltzed out of Amanda’s room, checked the time on her phone when Aleruchi’s name appeared on the screen. “Is everything alright?” Jacinta asked feigning concern.

“Do you know any good girl around?”

“Eh?”

“It’s just that my son hasn’t shown any interest in any girl. Since I set foot in this country, not one.”

Jacinta’s interest peaked. “He just hasn’t met the right one. You know you’re lucky to have a son that doesn’t chase after everything in skirt.”

“Is it when he has white hair? I just want to nudge him in the right direction. Is it wrong to try?”

“No, of course not. You know eh,” Catherine paused to ponder, “It’s best I come over.”

“Okay, I’m waiting o!”

She looked condescendingly at her phone and scoffed simultaneously before calling a cab.

Victor was back from work, and unlike him, he didn’t rush up the stairs. He plopped on the chair while Anita was reading a news article on her tablet. She gave him a slanted look.

He flicked through the channels and hissed.

“What are you reading?”

“News. Jeremy Clarkson punched his producer. Can you beat that?” she asked curiously, hoping to ignite a conversation.

Victor frowned deep in thought and then his face lit up. “Jeremy Clarkson of *Top Gear*?”

Anita nodded, amused.

“No way! Let me see.” He rushed to her side and pulled the tablet so he could have a view.

Her heart palpitated rapidly, and she slowly drank in his scent until she started feeling tipsy with excitement.

“Shit!” he said as he read through it.

He was still reading when his mother came in. He greeted her but when he saw the way she looked at both of them. He shifted from Anita. Anita almost cried out. Not caring how the woman saw her she mumbled her greeting in disdain.

“I’ll like to speak to Victor alone.”

Anita stood up, taking her tablet from Victor and exited. When she got to her room, she stamped her feet. *This woman, this woman is going to keep messing up my chances.* She bit her finger, looked at her nails and bit her lower lip.

Aleruchi talked for almost half an hour and at the end of it her son nodded, got up and made his way to the edge of the stairs.

“Anita,” Victor called out when his mother was done.

Anita was alarmed. Unsure and eager, she peered down from upstairs.

“I need your opinion, can you come with me?” he asked gesturing.

Anita knew it was about his studio. Victor was out of town and his mother didn’t know he had a studio. She quickly bounded down the stairs and grabbed her jacket. It would be her first visit and she welcomed the privilege.

“We’re off!” Victor said to his mother and grabbed his jacket too.

Aleruchi watched them and sighed exasperatedly. She hoped Jacinta could come up with ideas on how to get through to her son.

“*Ehen*, start talking,” Jacinta said as soon as Aleruchi opened the door to let her in.

“What do I offer you?”

“Anything o!”

Aleruchi took a few minutes too long, so Jacinta craned her neck to find out what she was doing. “Where is my drink o?”

Aleruchi smiled and shook her head. “In a minute o!” She disappeared and came back with a bottle of Irish cream and two wine glasses filled with ice cubes.

Jacinta sipped hers as she plotted and hoped for a glimpse of an opportunity.

Aleruchi was drunk and was still drinking.

Thinking, Jacinta ignored Amanda’s calls. Still thinking, she responded to a greeting absentmindedly and only realised someone had come in and gone out when she heard the slamming of the door. She curiously glared at Aleruchi and remembered overhearing a conversation that Andrew had with Victor regarding the latter’s homophobia. She clasped her hand over her mouth as an idea filtered into her thought.

Seizing the moment, she tried to lift Aleruchi to take her upstairs but was unsuccessful. She looked at the door and decided against it because she didn’t have a key.

Her phone rang again. “What?” she snapped.

She heard Amanda stammer. “I thought -”

“Stop!” Jacinta fidgeted excitedly. “I’ll text you an address, get here immediately.” She texted then snapped her phone shut. Next, she prompted Aleruchi and was able to take her upstairs with her help. She quickly prepared Aleruchi and impatiently waited for Amanda to arrive. She looked at the time and wondered what was keeping Amanda. She opened the curtain when she heard a car rev and rushed downstairs to pull Amanda in before she had a chance to press the bell. When they got upstairs, Jacinta gestured.

Amanda blinked, confused.

“Undress!” Jacinta ordered.

Amanda backed towards the door and stammered. “I’m not gay, Ma’am.”

“Your opinion doesn’t matter here, now please we don’t have all day. Quickly!”

Startled by Jacinta’s tone, Amanda cringed and did as she was told.

Catherine brought the camera she had bought for her daughter and gestured to Amanda, “To the bed and pretend to be lovers.”

“Why? What are you trying to do? I will not be a party to this.” Amanda picked up her clothes and headed for the door again but tripped. She got up and was looking into the barrel of a gun, her fair face turned pale. She didn’t need any further prompting.

After taking snapshots, Jacinta told Amanda to leave. She quickly dressed Aleruchi in the same order in reverse. She left the house and was on the porch when she sighted Victor.

“Good evening Ma,” Victor muttered and curtsied.

“Good evening my son, how are you?” Jacinta asked

tersely.

“Fine ma.”

“Good, good night.” Jacinta tried to control her footsteps – *not too fast, not too slow*, she urged herself. She went straight to the Polaroid booth and printed the pictures with Victor’s name on the envelope and quickly hurried back to slip them through the door.

However, Amanda was still in the house. She was desperately thirsty and had gone in search of a kitchen or toilet, but there were too many doors and not wanting to get caught she stealthily opened and closed doors in her search.

Finally, she found the kitchen. She was about to turn the tap on when she heard footsteps and shakily pulled on her plimsoles and opened the kitchen door but froze when she heard a clink of keys. Her ears hurt, the edge of her dress covered her mouth as she fought the urge to scream. After a few furtive glances, she muttered every prayer she could comprehend promising never to touch the white stuff again.

The door opened, and her heart cried out, but the footsteps stopped at the kitchen door. She remained where she was, holding her breath with eyes tightly shut then cracked one eyelid open to see a hand flick the light switch. The footstep started again, followed by clicking sounds and then she no longer heard the TV. It was now pitch black. She had to close her eyes a few times to help them adjust to the dark and then waited until she could no longer hear the footsteps.

Not wanting to be there when the person returned,

she crawled to the door. When she got to the door something fell on her head, and she realised she was right under the letterbox. She tried to grasp it and accidentally tore the envelope. The streetlight cast a dim glow into the hallway, and she noticed they were pictures. She packed and hugged them. Take a deep breath she opened the door and walked out, closing the door softly.

Somewhat relieved, she turned around to see someone speed-walk towards her. She almost crumbled on the spot.

Anita appraised the stranger with suspicion. “Who are you?”

“I came to check on my aunt, but no one is answering the door.” Amanda lied smoothly.

“No one is in then. Who’s your aunt?” Anita asked as she rummaged her bag for her keys.

“Ja-Jacinta.”

“Oh, I just saw her at the bus stop.”

Amanda’s shoulders fell. She exhaled ruefully and murmured her thanks. She could feel Anita bore holes through her, but she was more concerned with getting as far from that house as possible. As soon as she got into a blind spot of the street lights, she tucked the pictures into her dress, straightened and secured it with the belt of her dress.

Amanda entered her room and quickly locked the door. There was a soft knock before she could flick through the pictures. Peering through the keyhole, she griped. Rogers stood on the opposite side of the door, his trousers was undone. Filled with excitement and anger, she quickly lifted her mattress and tossed the

pictures underneath, pulled off her panties and threw it away then appraised her reflection. She tucked her hair behind her ear as she opened the door leaning slightly on the door post.

He started taking off his clothes

She pursed her lips and feigned a cough. "Don't take off your clothes just yet."

He gave her a humourless chuckle and quickly produced a sachet of white powder which he waved in her face.

She shook her head, smiling mischievously and murmured, "Let's take care of this, first." She sat at the edge of the bed and parted her legs.

Agog, he stifled a groan and went to her.

As soon as Jacinta entered the house, she plopped on the chair. She appraised the sitting room and smoothed her hand on the fabric of the sofa.

"What do I offer you?" Adetunji asked heading to the bar.

"Umm, nothing." Her heart fluttered as she tried to bury her thoughts.

"Nky, are you okay?"

"Mh-huh. Why?" She asked looking at Adetunji. Looking into his eyes made her heart race, so she quickly looked away.

"What are you going to drink?" he asked stroking her cheek.

"Water."

Adetunji's eyes widened for a few seconds. "Water it is. I'll be right back."

She dove for the remote control and started fiddling with it absentmindedly.

Adetunji took the remote control from her hand and replaced it with a glass of water.

She sniggered as she looked down at her shaky hands, glad that Adetunji was checking for a channel on the TV.

Adetunji slanted a look at her. He had to admit he still loved her and wished he had ended his relationship with Iya Muda on time before she got married to a man like Rogers. He was surprised she married a man like that. A man that everyone knew was abusive and had been rumoured to have killed his first two wives in one of such tirades.

She was becoming uncomfortable with the silence, so she blurted, "So were you in a relationship with Iya Muda?" She had heard rumour that the socialite's husband had caused him to leave Lagos for Ghana.

Adetunji shrugged.

"How come? I mean she hated your guts."

Adetunji chuckled. "Did she?"

Jacinta smiled mischievously and pulled him to sit beside her. "Tell me."

Adetunji smiled but said nothing.

"There was a time you could tell me anything o!"

"Yeah," he smiled ruefully. The oven chimed and he added, "I'll be right back."

Her heart leaped again then the guilt of being interested in a man other than Rogers kicked in, she tried to shake it off. Rogers had cheated, and they were separated before she met Adetunji in the grocery shop.

She let out a relieved sigh and made furtive glances at

him as he laid out the table, stunned as she imagined him naked making love to her on the laid-out table. Her skin was beginning to feel prickly under her clothes and, she walked over to the French window. Resting on the panel, she flapped her shirt for a few minutes then returned to toying with her necklace as she went down memory lane.

It was 1994. She opened the window to let sunlight in as NEPA had taken light. The cloud was grey, she looked at the time and tapped her feet hoping the cab would arrive before the rain started, she tried to straighten the umbrella, one of the spokes had gone off. She called the cab again, but the call wouldn't go through. She sighed and twisted her mouth, dreading being doused by rain again.

She had made a promise to attend the wedding and even agreed to wear their purple aso-ebi, a colour she detested because it reminded her of Lent, the period her father abandoned them. But for the promise she made, she would have slipped out of the dress.

She also had to attend Iya Muda's twin sister's – Mrs. Sola Modestus' - wedding anniversary and the naming ceremony of their first child after twenty-two years of marriage. She wasn't about to miss that one, fortunately, the colour scheme was the same. What's with the purple colours anyway? She'd asked herself several times. She looked at her reflection and sighed; she had to admit she looked good in purple.

When she got to the church she discovered that the service was just about to start, so she walked briskly to a seat someone had just vacated. The lady came back

giving Jacinta evil looks, but she ignored the woman. It was hot outside; the vacated seat was directly in front of the enormous fan, so the woman should have known better. However, she felt the discomfort she always had when it came to children.

Someone winked and waved at her when she turned to share the peace-of-the-Lord with the people around her after the pastor suggested it. She couldn't see who it was because the person in front of him wore a different headgear from hers, which meant it was from the groom's side of the family – they wore cream-coloured headgear. Then she looked beside her, and she realised he was winking at her. Frowning, she glanced at him. He winked again and waved.

She shook her head and went to join those dancing with the couple. Immediately after they arrived at the wedding reception, she embraced the bride, handed her gift and slipped away to attend Sola's event. She noticed someone following her when she appraised herself on the windscreen of a car. His beard was as white as his teeth and was about the same height as the man who was waving at her in the church.

As soon as she arrived at Sola's residence, she realised who the woman in the cream headgear was, it was Iya Muda. Before she could make it to the boys' quarters, the woman called out her name causing a stir. She exhaled slowly and headed in the direction of the woman.

"Nkiru, how are you?" the woman asked tugging a man's hand. The man turned to face Iya Muda with raised brows, and the woman gestured at her. "This is my niece. You remember that my younger sister when we

were still in Kano? This is her daughter.” She tugged Jacinta and held her close. “Nkiru, this is R. K. Durosinmi. You can call him Rogers, he’s like a son to me. He is a commissioner.”

Jacinta was finding it hard to believe that she considered him ‘like a son’. Not with the leery looks the woman gave him and the fact that they looked like they were age mates.

He stretched out his hand and Jacinta reciprocated. “Nice to meet you.”

Her aunt nudged her closer. “Nkiru, her name is Nkiru.” Iya Muda muttered and nudged her again.

She watched her aunt saunter towards another guest and gave him an apologetic smile.

“It’s okay,” he waived. “You’re different!”

“Different.” She mumbled absentmindedly.

“Most girls would jump with excitement upon hearing that, that I’m a commissioner. I’m Rogers by the way.”

She was more concerned with the influx of guests and was intrigued by the calibre of people that were in attendance. She saw famous actors and actresses. She now understood why her aunt was present; she was friends with the governor’s wife who happened to be the godmother of the celebrant.

Jacinta walked towards the podium but then decided to sit at the back. She rolled her eyes when she caught sight of Iya Muda, finding out that she was the owner of the venue was unsettling enough, now she had to listen to the woman try out an American accent as she read her speech. She had forgotten about Rogers until he signalled the waiter.

He gestured and she shook her head. But after he

insisted, she took a can of soft drink.

Rogers frowned but didn't say anything. The MC waved at him, and he shook his head again.

'I could go out with him', she thought as she surreptitiously glanced at Rogers. 'There's no point in waiting for Adetunji to rescue me, not while he's still Iya Muda's puppet.' She appraised her environment and twisted her lips, she would probably get attached to Rogers and be a leech until he went to something better.

Someone shoved past her and knocked her can of Coke over, but she didn't dodge the tumbling liquid on time, and it touched most part of her skirt. Meanwhile, Sola, the celebrant came over and tapped on her shoulder, she looked up and smiled.

Sola grasped her by the arm before she could make up her mind. "Why didn't you come inside eh? Come with me."

Rogers stood up at the same time as Jacinta. "Sola," he said in a whisper.

Sola was surprised. "Long time no see. Thanks for coming." Smiling too sweetly, she extended her hand just as he was about to hug her and quickly withdrew her hand. She exhaled slowly and waved her hand, "Enjoy." Then tugged Jacinta with her as she made her exit.

Two hours later, Rogers came inside the house with a few friends. Jacinta was trying to untangle a toddler from her body. She wasn't exactly playing with him but was trying to get him to stop chewing her skirt and was now exhausted. He was half asleep, and the girls that were initially ogling Rogers crashed into the sitting room and startled the baby. Jacinta glared at the girls, soothed him until he stopped whimpering.

Sola came back inside the house with four other women.

One came to sit beside Jacinta, nudged her lightly and smiled then got up and gently took the baby from Jacinta and said, "You're the first person he has allowed to carry him. He likes you."

Jacinta removed her headgear and tried to sit up. "I guess."

When the baby was well propped in her arms, she turned and said. "Thank you. I'm Adaeze, his nanny."

Sola gave Jacinta a funny look and gave Rogers a few furtive glances, glances that were anything but innocent.

Oblivious, Rogers came to sit beside Jacinta. "She's right you know, he is picky."

Jacinta frowned at him "How do you know?"

He smiled at her scratching his forehead. "You look beautiful even when you're frowning."

She glared at him.

"He's my son." He retorted confidently.

"Oh," She whispered as the realisation hit her. "Sorry."

"It's okay."

She looked over his head. "Your fans don't like me much."

"I know. You're a better company."

Jacinta smoothed the skirt of her dress, smiling. "You're just saying that."

They looked up when someone blocked the light. "Sir, I'm ready to go."

Rogers nodded and signalled his driver then turned to face Jacinta squarely. "Are you hungry?" he asked getting up.

"I think I am." She said enigmatically and placed her

hand in his as she rose.

The second driver was a few steps out then she whispered in Rogers' ear. He nodded and stood aside while she talked in low tones with Sola and they hugged. Sola looked at Rogers and nodded a greeting; tears rimmed her eyes. Jacinta didn't miss that and wondered what had happened between them that made Sola desperately want to be distanced from him.

It was the following day when she inspected that spot on her skirt that she noticed why the toddler was chewing at her dress – it was where the Coca-Cola had spilled. From then on, anytime she visited Rogers, she would drop some on whatever she was wearing making sure to wear something dark, but with time, she stopped as Victor was now used to her.

She opened her eyes to realise that she was in Adetunji's arms and leaned in.

He held her firmly while he tried to control his erection, but it was too late as she had felt it. "Do you want to go for a swim?" he asked quickly in a croaked voice.

"A swim?"

Adetunji nodded to her left, and she gasped at the size of the swimming pool and grunted.

"What's wrong?"

"What's wrong, is that I don't have a swimsuit."

Adetunji smiled mischievously. "Do you really need one?" he pulled her with him through the kitchen and outside the bi-folding doors. She shielded her eyes, squinting. The garden didn't look bigger, it was. She strode to the chair at one end of the garden while he

pressed a button and a *whoosh* sound followed. She stared in awe as a roof extended over the swimming pool, then walked to the pool and caught sight of a hot tub.

Adetunji went back inside.

She touched the tepid water, smiling she pulled her dress over her head but hesitated nervously halfway through removing her slip. She was about to pull it back down, but Adetunji had slipped his hand under it and hauled it over her head briskly and gently.

Her breath caught as his hand smoothed her skin and shivered as his lips grazed her arm. “Do you still remember how to swim?”

“Mhm...” she was so glad he had whisked her up because she could no longer feel her feet and the pores on her skin opened. *Thank God I’ve waxed my skin.* Suddenly self-conscious, she wrapped her arms around her body and kept her distance.

Adetunji went to her, and she kept moving back until she was cornered. He gazed at her lovingly.

She lowered her eyes and smiled lazily.

Adetunji planted a kiss on her forehead and tilted her head up.

She was torn between walking out of the pool as a woman who was married or test her limits as a woman who’s separated from her husband or stay and be the satisfied adulterous woman. She forgot all of her concerns as soon as his lips touched hers. She closed her eyes and reciprocated hungrily.

I guess there’ll be no swimming today.

Jacinta pulled the duvet over her head when Adetunji

opened the curtains.

“What time is it?” she mumbled.

He pulled the duvet away from her face.

She smiled with eyes still closed but opened them when he caressed her cheek. Then frowned a question.

“I just wanted to see your face in the morning. I never did get the opportunity in Naija.”

She smiled broadly. “Good morning.”

“I ordered a few things I figured you’d need. I hope you don’t mind I had to check the size of your clothes.” He grimaced and cocked his head. “Your bath is prepared for you, take your time.” he cupped her face and kissed her hard. “I’ll get breakfast ready.”

She stretched slowly and smiled as her escapades – past and present - flooded into her mind. She was comfortable and looking over her shoulder, not surprised at feeling no guilt. For the first time in a really long time, she was confident enough to climb out of bed completely naked. She went through the clothes that he bought and gasped when she saw the labels.

She started to feel the familiar warmth of last night’s carousing, and she hurriedly took a cold shower. With a grimace, switched off her phone and tossed it on the bed. Since the tenant was going to be in Amsterdam for some time, she could forget about paying the heating bills for another month. She still had two days anyway.

In no hurry to go back to her house she undid the towel and waltz down the stairs to join Adetunji. Smiling mischievously, she smacked his buttock and posed for him. With a guttural grunt, he turned off the stove and carried her out of the kitchen.

Jacinta grimaced as she unlocked the door to her house. She was exhausted and felt too lazy to climb the stairs, but she was also too sleepy, so she climbed it anyway. Her heart pined for Adetunji who had to go to Scotland for a week which meant that she was going to spend the nights alone, again.

At the landing, she saw Amanda's door half open and overheard moaning. Shaking her head, she stretched her hand to close the door and found Rogers on Amanda, a girl old enough to be his daughter if he'd allowed her to have kids.

Rogers had carelessly given her the opportunity to complete a mission she'd been longing for.

Resting on the doorpost, Jacinta crossed her arms and watched Rogers sidle Amanda. Watching them made her horny, but she would rather take a cold bath than plunge into masturbation again. Besides, there was Adetunji and he was only a week away.

As soon as he came off Amanda, Jacinta applauded him. "A reason, at last, you're leaving this house at first light. Ciao!"

She couldn't help but notice the triumph in Amanda's eyes.

He held his head and sank to the floor and whispered something. Jacinta thought she heard him say, "my love" as he looked up at her with tear-rimmed eyes.

CHAPTER NINE

Aleruchi

Aleruchi woke up sweating – it's been happening since she found out that Jacinta and Nkiru was the same girl that was her best friend in secondary school. She still couldn't understand what she had done to Jacinta, she couldn't possibly be angry with her for not coming back so they could go to the stream together, could she? Jacinta hadn't quite disguised her contempt, and Aleruchi saw it for what it was.

She tossed a few more times and went into another fitful sleep. Startled awake by her alarm, she stalked to the bathroom. Sighing, she made her way back to the room, pulled on her silk robe, and followed the smell of coffee to the kitchen.

Victor didn't look up when he said, "Good morning mum," surprise illuminated his face when he finally did. "You're not coming to church today?"

"I am," she mumbled and gasped on seeing the time. "Oh, my God, I didn't realise I woke up that late." She carried his coffee up to her lips.

"There's no sugar in it o!"

She gulped and shuddered. "Since when?"

Amused, Victor flipped a page in the magazine. "I just decided to try it now."

She nodded her approval and hurried up the stairs, coffee cup in hand.

"Aww!" she shrieked.

"Mum, what happened?" he asked rushing towards the hallway with shoes in one hand.

“They are not coming again o!”

“Let’s go to church then.” He replied, pondering on what she meant as he checked his profile on the mirror in the hallway.

On their way back from church, Victor slowed down to a trudging pace. Aleruchi had been observing her son since she arrived. He didn’t talk about any girl and even when girls ogled and stalked he didn’t notice. She heard that men who were keen on their looks were usually gay. She couldn’t afford that; he was an only child. In the church, there was barely any young girl – except underaged ones or middle-aged widows - the two young girls had a man of the same age as them. Heck, she didn’t even know what middle-aged was until her son mentioned it.

“Son, are you gay?” she blurted her question a little too loud.

“What the hell? Mum!” He stepped back bumping onto the railing of the footbridge, shocked.

“Don’t look at me like that!” she snapped. “You are not active in the church. I don’t see girls visiting you, and you’re oblivious to the ones that show the green light.”

“Greenlight?” he asked, confused.

“Indicate their interest, okay?” she explained dispassionately.

“You’ve only been here a few weeks –”

“Six weeks, that’s over a month.” Aleruchi sighed heavily, twisted her mouth and gestured, “that’s beside the point. You’re not getting any younger. I can’t wait

forever to hold my grandchildren.”

Victor stared at his mother with disdain. “You talk as if marriage is only about children –”

“Why don’t you get Anita to bring her friends over, she seems decent enough to have good friends, after all, birds of the same feather flock together.”

Victor stared at his mother horrified.

“What?” she asked indignantly.

Victor shook his head and briskly walked away from his mother.

“What did I do?” She shouted after him trying to keep up.

Victor came to a halt when he got to his street. His mother dallied when she saw him waiting.

But he wasn’t waiting; he was admiring Misha from a distance as always. She was dunking bin bags into a large bin. He would have loved to help her, but her father was with her. Her father had been acting strangely towards him (since his daughter had turned down Dr. Mackson’s hand in marriage).

The weary man looked menacingly at Victor, and they locked gaze for a few seconds. Misha lingered at the large bins, and her father called her saying something in their dialect. She grumbled and made her way back to the house. Her father looked at Victor disapprovingly with his hands tucked in his pockets.

Anita’s heart was almost in her mouth when she heard the clinking on the porch. She’d been waiting for his mother to go out with her friends and had dozed off.

Now she was ready and waiting. She took another look at the new lingerie and nudged her breast up. Her anticipation was so high, it was hard to breathe properly and harder still as heat rose in her. Filled with excitement she closed the microwave oven and hastened to the kitchen door. Comporting herself, she opened the kitchen door, with a smile brushed the robe aside and posed, ready to greet Victor. As soon as the door opened...

“Son, you best give what I told you a thought!”

Tears rolled down Anita’s eyes as she heard an annoyingly familiar voice. She quickly wrapped her robe around her and cleaned her face.

“Oh, for goodness sake,” Victor muttered under his breath and brushed past Anita into the kitchen.

Anita smiled wryly. “Welcome, Ma!”

“Anita, how are you, my dear? What happened? I didn’t see you in church.”

Anita smoothed her robe. “Fine, Ma. How was Mass?”

“Fine o!”

“Hey, what’s up?” Victor asked as he peered into the fridge.

Torn between anguish and excitement, words refused to come out of her mouth. Finally, she said, “Sorry,” then awkwardly scrubbed her hand through her hair and remembered she had styled it, patted it instead and asked, “How you dey?”

Victor shrugged.

Just as he was about to leave the kitchen, Anita asked, “What would you like for lunch? There’s rice and palm oil stew.” *Just the way you like it.*

“Nothing, but thanks for offering.”

Aleruchi smiled expectantly, "Meat or fish."

"Fish," Anita muttered looking expectantly at Victor.

"I'll have some."

Of course, you will, you witch! "Coming right up," Anita smiled briefly and stalked into the kitchen trying to hold back her tears. Annoyed that the woman had spoilt her chances of making up with Victor, yet again, she kicked her leg in frustration and frustration quickly turned to pain when it came in contact with the cabinet.

As she laid out the table, Aleruchi removed her shoes where she sat and joined Anita at the dining table. Anita feeling like strangling the woman decided a quick exit would be best for her peace of mind.

"There is something I'll like to discuss with you," Aleruchi said pulling out a chair.

Anita clenched her teeth - it was too late to withdraw. Not looking up, she sat down slowly.

"You know my son is still single, yes?" Aleruchi asked frowning into her plate.

Anita nodded, her tongue between her teeth.

"I know you're a good girl." Aleruchi paused to sip water. "And you're beautiful and hardworking. I need your help."

Anita's eyes lit up, and she smiled inwardly.

"I want you to invite your friends, after all, birds of the same feather flock together. I need a good girl like you for my son. What do you think?"

Anita couldn't tell the woman sitting opposite her that she thought she was mad. She cleared her throat and took a sip of water from the glass Aleruchi had just drunk from, exhaled with forced excitement and said, "it's a good idea!"

Aleruchi picked up her cutlery and nodded in agreement. "I thought so."

Anita glared at Aleruchi who was oblivious to her pain.

"I'll let it sink, we can talk about it at a later time."

"Are you going out?" Anita asked, a little too expectantly.

Aleruchi raised her head and a brow, scanning Anita's face, "No."

"It's just that you're postponing –"

"I can't let the sun go to waste. I'll be in the garden with a novel."

"Oh!" Anita sighed into her hand. She needed a new plan of action before Victor's mother could further dampen her chances.

Aleruchi didn't understand her sudden dislike for the girl who always seemed to be in her way these past weeks - it was probably because Anita just happened to drop in when Eduardo shows up.

I just might need her.

Her eyes widened, *now that's an idea.* She got up and unbuttoned her jacket.

The buzzing sound was beginning to get on her nerves, unable to tolerate it any longer, Aleruchi shut the window and sprayed insecticide which did not affect the bee. She sat down, shrieked, covering her ears simultaneously and just then 'Sexual Healing' by Marvin Gaye started playing. She laughed hysterically. *Why do I still use this ringtone?* She stretched her hand to turn it

off but changed her mind.

“Hello!”

“Ruchi,” Princewill’s voice was low and gentle.

Aleruchi’s grip tightened around the phone.

“Ruchi, I miss you.”

She frowned. There was no doubt in her mind that she also missed him. However, she wasn’t going to make it any easy for him.

A few seconds passed.

“Please say something,” Princewill pleaded on the other end.

She threw the phone down, hesitantly picked it up waiting to hear him but heard him sigh deeply and end the call. Her heart thumped in her chest. She sucked noisily causing her chest to hurt and wrapped her hands around and began to rock herself. It had just dawned on her that she was still in love with Princewill.

But how can this be? He has hurt me more times than I can count. I should just walk back into his life like nothing happened? God forbid! I will never forgive him. Besides, he should be grateful that I didn’t ask for a divorce, maybe I should.

Aleruchi jumped at the sound of a clang behind her. She turned abruptly to find Anita bent over a pile of broken plates, irritated she snarled at Anita, “Can you try and -”

“I’m sorry, Ma!” Anita stammered, tucked her hair behind her ear and slowly picked up the larger shards.

Aleruchi’s shoulders slumped. She quickly got up and joined Anita when she heard the girl sniff and sighed. “I’m so sorry. I’ve been on edge and...”

“No problem, Ma. Don’t worry, I’ll vacuum the rest.”

“Okay,” Aleruchi grimaced and left for the safety of her room. The safety of the room wasn’t enough to douse her thoughts. Tears welled in her eyes as the memories she’d avoided for so long flooded back.

“You’ve got what you wanted,” Aleruchi muttered as she fastened her seatbelt and pondered for a second if she had secured her belt on the day of the accident. Two weeks had gone by, but it felt like a few hours ago.

She had watched the whole proceeding, unable to cry and feeling like an outsider. Her day started with the midwife washing her babies.

Her dead babies.

Her stillborn babies.

Babies that were welcome to mother earth without breath in their lungs and now covered in earth’s loamy soil... a few hours earlier the priest baptised the children on her insistence and made sure she received their baptism cards, the birth certificate and death certificate from the clinic.

Princewill wanted to stop her, but the midwife prevented him through it all. The midwife sang lullabies with her as she bathed the babies, then dressed them in white – the clothes they had to send someone to buy, and she wouldn’t let anyone touch them until the clothes arrived four hours later. She planted a kiss on their heads before placing rosaries around their necks – it was the only time she touched them.

Princewill watched his wife, eagerly waiting for a reaction.

She didn’t cry when they were committed to the ground. She just hugged herself. Weeks after they’d arrived from Benin, she woke up to the sound of crying

babies and rushed to the nursery before realising it was her imagination.

It was not until Princewill insisted that Victor starts boarding school because she wasn't taking proper care of him that she decided to seek help. She could still feel the wetness of her pillow and the pain that darted through her chest every night.

She had continued to travel to their gravesite on their birthday until five years ago when the governor of that state decided to move the cemetery.

She wanted them cremated but Princewill would hear of no such thing. But she went behind him and cremated them. He was so angry that he left the house for days. When she returned from her suppliers, she discovered that he'd shattered their urns and thrown away their ashes. His action was worse than his having romantic liaison with another woman.

Aleruchi woke up shivering then bawled uncontrollably. She hadn't even given herself time to mourn or let go of her past hurts, and they were now replaying in her dreams. It was draining. Exhausted, she gingerly stretched.

It was Wednesday; Aleruchi had to get to the hospital with Catherine. She searched for her phone under her pillow. On seeing that she had twenty-five minutes before Catherine was to come to pick her up, she rushed to the bathroom. Stifling a groan when she discovered that there was no hot water; she ran down the stairs to use the kettle and bumped into Eduardo.

She tightly tucked the bathrobe around her body. A little dishevelled, she swayed. Eduardo held her to keep

her steady. As he did, she glanced over his shoulder just as Jacinta opened the door to let someone in. Spotting Princewill, her legs gave way. As she sagged onto the steps, Princewill walk towards her, in his eyes were the mixture of guilt and relief and something she couldn't read. The guilt she felt made her want to explain herself but then her mouth was dry.

Jacinta, who had been lingering scampered towards the kitchen.

Princewill looked at his wife and turned away in pain as he saw his wife in another man's arms.

Eduardo wiped the tears streaming down Aleruchi's eyes and wrapped his arms around her.

Still dazed, she didn't notice Eduardo's arms around her until Princewill turned his back to her. She pushed Eduardo away with so much force she missed a step and fell, just then Catherine walked into the house.

"Ruchi, what the hell? I've been waiting for you *nawh!*" Catherine scolded as she stumbled into the living room. "What's going on in here?" Why aren't you dressed? You should have been ready ages ago." Catherine griped and twisted her wristwatch impatiently. It took a few more seconds for Catherine to realise she had walked into something. "Babe, I'll see you later." She shook her head and turned to leave just as Jacinta was coming out of the kitchen. "Wow, Jacinta, wasn't expecting you here this early!"

Jacinta scratched the nape of her neck making furtive glances as she brushed past Catherine, picked up her bag, slung it. "I have somewhere I've got to be."

Catherine looked at Jacinta confused. "Let me drop you on my -"

“No, I need to walk,” Jacinta said through gritted teeth.

“Hmm.” Catherine shrugged. “Ruchi, later abeg, I don late.”

Aleruchi tried to call out to her friends, but she couldn’t speak. She closed her eyes willing what had just happened to be a dream. Cracking her eyes open denied her that sentiment, so with wobbly legs, she retraced her steps back to her room upstairs.

Squinting to bring her eyes to focus while struggling to hold up the open bottle of wine, Aleruchi climbed out of bed and staggered to the bathroom, brushing away all the bottles in her path. Feeling a lot better, she pulled the curtain open and scrubbed her scalp sore. She started to change the sheet on her bed but only managed to remove the dirty one and sat on the bed, flanking her whirling head with her hands then stared daggers at the door.

“Yes?” she answered, irritated at the sound and its unseen culprit.

“I’m sorry, Ma. But, there’s someone to see you.”

“Who is it?”

“He didn’t give his name, Ma.”

“Please go and ask him his name.”

“I did, but he didn’t give...”

Aleruchi yanked the door open and raised a brow at Anita.

“I’m sorry, I didn’t mean to wake you,” Anita retorted.

Aleruchi sighed deeply, patted Anita on the shoulder and walked briskly down the stairs.

In the kitchen, she hastily ate the crackers she’d

found and it went the wrong way, making her chest tight and painful and then rushed to the drain to take the glass she'd left there the night before but accidentally knocked it down. Frustrated, she put her head into the sink and lapped water.

"Are you alright?" Eduardo asked, leaning on the kitchen door that led to the sitting room.

She stiffened, wiped off her mouth, and raised her head slowly then turned to face him half-smiling. "Hello! What are you doing here?"

He grimaced. "You didn't answer my question."

"Neither have you mine."

"I asked first."

She rolled her eyes and pressed her lips together simultaneously.

"Fine. I came to see you. We need to talk."

"About?" she asked agitatedly.

"Us!"

She let out a long hiss.

"I love you."

She raised her hand to stop him, stretched her feet over the mess she had made and brushed past him on her way out of the kitchen, and bumped into Anita.

"I'm sorry, Ma," Anita said rousing slowly. Holding a few letters in her hand.

Aleruchi appraised Anita, grimaced and plopped on the sofa. Her eyes fell on the list that Catherine, herself and Jacinta had made for their upcoming birthday. She'd only participated because Catherine was back to her chatty self, the self that had been at bay for a long time.

Sighing, she pondered, *what could she possibly want*

to celebrate at fifty-three? Her father was fifty-three when he died. Sniggering with a deep frown, she reminisced.

By some weird hand of fate - Aleruchi on the couch in her son's living room staring morosely at the list they'd created; Jacinta pondering on Catherine's list as she lay in bed deliciously exhausted in the arms of the snoring Adetunji; and Catherine sitting at her bay window facing the garden and cupping the large pills in her palm - thoughts were drawn to the 70s, the time of their youth.

PART 2

(BACK IN THE DAY)

CHAPTER TEN

1978

September

Aleruchi

Aleruchi was a plump girl of fourteen years with large eyes, a slender nose, lips like *Rosie Huntington-Whiteley* and long curly hair that went wiry when wet. At five-feet-six, slender and with normal skin which was abnormal for her family of constantly dehydrated skin - it annoyed her step-mother who ate everything to gain weight but remained thin.

She felt like an African version of Cinderella whose step-mother had *jazzed* her father into being blind to her suffering and made sure no prince would find her not to talk of rescue her. To give her step-sisters more exposure and better opportunities to have boyfriends, her step-mother didn't let her go to school. She filled two hundred-litre drums with water before 6a.m. every day or she wouldn't be allowed to eat. Her father seemed oblivious to her plight so his being around made almost no difference.

The sound of doors opening always filled her with dread, so when her long-lost Aunt Sylvia - the only surviving relative on her mother's side of the family - walked in, she was dizzy with excitement.

Aleruchi was not interested in what her aunt had to say unless it was going to take her out of her present

predicament. The way was made available when Aleruchi's aunt discovered that Amanze, her first boyfriend was principal of St. Francis High School in Kaduna State. Her aunt told her it was going to be hot all the time, and it was a boarding school. Aleruchi didn't care, the fact that it was going to be far from her step-mother and her whiny, lazy step-sisters made it perfect. She also hoped it will give her time and space to grow a spine to confront her father, but she was worried that her step-mother would charm her dad into resistance.

It was an unusual dream-cum-reality because her father agreed with her aunt to move her to the boy's quarters for privacy. Anytime, her step-mother came to the door, she knocked, or she'd barge in, and the door would spring back on her face. Her aunt's appearance brought her dad closer. The consequence of this was beyond what she could bear when her aunt had left for England, and her dad was away so much so she'd pack her things in readiness to run away but by the time she got to the gate she faltered.

Where would I go?

Aleruchi was two years older than her classmates, but to save her the embarrassment, her aunt lied to the principal about her niece's age. At fourteen Aleruchi was supposed to be in senior secondary school but she was fortunate to have features that made her appear much younger than her classmates.

She felt most comfortable with Jacinta, probably because they shared the same bunk or because she wasn't as talkative as Catherine - the girl who stayed in

the bed beside hers.

Salami, the senior prefect, always visited Catherine's bunk when Catherine was away, Aleruchi knew she pilfered but so did Jacinta. She pardoned Jacinta's because the girl never had food.

Besides, Aunt Sylvia had bought and paid for anything she'd need through to graduation. She wasn't one who had time for gossip and was considered a snub because she didn't have a clique, but curiosity caught all her classmates when a surprise birthday was organised for her. It was hard not to cry when she saw the cake. It was the first birthday cake she ever.

Twenty-first of January 1979, my memorable date. Since her father remarried, she didn't want to remember her birthday until now.

Due to this celebration, Aleruchi got three school-mothers the next day. She didn't turn them down because she was scared, they hadn't asked nicely. *Don't speak just listen* – was what she'd known all her life.

Most importantly, Adekemi was labour prefect, and best friends with Haruna plus they'd asked in tandem. Unknown to Aleruchi, they mutually agreed to let her choose one of them, but individually tried to woo her with gifts. While Adekemi and Haruna poached her with what they had taken from junior students, Karen imported her gifts - she was the illegitimate daughter of a feared prince.

Jacinta

Tuesday, the day after a public holiday, looked like the first week of school, even though it was the third term.

With promotion exams fast approaching, teachers remained in the staffroom exchanging malicious stories, while students remained detained in the classrooms; except the classes closest to the staffrooms which were for the final year students and any senior students permitted by them. There was a tight circle of senior students and at the centre of it was the fairest girl in school, Jacinta. She was reading and listening to love letters and scribbling on papers almost simultaneously.

She was much taller than most of her classmates and would have been the prettiest girl in school but for her crooked nose. Still, she was the most sort after student, a blessing and a curse – the boys hassled for companionship, and the girls hassled her for penning.

Her problem started a few weeks after she'd been enrolled as a student; she was bored, and her classmates didn't seem to be in the same level of intellectual vernacular as herself neither was there any books in the school library that she hadn't read. It was one of those really hot days, the kind that turned a fist-sized plump and juicy tomato into something that looked like a parched red leather. As she paced the verandah of her classroom, she caught sight of a piece of paper, dusted it and brought a pencil out of her math-set in her pocket and started scribbling.

Miss Aria, the music and art teacher - so nicknamed because her name was difficult to pronounce – saw Jacinta scrunch the paper. Thinking it was from a boy in the class she waited until the students had gone to get lunch. The scrunched paper had a beautifully written poem that Miss Aria entered in an adult competition where the piece became first runner-up.

Jacinta was first approached by the Senior Prefect who had a boyfriend in the University of Jos - they had agreed to rendezvous at the National Museum during her school's excursion - she wanted four letters and two poems. Jacinta asked if one was for the boyfriend who was also Senior Prefect. The reply left her nursing her left cheek for two whole days.

Jacinta, however, liked it in school, she may not have had the privilege of privacy at home or in school, but she had her own bed.

She didn't have to pick out the stones in *abakiliki* rice, or from white beans, or break the dry shell of melon seed until her fingers were sore. She didn't have to fill the drums everyday only for her brothers to use it all up at one go. She ate food without guilt, no droopy-eyed brothers looking hopefully at her morsel.

She wondered how her younger brothers were coping and wished her mother hadn't given birth to them. They've only known suffering. She was however lucky her father - whoever he was - was wealthy and to ensure her mother didn't squander the money like she had been doing, he paid her fees to the school directly and gave the principal her pocket money at the start of term to be dispensed weekly.

Every Saturday, she'd look at her stipend, hesitate for just over a minute and the image of her brothers' droopy eyes would weaken her resolve. She'd send her stipend through any drivers heading to the east from the lorry park. She was less concerned with her father whom she'd never met. Anytime she ran out of money or food she'd eat Aleruchi's food even though she'd often notice Aleruchi wrinkle her nose in disgust.

Catherine

Catherine sighed ruefully.

Her eyes darted from one corner of the room to another as she tried to hide her face in the brown turtleneck blouse she'd been wearing for the past two days.

This would be the fifth secondary school her father will be getting her into in one term. Her mother didn't come with them this time, and her father had just lost his job, so he had no excuse to use as an escape from his duties as usual. The reason they were now in a school in Kaduna State was to ensure that she didn't run away from school, again.

Everyone spun to the sound of crashing and returned to what he or she was doing without reservation. Catherine raised her brows in surprise because the boy wasn't reprimanded. She figured that she might like the school.

She looked back at the half-open door of the principal's office. Her father was still talking to the principal who was an old friend of his; her cousin was reading a novel and clicking her nails as usual just as the typist was filing her nails and leaning sideways to listen in on the gossip between a heavily pregnant woman in white *hijab* and a woman wearing a blue-green tie-and-dye jumpsuit.

The boy that fell walked funny like one of his legs was longer than the other, a knapsack awkwardly slung across his back, a cookie-biscuit tin in the crook of one arm and the other was stretched out to the ground searching. While he searched, he made a croaking

sound which Catherine found endearing. Catherine was startled by something touching her feet, shaking her feet it jumped onto her purple floral skirt, she hid her face in the back of her hands in a bid to defend herself.

“May I?” she heard a small voice ask.

She uncovered her face slightly to see the boy scratching his buttock and frowned.

He pointed at the frog on her skirt.

She nodded.

He picked it up. “I’m sorry.”

“It’s okay,” she gave him a sardonic smile.

He gently dropped the frog in the biscuit tin, smoothed leaves over it before replacing the lid.

He started walking away and turned to look at her. “Thank you!”

She nodded and smiled as she watched him leave.

He ran back and stood in front of her.

She raised a questioning brow at him.

He fidgeted, saying nothing

She stretched her hand and said, “My name is Catherine.”

“Alfred.” He stammered and turned. She watched him briskly walk away.

A few minutes later, her father asked her to join him and the Principal and ten minutes later, she was led to her hostel by a girl called Aleruchi whose bed was beside hers.

Everyone came to see who had taken over – the girl that used the bed at the start of the term had left the school the week before claiming that a ghost used to haunt her. It was well positioned as well as being the only bed without a tier, but it was closest to the door,

and some other students had said they too had seen the ghost at the head of that bed.

CHAPTER ELEVEN

1979

May

Since there was no electricity in the village, St. Francis High School had a generator which was turned on at seven in the evening to twelve in the morning and then again for two hours between 6 and 8a.m. The wells in the compound had run dry, so the students had to go to the stream to get water, which meant that they had to go in groups and this was easier in the morning; the road to the water flow was thin, hilly, and steeper the closer to the stream it got.

There used to be a rope that the students used to aid their climb. However, local hooligans had cut it, leaving the girls to fend off gravity and carry their buckets and basins on their head, with one hand on the bucket and basins as the other pushed or pulled their members up depending on their distance from the stream, while they climbed the steep road.

The best time to get clean water was at seven-thirty in the morning before the villagers came to do their laundry. Students were torn between going to get theirs early in the morning or waiting until evening because at one end of the second football field was a massive tree, wrinkled with age. It wasn't tall but not low enough to block the view of the path of the people walking underneath.

Its leaves never turned brown no matter how hot or dry the season. Snakes were always falling or hanging down at unusual times during the day, especially when

the sun was hot, also it spewed a pungent smell that lingered around you for hours after you'd gone past it. When students complained about it the principal made it a point of duty to let them know that it was part of the school's legacy in so many words, so students called it *warki-tsofo* (old man's apron).

Any student who wanted to get water would have to tread carefully and peruse the branches closest to them before running across three yards of lush greenery with their buckets held over their head as helmets. The male students were never seen by the stream. No one seemed to know where they got their water from, but they always did and on time too. The Cook never went to get water, she had some boys assisting her until one of them stole from her, and she discharged all of them. Soon after that, every student was required to get a bucket of water.

To ensure you fetched you would bring the bucket to the Cook and she would write your name: *you didn't fetch? No food*. The problem was that she was hardly ever at home. If you met the Cook's daughter, then you would have to pay one kobo.

Jacinta

Jacinta seemed to be the unfortunate creature every time because she had nothing to offer the Cook's daughter, Amina, so she decided to get her water as early as 6a.m. when she knew the woman would start preparing the school's breakfast.

She had to be back on time to meet up with the queue for breakfast, so she decided to fetch water in the

evening and took two buckets – one she borrowed from a classmate. She carried one down the hill and then the other before carrying them in both hands, by the time she got to her room, her palms were red, her hands sore and numb.

Before the cock crowed, she got up to take one bucket to the cook and noticed that the bucket she borrowed was empty and her bucket was missing. She searched until she found a senior student using it to take her bath. She burst into tears, not because it was a bucket she used for drinking water but because she couldn't go to get water anymore; it was almost seven-thirty. The Labour Master didn't tolerate any excuses for being late, and if he flogged you, you couldn't sit down for days which always led to other punishments.

Aleruchi came in just in time. When she was sober and able to explain, Aleruchi asked that they share her water and she could drink from her bucket whenever she wanted. Aleruchi couldn't stop staring at her because she kept sobbing. The following day, they went together to the stream, Aleruchi showed her how to carry two buckets of water on the cane made from a bamboo stalk propped across their backs.

Sunday was unusually calm, the sun wasn't blistering hot as usual, but no one was on the field, the compound was so quiet you could hear the chirping birds. Jacinta shook her head as she could almost hear the wind caressing the leaves. Study groups doubled the week before. The little library was full. There was an unspoken decorousness shared among the students that some students could read on their beds in their

dormitories without distractions.

She had read somewhere that exercise during exam time helped boost brain function, so she convinced her friends, Catherine and Aleruchi. Aleruchi was interested, Catherine could only think of what she was going to give Alfred for his birthday. They did their run around the football field. Feeling sticky Aleruchi suggested that they go to the stream, Catherine declined. Jacinta cajoled Aleruchi into waiting until it was evening.

Evening came, and they set out for the stream. Soon after they passed *warki-tsofo*, Aleruchi realised that she had forgotten to carry the lid of her bucket and insisted on going back to get it. Jacinta didn't like the idea as they were already at the other end of the school.

"I'll wait 'til you get back."

"Why don't you keep going I'll run up to you."

Jacinta looked at the darkening sky and shook her head. "No o, it's already getting dark, maybe I should go back with you!"

"No, no, no, don't worry. I'll meet you, I promise. Besides, it's only the cover of the bucket that I'm going to get, remember what happened the last time."

"Oh yes!" Jacinta chuckled as she remembered the plop which was followed by an investigation – bird poo had dropped into Aleruchi's bucket. She sighed, "I'll go ahead of you, you better hurry and meet me there o!"

"I will," Aleruchi said running back to her room to get the cover.

Aleruchi

While Aleruchi searched for the lid of her bucket, she

heard her name and inclined her ears to find out who was calling her then shrieked with excitement when she spun. It was her aunt. The Senior Prefect that led her aunt lingered while Aleruchi's aunt scooped her up in an embrace – her aunt was a tall woman.

After exchanging pleasantries, Aleruchi said, "Aunty, I have to go and fetch water."

"Don't worry," her aunt said tucking her braids behind her ear.

"But –"

"Don't worry, the principal will send someone to get you water."

"I left my friend near the tree, let me go and tell her..."

Her aunt turned to the student who'd led her to the dormitory. "Ibiwari, can you please check on the girl in question?"

The Senior Prefect nodded, started walking off and turned abruptly. "What's the student's name?"

"Prefect, it's Nkiru Onuorah."

Ibiwari grimaced and went in search of Jacinta, only that she didn't go in search of Jacinta, instead, she went to the boy's dormitory where she was to rendezvous with the new maths teacher. She hated Jacinta ever since Jacinta refused to send her love letters to the right people. The mix-up caused the two boys who happened to be best friends to find out she was sleeping with both; they weren't even in the same school.

Jacinta

Jacinta stopped after a few steps and decided to wait for her friend. No matter how much she shook her legs, the

mosquitoes wouldn't give up. She began to stamp her feet, slapping her legs now-and-then as she waited for Aleruchi near *warki-tsofo*.

Being hungry in exam period is not an option, she thought. She looked back at the school compound unsure of what to do: go back to look for Aleruchi or head to the stream? She looked up at the little white bulb in the sky. Taking a deep breath, she advanced towards the stream as quickly as she could. She couldn't help looking back worried.

The sounds coming from an unusually well-lit building not so far away eased her worry. She concluded that it had something to do with why some senior students were keen on getting an invitation to a party held by the chief's son – none of the students knew that it was the chief's may-guard holding the party. It was too quiet around her, the noise from the party was distant. She wanted to whistle as she walked, but because it was rumoured that whistling attracted ghosts in human form, she decided to hum.

At the edge of the road which introduced the peak of the hill she heard rustling and stopped, slanted her head to listen, hearing nothing she continued humming. She heard it again and shrugged as it came with a cool breeze. Not wanting to take chances especially since she didn't speak the languages of the villagers, she hurriedly fetched her water and climbed up the slope, it felt easy like someone was pulling her up.

As soon as she was up, she knotted the bamboo stalk around the bucket handles. She was about to position the cane through the bucket handles when she heard some girls scream. She looked to see where she could

hide but it was too late, some boys were walking towards her – one had already loosened the rope that held his trousers up. She started walking backwards briskly and bumped into one of them and recoiled. He staggered, and his dagger fell.

She picked up the dagger and threatened to kill herself. She didn't know there were two others behind her, as she raised the dagger with both hands they grabbed her wrist and tugged her firm grip off the knife. She screamed. She screamed so loudly that the other students being raped joined in to scream at the top of their lungs.

Some students who were heading for the stream heard the screams and ran back to alert the school authority.

Catherine

Catherine blinked and stared at the window before comprehending she had dozed off in class.

She looked at her wristwatch. Shaken by her dream about Jacinta, she hurriedly packed her books. She had to see Jacinta, acknowledging that she wasn't close to her, decided to administer Aleruchi's help. The door was locked from the outside. She couldn't move any desk to the window as they were screwed to the ground.

Finally, out through the window, she ran to her dorm room hoping to meet Aleruchi before they left for the stream. When she got there and found out they had just gone, she ran towards *warki tsofo* but didn't cross, peered through it with the moonlight as her guide she became solemn, her dream was coming true, and there was nothing she could do about it.

She scratched her head thinking of what to do next when she heard Aleruchi singing. Aleruchi was close to their dorm room so she started running again towards the dorm room. In the struggle to catch her breath, she leaned over her bed heaving and puffing. When she realised that it was Iyana she frowned.

“Have you seen Ruchi?”

The girl frowned.

She glared at the girl. “Aleruchi!”

“She left with her aunt.” The Duty Prefect muttered changing into her night clothes.

“What of Jacinta?”

They stared at her confused.

“The girl that sleeps on this bed.” Catherine pointed at the bunk bed beside hers.

“Oh! The girl with her aunt talked about leaving her on the other side of the tree.”

“Oh no!” Catherine yelped and started running back to *warki tsofo* but there was no one there. Her dreams came through to reality ninety-nine dot nine percent of the time. She stared at the path for a while still perturbed, not having the courage to go further, she remained rooted to the spot.

She prayed that this time, it would be one percent accurate. She barely completed her thought when she heard students screaming. She couldn't show her eagerness to make it untrue. It was a *déjà vu* moment. The teachers came out in their pyjamas, shirt dresses and dressing gown, one had a facial mask on her face, most of them had a cane in their hand in case it was another exam term prank.

The students were crying and trying to explain, but

their explanation sounded like water splashing on pebbles. Even the duty master's threat of flogging them didn't affect them. So, he took one of them aside and asked what happened, not waiting to tell the other teachers he ran towards the teachers' quarters and returned with his hunting rifle. Some senior students saw this and went to get their cutlasses. The senior students and some male teachers ran past *warki-tsofo* heading for the stream. The female teachers took the girls back to their hostels and dorm rooms.

Catherine's legs gave way as she saw her dream unfold.

The Cook and the principal's wife chased the rest of the students who were unwilling back to their dorm room with the threat of no breakfast the following day.

The hooligans must have heard them coming and had dispersed. They covered the girls as much as they could. The matron was so angry that she suggested they carry the girls to the chief's house. The principal met them there and took the girls to the hospital instead.

CHAPTER TWELVE

1979

June

Jacinta

Jacinta cried.

My mother had told me that the bride-price for virgins was not only high but honourable. How am I going to say to her, 'I'm no longer a virgin'? It is the one thing I wanted to save for marriage. How am I going to explain that I have been tainted? Tainted by a man in the dark; with no face, no name, no colour. She recalled the Head Teacher's advice to her and the other girls to tell no one about it because it was disgraceful, but she wished the Matron hadn't carried her but left her there to bleed to death.

She stiffened when someone touched her.

"It's me." The Matron said softly and sat down beside her setting her first aid kit on the ground before pulling on her gloves. The elderly woman checked the dressing on Jacinta's wrist, propped her with one of the pillows from Catherine's bed. "Nkiru, look at me," she tilted Jacinta's head to face her when she tried to hide her face.

The matron grimaced. "Did you know that my name is also Nkiru? I remember at one time I asked my mother why she gave me the name 'Nkiru.' instead of Ruth, Elizabeth or even Mercy but she said, 'it is common'. My father said it would make it easier to trace my roots."

The matron sighed ruefully. "I don't even know why I said it or why I remembered it. Oh, that same day I met an elderly woman who had gone through a lot of things, I overheard my mother ask her how she managed to stay strong and she said, 'I know the sun will be up tomorrow, so if the sun is up then there'll someday be something to laugh about'. I'm not good at this, but I do know you'll pull through because you are stronger than most girls in this school. Please don't wait too long to let go."

Jacinta continued to cry even though tears were no longer coming out and her eyes were puffy. The matron stroked her back and encouraged her to continue letting it out.

The date was stuck in Jacinta's head: *5th of May 1979*.

Most students felt sorry for her because they thought she was one of the students whose parents were killed in a communal clash a few villages north-east of the school. Some couldn't help joining her in crying which overwhelmed the Matron who didn't have children of her own and didn't know how to handle it.

"Nkiru, how are you?" Catherine asked leaning over her.

Jacinta hissed. She had seen Aleruchi and Catherine earlier in the day huddled together whispering. She believed they were gossiping about her.

Catherine straightened, standing with arms akimbo, "What did I do?"

Jacinta hissed again.

"If I did anything wrong, I'm sorry. I'll come back

when you're in a better mood."

A few minutes later, Aleruchi came in with a few other girls, chattering and giggling. As soon as Jacinta heard them, she covered her head with the bedsheet.

Aleruchi tapped Jacinta lightly, "Nky, are you still sleeping?"

One of the girls asked cheerfully, "Is she still sleeping?"

Aleruchi was about to speak, but Catherine cut in with a stern voice, "Yes, she is!"

Aleruchi shrugged.

Not feeling quite herself, Jacinta wrote her promotion exam in the staff room as the Matron had suggested.

A few days later, Jacinta forgot about the incident. She had a sinking feeling and sometimes felt sad but couldn't understand why. With the exam frenzy, she spent more time with her novels than her textbooks because she couldn't concentrate and worse still, she had become quite forgetful. She decided to give each topic in her textbook an anagram then formed them into a song she had heard before because she kept forgetting what she read.

She started forgetting what she said or heard during a conversation and even forgot to take her bath twice during menstruation which attracted the attention of the Matron. She detested Aleruchi and anyone affiliated to her, though she was polite in their discussions she was no longer intimate. She passed out on two occasions during her exams because she had forgotten to eat.

When her roommates couldn't take her screaming in

the night anymore, a doctor was brought in to sedate her. There were times she would look at her wrists and wonder how she had got the gashes. She pondered, remaining in thoughtless silence for hours.

Jacinta couldn't erase the smudge that prevented her from remembering how she'd spent the 5th of May and why it reminded her that she'd forgotten something. Initially worried that she was one of the victims rumoured about, it was a welcome relief to discover that the girls who'd been assaulted had withdrawn the same week of the incident.

The day of the final exam, Jacinta feeling relieved with her input in the exam hall decided to sleep earlier than everyone else and ran straight to her dorm room; her mother was already waiting for her. She shivered and drew her cardigan across her body; shoulders sagged and ambled towards her.

"Mma, good afternoon."

Her mother looked at her with sombre eyes which she was used to, it was the condescending look behind those eyes that made her skin crawl.

"I've already packed your things." Her mother bent down, unzipped a weekend bag and produced a set of clothes, "Put these on."

Feeling uneasy, she did as she was told.

"Well, let's go."

"Mummy, can I please go and ease myself?"

Her mother gestured nonchalantly.

She briskly walked towards the toilet and veered left when she reached the areas that weren't in her mother's view. She stood near the farm crushing dry leaves and twigs and lingered for a while knowing her mother

would get impatient.

The sound of her mother's voice brought her out of her thoughts. She quickly walked to the shrub nearby, squatted behind it and watched her mother set the suitcase down and hug the Matron and one other staff. She waited until they were close to the staff room before coming out of her hideout and quickly ran to her dorm room.

She looked around to ensure no one was coming then lifted the mattress, producing money wrapped in a cellophane bag, hidden in one of the pockets she had created. She had just tied the bag around her thigh and rolled down her pedal-pusher when her mother strolled in.

"I was calling you to let you know where I was." Her mother grumbled.

"I'm sorry –"

"Let's go."

Aleruchi

Aleruchi was not willing to reconcile with Jacinta after the so-called best friend called her a 'hysterical wannabe'. Catherine had even brought a cake to force them to sit together and eat, but they turned their backs to each other as they ate and used her to communicate. She wanted Jacinta to apologise to her first since she was a year older.

Now, as she stood by the windowsill looking down at Jacinta, she wondered if she was right to force an apology out of her only friend, second only friend. It wasn't her fault that she didn't return to join her. If she wasn't so doggedly self-centred, she would have heard

and understood her reason for not returning. Was it not a privilege to have a prefect sent to fetch her?

She watched Jacinta hide in the shrubs and shook her head. If she had a mother like that, she probably would have hidden, too. She got up, dusted the skirt of her dress, and took a quick stroll toward Jacinta. Then she heard Jacinta being called and grimaced then turned toward the library before Jacinta's mother would notice her. She rested on the window with a book she wasn't reading in her hand and ended up dozing off. She woke up a few minutes later.

Blinking, she looked out and saw Catherine walking toward the football field carrying a picnic basket, and her stomach growled. There was no point on satisfying its growl she had already missed lunch. She rubbed her belly, *you'll have to wait for dinner*, she thought and prayed it wasn't beans.

She turned her attention to where she last saw Jacinta, but her friend was nowhere to be found, and neither was her mother. She scrambled to the hostel, but no one was there. The bedspread on Jacinta's bed was a bit ruffled. Her shoulders fell when she realised that Jacinta had gone.

She was leaving the following day but was too restless to go to bed, so she went to the library to get something to read. She was sure she wasn't going to fall asleep, not with the dread of going back to her father's house. She only hoped her aunt would process her passport quickly so that she could join her abroad.

Suddenly feeling lonely, she began to walk towards the field. Across from her were girls playing *ten-ten*, a game that required clapping and switching feet

simultaneously until someone failed when each of their steps matched. Beside them was a larger group of girls playing hopscotch, followed by boys acting as wheelbarrows. They all seemed happy, jumping and laughing, the exact opposite of how she felt.

Aleruchi looked down at the book in her hand then shielded her eyes with her hand as she scanned the crowd in the hope of seeing Jacinta. She groaned and sat at the edge of the grass. Her inability to read had nothing to do with the noise being made by the other students. Bored she sat down and got up about some minutes later, dusted her skirt and counted her steps. She turned to her left to see Catherine at the other end of the football field. She bent down but stopped in her tracks when she saw Catherine with Alfred, who was their senior. She continued counting her steps but on the opposite side until she got to her bed.

Catherine

“Alfie, can you please listen? It’s not all about frogs, you know!” she started unpacking the picnic basket while Alfred spread the second mat.

“I am,” said Alfred, as he scratched his ear and slapped his calf simultaneously.

“So what is it then?”

“I don’t know, but my body is itching me too much.”

“Are you sure it’s not all those frogs you’re always playing with?”

“No, it’s not!” he snapped.

“Don’t talk to me like that, in short, I’m going!” Catherine knelt and was about to put everything back.

“Please, don’t be angry.”

“Mph!” She closed the lid, put the picnic basket aside, and started rolling up the first mat.

“Ah!” Alfred shouted and withdrew with a jerk.

“What is it this time?” she groaned, rolling up the mat.

Alfred got up and suddenly fell.

With the basket in one hand and the mat on the other, she turned to rebuke him. With eyes wide open, she could neither scream nor talk, she just stared with mouth open. There was something long and slender swaying between his legs.

Alfred yelled.

Some farmers came to find out what the situation was. Most of them approached cautiously, except an old woman, who was bent over, and Amina, who stood beside the old woman curiously. The old woman removed the snake, held it away from herself, set it down, and held the head in place with her foot and cut the head off.

The crowd had increased and made a circle around them. Three people came to help, but no one was willing to suck the venom out of Alfred’s scrotum

Amina quickly knelt in front of him and sucked the venom out with the guidance of the old woman. As soon as she finished the old woman stood over her as she puked and then gave her a foul-smelling broth, to drink. A few minutes after drinking the broth she started grinning and talking incoherently, she was drunk.

The ensuing weeks Amina would go to Alfred’s dormitory with foods, cakes, and soft drinks until Catherine found out and beat her up.

CHAPTER THIRTEEN

1979

August

Jacinta

“Are you alright?” her mother asked.

Jacinta shrugged, frowning.

“What is that?” her mother asked mimicking her.

“You asked if I was alright.”

“Yes, was that an answer?” Her mother grimaced.

“No o! I...” Jacinta murmured.

“Hhm, I hear you. Now, go and pluck vegetable leaves from the backyard because you have to cook plantain porridge.”

“We don’t have any plantains.”

“I know! Use the money that girl paid you.”

“But mummy –”

“Eh-eh, what? Have I not been the one taking care of you all these years? Go and buy the plantain *abeg*.” She hissed and left the house.

Jacinta went into the room to bring the money out of her Sunday shoes, wiped the tears that stung her cheeks and went to buy the plantain. She hadn’t saved any money since she got back home two months ago. If she made any attempt to go to the bank her mother would find out she has an account and all hell would let loose. She just wanted to go back to school, why was it so hard for her mother to understand. She wiped her tears and resolved to go to Kaduna State whether her

mother liked it or not.

The smell of roasted fish wafted through the window of the bedroom she shared with four step-brothers and two step-sisters. She closed her eyes and inhaled it. As her mouth watered she thought of what she would do to raise more money because the holiday would end in two weeks. Sighing, she stepped outside and yelped. It was much hotter than she had thought. She pulled up a cellophane bag she had stuck in a fascia board, and something fell out of it. She bent down to pick the piece of paper.

“Nky!” one of their neighbours, Mma Nosé shouted.

Jacinta froze wondering what her step-brothers had done this time. Holding her breath, she straightened and smiled through gritted teeth waiting for the woman to barrage her with insults again.

Mma Nosé drew closer and looked at Jacinta’s house furtively. “My daughter, are you busy?”

“Somehow -”

“*Ehen*, when you are less busy, come eh, I want to talk to you, eh?”

Jacinta frowned and retorted, “Okay, Ma,” *What have they done now, eh? These people will never go to my mother to complain oh! Every time it’s me, God!* “Em... Why don’t you tell me now?”

“Don’t worry, later, eh! Mmm!”

Jacinta watched Mma Nosé turn back towards her house just as her mother was coming out of the bathroom. Her mother mouthed, “What does she want?” Jacinta shrugged. She didn’t know who was nosier; Mma Nosé or her mother.

She waited until her siblings had taken their bath,

had dinner and were glued to the television watching *Sesame Street* before slipping out of the house to Mma Nosé's.

"Who be dat?" Mma Nosé shouted on top of the squabbling of little children.

"Na me o!" Jacinta whispered not wanting to raise her voice any higher. She knocked again a few seconds later. *Hurry up nawh!*

"Who be *dat*?" the woman shouted again and yanked the door open at the same time. She ushered Jacinta in removing her breast from the baby's mouth at the same time. Jacinta dipped her smallest finger into her ear as the baby let out a shrill sound. The baby was the tiniest she had set her eyes on, but her voice could cause a man to weep. The woman pulled the stool from under her son, placed it beside her and patted it. Jacinta reluctantly went to sit beside the woman as she was desperate to go back before her mother discovered she was absent.

"My senior sister pikin dey marry, so I need pesin wey go help them cook." She paused when she saw Jacinta's contorted face. "She go pay you o!"

Jacinta liked the idea of money and nodded, "Okay, which day?"

"Tomorrow –"

"Tomorrow?"

"Yes nah, you no go fit come?"

"I go come. I have to tell my mother."

"Na everything you dey tell am?" Mma Nosé asked, surprised.

Jacinta gave her a wry smile and got up, "Thank you Ma."

“I go come carry you tomorrow. I no wan’ your mama’s *wahala* so for early momo comot for house, go tanda for Mma Kufré shop. Early momo, like six, abeg no late o.”

“Okay Ma, good night Ma!”

“Good night my daughter.” Mma Nosé murmured.

Jacinta didn’t like the look Mma Nosé was giving her. Although she wasn’t the only person who gave her that look of pity, she still hadn’t gotten used to it. Perhaps she never would.

The following morning, Jacinta left with Mma Nosé, deciding that her mother wouldn’t be on her case if she saw money, it was her mother’s remedy to everything.

It was a fanfare; Jacinta had never seen that many people converge in one place unless it was during harvest and bazaar celebrations. However, she was restricted to the back of the house where the cooking took place not that she minded, it was the money she cared about. Her duty was to sort the firewood and make the fire ensuring that it didn’t go out, simple enough she had learned how at her father’s mother’s house in Ilorin after she ran away because her parents were always fighting and using her as bait. She was ‘too little to understand’ she’d been told.

She wondered if she could run again. She shrugged the idea off immediately – her siblings needed her. Using a big log as a stool, she peeled the bark absentmindedly. A little while later, she started to feel queasy. She thought it was from inhaling the smoke but not moving away because it soothed her she averted her face to protect her eyes.

A fair lady with makeup like a *Barbie doll* came and handed her a large bowl of onion and a knife. She took the basin from the lady just as Mma Nosé appeared.

Mma Nosé grimaced and asked the *Barbie-lady*, “Where are you going?”

The lady quickly took the basin away from Jacinta. “To cut onions Mma, welcome!” the fair lady retorted, curtsied and made a quick exit.

Mma Nosé looked at *Barbie-lady* haughtily and gestured at Jacinta. When the smoke reduced Mma Nosé parted her shoulder and asked. “*Ehen*, my pikin, you don eat?”

“No, Ma,” Jacinta replied while she chucked more firewood into the fire.

“You sey wetin? Na im that thing come give you onions to cut for am abi? Imagine o! Anyway, make I go bring you chop.” Mma Nose adjusted her head-tie and peered at an invisible mirror, satisfied with the result she headed to the building beside the large white tent that housed the guests.

It was a two-storey colonial house, an indication that the bride came from old money. Jacinta was unreliably informed – by one of the bride’s friends – that the bride was an illegitimate daughter of the third wife. Jacinta snickered and shrugged. The lady, getting no contribution from Jacinta went away. Jacinta remained on her stool with her hands under her chin wondering what it would be like to be in the bride’s position.

She didn’t realise that the fire had gone out again until her eyes started hurting from the smoke. She knelt to blow it, pushed out a third of the cinders then pushed in the dry twigs and wood.

A scent mingled with the smoke irritating her bowels. She raised her head up for fresh air and inhaled. The sun felt warm and silky as it stealthily announced its presence.

It must be eight by now, so I've been here for two hours already.

She sat down, straightened her back and threw her head back and inhaled. *Peace and quiet.*

"Good morning."

Startled by the deep husky voice, she spun.

"Good morning," She murmured with a frown. He was the bearer of the unusual scent. The first thing she noticed about him was the way he looked at her, and she didn't like it.

"How are you?" He asked with hands tucked in his pocket as he tried to look demure.

"I'm fine."

"I know you are fine. You're as ripe as tomato, as fair as the sun and your skin looks like the glossy surface of Vaseline. You have very clean big eyes. Do you want to talk?"

On impulse, she tucked the knife she had earlier under her. "No! You can go. I'm busy, and it's too early."

"Too early?"

"Yes." She slanted a look at him and rubbed her neck wondering why he unnerved her.

"It's only eight-o-five."

"So?" she asked curtly.

"Na wa oh!"

Jacinta hissed.

"You don't have to be rude, it's annoying."

Jacinta rolled her eyes, removed the lid of the large

pot of rice, and inclined her ears to listen for any crackling sound, which usually suggested that the rice was cooked. She heard it, covered the pot and pulled out some firewood to reduce the heat just as Mma Nosé, and two other women appeared.

Mma Nosé stood beside Jacinta sizing up the boy standing near them and asked, “E don done?”

Jacinta nodded.

Mma Nosé cleared her throat and tilted her head. The younger woman slanted her head. “Ferguson, what are you doing here? Are you hungry?”

The older woman croaked as she tasted the rice she had just scooped out of the pot.

“Nope!” Ferguson, the boy with the unusual scent murmured.

The older woman collected the salt from the younger woman and asked, “so, what are you doing here?”

“Just wandered here.”

“You missed your way *abi?*” the younger woman asked her eyes condemning while Mma Nosé gave him a condescending look.

“Have I committed any crime? Because it’s beginning to look like I’m being interrogated.”

“You are! She is out of bounds,” Mma Nosé wrinkled her nose and adjusted her wrapper simultaneously. She cleared her throat and pointed at the tent, “The groom’s family has arrived.”

“Eh!?” the younger woman exclaimed and turned around to see people emerging from three buses and heading to the main house. “Oh-oh!”

“What?” the older woman asked.

“I’m not ready nawh!”

“Just go, I’ll take care of things here. Ejiro, please go with her.”

Mma Nosé nodded but hesitated.

“Mama thank you!” the younger woman briskly walked away dragging Mma Nosé. They vied to the side of the back garden to enter the house through the kitchen. The older woman watched them leave and turned to find Jacinta on her knees blowing the fire under a different pot and Ferguson staring at Jacinta’s backside. With tight lips, she heaved, “Ferguson, go and get me my cane. My daughter, you can stop blowing that fire now before the rice gets burnt.”

“Mma, it’s not rice-” she started then realised she was alone. She scanned her surroundings and sighed with relief but not confidently. He looked harmless, but with all the warnings about boys, she’d rather stay away. One could easily get pregnant if a boy touched her, at least that’s what her mother said.

The older woman returned waving a hand fan at her. “You can use this fan, so you don’t hurt your eyes anymore.”

Catherine curtsied as she took it. “Thank you, Ma!”

“What did he want?” The older woman asked in a stern voice.

“Who?” Jacinta asked, looking around and frowned.

“Ferguson.”

“Ferguson? I don’t know any -”

“The boy that was here earlier.” The older woman finished sounding impatient.

Jacinta shrugged. “I don’t know.”

“Hmm, you know when meat is cooked?” she asked, eyeing Jacinta suspiciously.

“Yes, Ma!”

The old woman got up and rubbed her lower back. “Good, I better go make myself useful inside, when it’s cooked come and get me, ask for Mabebe.”

Jacinta nodded.

As soon as the old woman disappeared around the back of the house, Ferguson reappeared.

“She asked about me, didn’t she?”

“Jesus! Dem send you?” Jacinta cried, falling off her makeshift stool.

“What!?”

“Just carry your wahala dey go, abeg!” she spat.

“Did she?”

“Aaaah! Wetin, wetin, wetin?” Jacinta shouted and scratched her head vigorously.

“Easy! You don’t have to go wacko on me.”

Jacinta frowned with her lips twisted to one corner.

“Geez, I’m sorry.”

Jacinta sighed, picked the knife and began to doodle on the ground.

He picked up a battered mudguard and walked towards her slowly. “Hi! So, what’s your name?”

Jacinta kept doodling with the little knife.

“As you already know, my name is Ferguson.”

“Obviously,” she said, irritated. She was hungry and more concerned with transport to get back to school. Her mother didn’t know where she was and was going to be expecting her to get back with food for her brothers. She couldn’t let this boy mess it up for her not when she could kill two birds with one stone.

“I can call you ‘obviously’, if you want.”

She rolled her eyes, stopped doodling to put more

wood into the fire.

"I'll pay you if you show me around this village."

"Why?"

"Do you know how long traditional marriages take?"

Jacinta shrugged and coughed as she gulped the rising smoke.

"A whole day."

You might as well make yourself useful. "How much?"

"N30." He said wearing a mischievous smile. *They always want money*, he thought.

Her eyes bulged. *I have £5 in my account. If I get this money, then I'll have pocket money 'til third term. And still have enough for a new pair of uniform, books and provision.*

"What's in it for you?" she asked with raised brows.

"Company."

"You have the money on you right now?" She asked casually but everything in her rebelled against her impending action; her mother's words about the sanctity of abstinence, the honour of being married off a virgin, but all she could see was herself on the next bus to Kaduna State. She didn't understand why she should be afraid of a frail-looking boy that a strong wind could knock down. He looked harmless, besides he spoke with a foreign tongue.

"Mh-huh." He turned his back to her. When he turned around, he was holding wads of N5 and N10 and a few kobos.

She raised her brow. She suspected that he'd stolen it – these notes were not readily available, and you had to be in opulence to have it. She said nothing else and asked him to leave her to finish her job. For the next

three hours, he lingered, disappearing whenever anybody came.

She didn't need to think because she needed the money, her instinct wasn't going to provide it for her. If he indeed stole the money she would be long gone when he was discovered. The giant cauldrons were brimming with beautiful aromas, from plain white rice to coconut rice, from fried to grilled chicken and soups she didn't know existed. When the cooking was over, it was time to collect her money. She stretched her hand out and he gave her the money he promised before she made her way to the house for her wages.

"Hey! Not that way!" Fergusson exclaimed with outstretched arms.

"I'm coming."

She walked briskly and not looking up she bumped into Mma Nosé.

Mma Nosé held her in place scrutinising her. "Are you alright?"

Jacinta nodded.

Mma Nosé frowned.

"Oh, I was just rushing to tell Mabebe that the last batch is ready."

"Don't worry, I'll take care of it. You can go home now."

"What about..." Jacinta scratched the nape of her neck.

"The money," Mma Nosé chuckled, "I'll give you in the evening when I get back, okay?"

Jacinta nodded and curtsied, "Thank you!"

Mma Nosé opted to see her off to the gate looking furtively around in search of Fergusson. Not seeing him,

she sighed with relief and bade her goodbye.

Jacinta slanted her head and saw Ferguson gesturing. She walked up to him, and they made their way through the village. It was shorter to show him a few places and then head home as quickly as possible. She vied into a footpath that led directly to where she lived, but he showed her another path she hadn't seen before.

They walked for over thirty minutes until they got to a mound by a large tree stump that reminded her of *warkitsofo*. She sat down while Ferguson opened one of the bags he brought with him, and produced *Nasco* wafers, and her stomach rumbled.

Mma Nosé had forgotten to get her food. He offered a cellophane bag to her, and she rummaged through it while he brought out two bottles of fizzy drinks another bag. They ate and drank in silence. She didn't notice when he came to sit beside her. They talked about the wedding and some of the outfits the guests wore.

The breeze caused the tall grasses to make a wheezing sound. She shivered and looked up. The sky was bright blue except for a cloud which concealed the sun.

She chuckled as she remembered being told that you could get pregnant if a man touched you but doing homework for senior students had taught her differently that notwithstanding, she made sure she was at least an inch away from him. She had heard many stories from the senior students that when he touched her lap lightly, she quickly brushed it off.

But Ferguson's touch had a singeing tingle.

She hurriedly drank the fizzy drink he'd brought as she tried to stifle the hunger for his touch. She was uneasy about inviting him to, so to distract herself she began to tell him the folktales she knew. She took a quick sip as her mouth began to feel dry then froze when she felt his hand in her bra as the other moved up her back. As he unbuttoned his trousers, she shuddered and closed her legs instinctively, thinking she had wet herself. Her heartbeat quickened as the tingling feeling from her breast travelled through the rest of her body.

A few minutes later curiosity trumped caution so when he asked her to remove her panties, she did. He spread out his shirt and trousers, and she lay on it. She bit her lip in anticipation; her confidence intrigued her, her curiosity surprised her, the fact that she had no inhibition with what they were about to do baffled her. When a hint of hesitance crawled in her ambition chastised it.

His penetration was quick.

Jacinta blinked and the event at the stream back at St. Francis came flooding back like water overflowing its bank. He had covered her mouth to prevent her screaming, but now his hands were kneading her breast. Nevertheless, she froze as the night of the 5th of May that had been tucked away in the most remote recesses of her mind opened. She watched the vague creature molest her in the moon-lit night while his counterparts pinned her down as they each took turns. She couldn't scream, didn't even remember how to until she snapped out of her mind to see Fergusson on her and let out a piercing sound and pass out.

Afraid of being caught again, Ferguson got off her and ran away leaving his clothes behind.

When she came through, she got up shivering and quickly wore her clothes. Money spilled out of Fergusson's trousers where it lay on the ground, and she took and put it in the pocket she had sewn into her pinafore skirt to hide money from her mother. She heaved a ragged sigh then bent down to pick her slippers. She caught sight of her panties on the ground and started to cry again.

A few minutes later, she puked; her gut was sore, throat dry, body ached, eyes swollen, and her skin still managed to itch after each mosquito bite. The cricket had started chirping, frogs croaked, and the wind whispered through the trees. Hunched, she looked around and started running back home.

When she got to the compound, she took off her slippers and tiptoed to her house. The wood covering the window had shrunk over the years so she could peer into the house. Her mother's back was turned to it. She peered closely and saw her siblings sprawled on the floor, each one fast asleep.

She tried to open the front door. It was locked. She smiled at herself and walked past Mma Nosé's house down to the back. Upon arriving, she pulled a broken bucket towards the window, slipped her hand into the opening and slid the bolt off. As the window opened the bolt fell onto the aluminium bucket. She winced at the shrill sound it made. She waited. Hearing no approaching footstep, she climbed the bucket and over the window then replaced the aluminium bucket gently picking the bolt in the same stance.

After replacing it with a sigh of relief, she turned on tiptoes and swallowed.

Her mother stood akimbo, holding behind her a two by two plank she had gotten from the neighbouring building. She slapped her thigh where a mosquito seemed to have perched then crossed her arms. "Oya start talking."

"Em..."

Her mother let out a mocking laugh, uncrossed her arm and picked the plank from behind her.

"Mma Nosé asked if I could help with cooking at her cousin's house."

"You didn't tell me?"

"I knew we needed the money so I –"

"Where is it? Give it to me right now."

Jacinta produced the money from the side pocket of her skirt and gave it to her, glad that she had already split the money three-ways.

"Is this all of it?"

Jacinta nodded and winced.

"Thank you, my daughter, now we can have food to last us a few weeks."

"But mummy my fees?"

Her mother glared at her. "Do you want us to starve?"

Jacinta shuddered, eyes filled with tears as she shook her head, *what if I hadn't split the money?*

Jacinta was still squatting when her mother found her. She had just finished puking.

"Nkiru, Nkiru, Nkiru, how many times have I called you now."

“Three times,” Jacinta mumbled and raised her face to the sun.

“Who is responsible?”

“Hhm?”

“Turn around and face me.”

“Who is the father of the bastard you’re carrying in there?” her mother asked filled with disgust as she pointed at Jacinta’s stomach.

“I don’t know.”

“What do you mean ‘you don’t know’?”

Jacinta couldn’t say it was Ferguson because it wasn’t. She bit her lower lip to hold back tears as she thought of going back to school where everyone knew that she was a victim. She slanted a look at her mother as her mind reeled with memory and question.

A mother who when told of her daughter’s rape replied, ‘it serves her right’ is all the family she had.

Where do I go? Who do I know?

I’m not as lucky as Catherine or Aleruchi, I’m just one girl who’s her mother’s meal ticket. I’ve been feeling this way for a while now, which means many people are responsible.

How many? How would I know when I passed out?

The school said most of them have been brought to justice.

But what’s the justice in that? Will I get my virginity back? Can I be a reverend sister now? What would happen to me now? I’m not married but with child. Should I get rid of it and go back to the same school?

CHAPTER FOURTEEN

1979

September

Aleruchi

“You stupid girl! Did you not hear the door?” Mrs. Amadi shouted.

Aleruchi curtsied and ran out of the kitchen to the sitting room to answer the door.

“Good morning, how may I help you?”

“I have a parcel for Mrs. Amadi and a few letters for Aleruchi –”

Aleruchi saw the small pile of letters on the parcel and quickly signed for the delivery. Hearing footsteps, she tucked the letters in her camisole and walked in briskly before steadying her breath just in time for her step-mother to see the parcel in her hand.

“Who sent you that parcel? Bring it here!”

“Ma, it’s –”

Mrs. Amadi hushed her as she tugged the parcel off her. She hissed when she realised that it was hers. “You can leave now. Just make sure you finish your sister’s term paper.”

Aleruchi nodded and left the sitting room for her room in the boy’s quarters. She stared at her raggedy room and sighed with relief: the mattress lay on the ground on old cardboard boxes, she’d patched the curtains so many times that it could be mistaken for a quilt. The stool with a broken leg was her table, the mattress her

seat, and her father's old towel her mat.

'Just make sure you finish your sister's term paper! Time will tell! Shebi she'll finish university and go to find work. No wahala! She'll have to prove her degree, bah?'

Aleruchi let out a long hiss and rushed into the bathroom and sat by the window. It had a direct view of the gate. She couldn't risk opening any of the letters while the others were in the house, so she waited. Her step-mother was the first to leave with her driver and the may-guard, followed by her step-sisters, the maid, and then the cook.

Relieved and excited, she went back to her room and made extra-sure she locked the door. As she stretched her feet out onto the mat, a sheet of paper fell onto her leg. She replaced it and began to read her letters starting with the ones in Catherine's handwriting. Catherine had sent her only two letters so far. There was none from Jacinta even though she had already sent twelve letters.

Aleruchi heard a car on the gravel outside and wondered who it could be.

She had no reason to worry since she had done every available chore unless her step-mother wanted to carve more tasks out of stone - not that it would be a surprise. The driver came around the back of the main house shouting her name; she ignored him even after she heard him mention that her father needed to speak with her urgently - though the driver was legally her father's employee he ultimately worked for Mrs. Amadi.

Curious and eager, she snuck into the house through the kitchen soon after the driver left.

“Da-”

Her father hushed and beckoned her into his room. “Ruchi my dearest, I don’t like how I’m feeling. Go to my wardrobe quickly.”

Aleruchi went to the wardrobe, opened it and gave her father a questioning look. Something didn’t feel right about him; his eyes were red and he was sweating even though the air conditioner was on. She shrugged, chucking it to exhaustion.

“Bring me that pilot’s case.” He rasped.

When she came to his side with the flight bag, he gestured, and she knelt. He prayed for her and said, “Take this bag to your uncle. Tell him I said, ‘it’s for you’. He is the only one I can trust right now. Go right away!”

As she got up to leave, he caught her hand.

“I’m sorry I haven’t been a good father.” He pulled her close, kissed her forehead and sighed. “Now go!”

“Daddy, transport?”

He struggled to reach the bedside drawers and failed.

She stretched her hand and took a few one-naira notes.

“Hurry.” He muttered weakly.

She did. Glad that her father was now recognising her and didn’t want to lose the chance to bond with him. She was going to do as he requested, then she would cook him his favourite dish. She was so excited she forgot to ask for her uncle’s address. Perhaps the driver knew her uncle’s house. She ran to the door and stopped as an idea struck her.

Was it tears I saw in his eyes? She wanted to return to him to ask him why he had tears in his eyes but

stopped herself.

She just needed to get a pair of sandals, and she would be on her way. As she was heading for the boys' quarters, she heard the driver call her again. The voice was getting closer to the kitchen, so she hid behind the door, leaning flat on it and held her breath. The driver peered through the window for a few seconds then walked away whistling and calling her. She opened the door, looked around sneakily. As soon as he was out of sight, she briskly tiptoed back to her room.

She heard another car rev as she locked her room door thinking nothing of it until she heard the clack on the concrete driveway. Her step-mother's stilettos.

"The witch is back, and early." Aleruchi moaned. She hurriedly pulled the curtain close, then pulled on her plimsolls. Realising that her step-mother was standing right outside her door, she scowled.

Didn't she just leave the house? This woman will not kill me o! Can't someone have a minute's rest in this house? As she unlocked the door, she lifted the curtain slightly, saw Uncle Fabian and Mrs. Amadi smooching and gasped. She abruptly let go of the curtain and covered her mouth then balled her fists ready to pick a fight for her father. As she was about to open the door, she heard her name. At first, she thought it was in her head.

"Aleruchi!" Mrs. Amadi called out again.

Aleruchi kicked and punched an invisible wall in frustration. She gulped and almost choked then she started hitting her chest to clear her airway. She tripped onto her bed and fell on the letter. Quickly she gathered

them and tucked it under her bed. Remembering her father's bag, she became unsure of the wisdom of letting her step-mother find her with it. She shoved the bag into the wardrobe and joined it when she heard the twist of the doorknob.

Chuckling, Mrs. Amadi opened the door to her step-daughter's room. "Fabian –"

"Don't shout my name *nawh!*" Fabian mumbled sounding irritated.

"Sorry, I didn't know you were right behind me. She's not here o!"

"Even better," he smirked and grabbed Mrs. Amadi.

"Stop it, don't you know she can walk in any minute!"

"Really! You've made her a slave, and she would be somewhere doing your bidding."

"I need to be sure."

"Oh, for goodness sake enough with the excuses."

"We have all the time in the world when this is over, so *relax!* Now, the bottle," she stretched out a palm.

"What bottle?" he asked as he fidgeted with the strings of his *shokoto*.

Mrs. Amadi looked like her eyes were going to fall out as she glared at him. "What do you mean by '*what bottle?*' Didn't I give it to you in the car? Look here, you better not mess this up for me o!"

"Do we have to put it in my niece's bedroom? Why don't we put it in the driver or the may-guard's room or if possible throw it away?" He grumbled.

"Look numbskull, if we don't pin it on someone the police will be on our tail for life. Where did that come from anyway, Remorse? You're feeling remorseful? We

just killed her father and you're here trying to pounce on his wife when he is not even in the grave."

"One hearing you would think we haven't been down this road before. Bernice is still my daughter."

Mrs. Amadi cackled, "A remarkable mistake that still haunts me to this day!"

"Our daughter was never a mistake before you *met* my brother."

"You might as well go to all of the FM stations in Lagos since you can't talk but shout." Mrs Amadi spat.

"There is no one in this house, is there?"

"No, today is the may-guard's day off, the driver is busy, Bernice is at Veronica's and Aleruchi is at Eugene's place washing."

Aleruchi blinked. She had forgotten the laundry. More confident and less afraid she listened to them.

"The driver is busy you said."

"Yes, I hired him a prostitute."

Fabian gave her a querying look.

"He doesn't know she is one. Besides..."

"Besides what?"

She sighed. "Never mind. Let's just get this over with."

While she was engrossed with looking for the best spot to place the vial, he undressed.

"Jesus!" Mrs Amadi exclaimed when she turned to see Fabian undressed and ready for action. "This is not the place nor the time for goodness sake!"

"Whenever is the time? Please undress *jó!*"

"Oh, what the hell," she groaned and quickly undressed. She jumped on hearing the door creak. "What was that?"

Gruffly he mumbled. "Me, locking the door. Come my

baby, come and give it to me.”

She kissed her teeth and giggled.

“Where’s the bottle?” Uncle Fabian asked snuggling Mrs Amadi.

“Taken care of!”

Over an hour later, Aleruchi stumbled out of her hiding place shivering. She had tried not to snuffle, but now she was too tired to cry. Though nauseated her skin crawled, but she didn’t itch. Feeling overwhelmed with information, she waited until she heard both cars leave the compound.

They’d been so engrossed in themselves that they didn’t realise that she was supposed to go to St. Francis that day. She didn’t even remember to tell her father or to get money from him.

She went to the main house. A feeling of dread washed over her as she approached her father’s bedroom, but she had to be sure. The first thing she saw when she entered the room was her father sprawled on the floor, his eyes open. She sniffled and closed her eyes biting her lips.

She gritted her teeth, wiped the tears that blurred her vision and hurried to her room.

Soon after entering her room she opened her largest suitcase emptied it on the ground as the bed had been made filthy by her Uncle Fabian and her step-mother’s profanity. After tucking her father’s bag inside the suitcase, she took provisions from the other bags and used them to line her father’s bag before zipping up the suitcase.

She didn't dare touch her clothes that were on the ground - everything else in the room felt tainted, but she couldn't leave the letters behind. As she cautiously lifted the mattress to get to the letters, she caught sight of a transparent bag with a little bottle in it, remembered what she'd overheard and pondered for a while.

Hurrying back to her father's room, she placed the cellophane bag in her step-mother's vanity case almost forgetting to remove the handkerchief she'd wrapped it in. She thought of her father sprawled on the floor and shivered. She was never going to let Uncle Fabian have the bag even if it would kill her like *Dele Giwa*. Her aunt had always said he was evil, but she didn't know why until now. She only wished her father had known. It was too late now.

She used part of the money she'd gotten from her father at the phone box where she called the police pretending to be a neighbour. She sighed with relief when she found the gate still open, and no one else had returned.

As she paced, impatiently waiting for the police to arrive, her eyes fell on her reflection. Like her aunt, she had no other family. Therefore, she had to be strong and independent just like her aunt and let no one take her for a ride. She straightened, and her stomach rumbled. Then cringed; her bowels were empty, and the ulcer was acting up. She thought of the disapproving look on Lady Grouch's face. She straightened, raised a brow and looked back at her reflection tilting her head the way Lady Grouch would when she wanted to describe herself.

"Aleruchi Getrude Amadi, God knows you'll never

slouch again. Not for anyone! Not for anything!”

There was a stream of loud bangs on the gate. Suspecting it was the police Aleruchi steadied herself and walked briskly towards it. She opened the gate, and someone collided into her.

“My dad’s taking us to school, don’t worry your father approved.” Catherine gushed.

Aleruchi frowned.

“Yesterday. I came yesterday to ask you, but you had gone to the market.”

Aleruchi nodded. They went to her room and returned with three suitcases. Aleruchi lowered her eyes and slanted a look at Catherine’s father as he piled her cases into the booth of his car before heading back inside to ease herself.

In that time, the gate had been thrown open, an ambulance and four police cars were in the compound. She then realised that they were other cars in the compound. Aleruchi stumbled to a halt and appraised the mass of uniformed men. Mrs. Amadi came out of the house holding a handkerchief to bloodshot eyes sniffing with Fabian beside her, “Aleruchi, I have something to tell you...”

Aleruchi stared out of the car at the fleeting trees, she wanted to cry but felt like something was holding her back. Everything in life just seemed to be swishing past her, thinking she would find solace in the letters her aunt had sent but only discovered that her aunt was in jail for drug trafficking even though she’d sworn to

never touching or seeing it.

No one seemed to notice that she was all alone with nothing, well, except her father's suitcase but what was she going to do with his documents with the wolves she had left behind.

Catherine looked at her not wanting to say anything that might seem rash. Three hours into their journey she tapped Aleruchi offering her banana and groundnut, but Aleruchi gently shook her head. Catherine's shoulders fell, she knew Aleruchi well enough to know that she didn't like to be hugged – anytime you tried to hug her she'd cringe; emotional display was not her forte.

Catherine caught her father looking at Ruchi from the side view mirror. She figured he might be thinking of why Ruchi's step-mother insisted that he take Ruchi to school after such sad news. Catherine looked at her friend who seemed unaffected by what had happened, but she knew her well. She didn't like to complain or be a burden.

Catherine shook her head and sighed worried that her non-judgemental friend would explode one day from bottling everything up. She wouldn't be able to tell her about Alfred in this state, and she needed someone to talk to who wasn't her dad.

When they got to school, Catherine's father went ahead of them to inform the school of the turn of events. Aleruchi was given a week off classes, and a guidance counsellor was attached to her, a nurse and the nosy and noisy Deputy Prefect. For fear that she might be suicidal, the nurse was asked to stay by her side night

and day.

When she remembered she would check Aleruchi's temperature, if not she would be reading *Mills and Boons*. On one occasion while she was reading one of such novels, the principal came to their dorm. Aleruchi saw him and the vice principal for administration heading to the entrance via her window and quietly said: "You may want to put that book down now!"

"I beg your pardon!" The nurse exclaimed in shock and surprise. It was the first Aleruchi had said since she arrived at school.

Aleruchi pointed at the window, and that said it all. In a flash, the nurse buttoned up her uniform, slid down the top bunk, read her chart and sat down simultaneously. Fortunately, the principal got side-tracked and turned his back to their dorm before heading back in the direction he came from.

The following week Aleruchi unpacked in readiness for classes the next morning and remembered her father's bag. She wondered if Uncle Fabian was looking for it then made a mental note to empty it as soon as possible. Deciding that it would be best to do so during their lunch break - the dorm room would be empty at the time, and she wanted more than enough time to go through the briefcase and tidy up. At 12:15p.m, she hid in her wardrobe. Soon after that, the duty prefect came to inspect the room and left. Aleruchi emerged from where she hid.

CHAPTER FIFTEEN

1979

October

Catherine

Catherine tried to hide in her wardrobe, unable to fit in, she hid under her bed which was at the corner of the dorm room. She waited until the footsteps had died before crawling out, then wheezily stumbled to the window to further survey her environment and backed into Aleruchi who was trying to unhook her foot from a bag in her wardrobe.

“Ah!?” they both exclaimed.

Catherine quickly retreated to her hiding place.

“Who is that?” Aleruchi asked in a loud whisper as she whipped around like an *okoso*. Seeing no one, she remembered the rumour of a looming ghost and shuddered.

Catherine was holding her chest with one hand, and the other was over her mouth as she struggled to steady her breath. She removed her hand from her mouth and tapped Aleruchi on the foot. Aleruchi jerked back and spun so quickly she felt lightheaded. She saw her textbooks and reprimanded herself for being edgy. Gathering herself, she picked her books and went to her bed.

Catherine couldn't come out from under the bed. She prayed that Aleruchi would come closer because it was difficult to breathe. As soon as Aleruchi walked by her

bed, she wrapped her arms around Aleruchi's left ankle. Aleruchi reacted by slapping them.

"Let go of me!" Aleruchi bellowed, angry and frightened.

"It's me," Catherine whispered.

Aleruchi cautiously looked under the bed. "What are you doing down there?"

"What are you doing in here?"

Aleruchi hissed. "Well, you can come out now. The coast is clear."

"I can't."

"What do you mean by that? Are you not the one that went there in the first place?"

"I said I can't, will you help me or not?"

Aleruchi got up crossed her arms and sighed. With feet apart, she squatted down to lift her side of the bed. She managed to raise it about an inch, but it wasn't enough to let Catherine out.

"Please come out quickly."

"Lift it higher," Catherine groaned.

"Better pull yourself out before I let go," Aleruchi retorted through gritted teeth and lifted it a little higher.

Catherine slipped out just as Aleruchi farted and coughed, covering her nose. "That just entered my mouth."

Aleruchi let the bed go and nursed her palm. "That's the thanks I get *abi*?"

Catherine grinned. "Sorry, thanks!"

"Why are you not in class?"

Catherine sighed and looked down.

Aleruchi shrugged.

"You?" Catherine asked not looking up.

"I just need space and time on my own." Aleruchi thought of telling her friend about the briefcase but didn't feel comfortable enough to discuss it.

"I understand. I don't know what I would have done in your position. How are you all-in-all?"

Aleruchi nodded slowly.

They fell silent for a few minutes.

"My step-mother and uncle killed my dad," Aleruchi blurted.

"Wait, what!?"

"You heard me," Aleruchi muttered sounding irritated.

"I know, I heard you before, it's just... how did you know?"

Tears streamed down Aleruchi's face as she whispered, "I overheard them."

"Oh my god! Do they know that you -"

Aleruchi shook her head.

"I'm so sorry. No wonder she was so nice the day we came to pick you. I don't think she would have let you go if not that my daddy had told yours before we came. It's weird, you know. My dad said they spoke to each other in the morning. The news stunned my dad into silence through the journey. I tell you it's unthinkable to find my dad silent for more than ten minutes not to talk of five hours." Catherine looked at her friend and bit her lip. "I'm sorry 'bout babbling on and on."

Aleruchi touched her friend's arm. "It's okay. I need to hear any sound other than the one in my head."

"I, never mind."

"You know my dad wanted me to give his brother a briefcase."

Catherine glared at her friend. "You didn't?"

Aleruchi stared at her wardrobe.

Catherine followed her gaze, frowned, and raised her brow in realisation. "You brought it to school?"

"Where else would I have kept it?"

"True. Can I?" Catherine asked getting up.

Aleruchi nodded. "The tartan suitcase."

"Nice design, not good quality though and -"

"Don't insult my stuff *abeg*, what's your own *sef*?"

"Nothing except I'm hungry. Wait, I'm coming."

Wasn't going anywhere!

Catherine bent down in front of Ruchi's bed.

"Shift your bum-bum to the other side before you mess into my mouth."

"Ruchi, it's not mess, it's fart."

Aleruchi hissed. "Just move your bum-bum."

Catherine went on her knees and bent down to pull out the bag from a flat suitcase. She made a farting sound.

Aleruchi raised a playful frown. "Oh-oh why *nawh*? Didn't I tell you just now?"

Catherine started laughing.

Aleruchi smiled and joined Catherine to pull the box out. When it was out Catherine produced a key from the pocket of her pyjamas and unlocked it.

Aleruchi's mouth watered as she stared at the open box. There was an assortment of sweets, chocolates, biscuits and canned drinks that she'd never seen.

"Wow!"

"What?" Catherine asked absentmindedly, biting her index finger as she considered which one she wanted.

"Which one should I take?"

“How should I know? Is there a bitter one in there?”

“Of course not,” Catherine smirked and inclined her ear. “Did you hear that?”

“What?” Aleruchi asked in a loud whisper following her gaze.

“Quick, take and lower your head.” Catherine produced three canned drinks, two tins of sardine, half a loaf of bread and packets of wafers.

Aleruchi cringed with embarrassment as her stomach rumbled.

They brought their pillows to the ground, rested their heads as they munched on their makeshift brunch.

“Alfred is so annoying?”

“Who is Alfred?”

“My boyfriend.”

“Oh, is that his name?”

Catherine looked at Aleruchi raising a brow. “Yes, that’s his name.”

“It’s just –”

“Ruchi,” Catherine started, in her tone a warning. “that’s his name.”

“Okay,” she shrugged. Alfred was known in school as Batrachian.

Catherine clasped her hand then rubbed them. “Let’s see the papers your daddy wanted to give his enemy.”

“Oh no, not yet.” *Not with you. On my own.*

“Why not?”

“Well, it’s just that...” Aleruchi seemed to be talking to herself because Catherine had already opened the wardrobe and was half-dragging the suitcase.

“This thing is heavy o.” *I hope this wasted energy was worth it o!*

“Someone seeing you would think you ran from Sokoto to Kaduna.”

“That will be the day,” Catherine said with a chuckle. They stared at the suitcase for a long time.

“Thank you!”

“For what?”

“For never talking about my weight.”

“It’s nothing. I believe when you are ready to lose weight, you will. Besides, talking never really accomplished anything.”

“You just sounded off like Jacinta.”

“I know, wonder what’s keeping her. It’s almost two weeks now.”

“Abi? With the way she likes school. You know she never wrote me back.”

“She did once, but I don’t think she got the first one I sent because she was asking me questions I already wrote answers to in the first one.”

Catherine shook her head not understanding part of what Aleruchi said. “Alright, may I do the honours?”

“No!” Aleruchi threw her weight on the suitcase.

“Look here, if you continue like this you’ll never open it. Don’t forget, it will soon be break time.”

Aleruchi reluctantly got off the suitcase while Catherine crawled away to give her space.

“What do you think the documents will be about? You might need a lawyer. My father said, ‘with documents you always need one’. I can’t wait for you to claim what belongs to you, it’s high time someone put those people where they belong.” Catherine stopped blabbing and stared at Aleruchi waiting for a response.

Aleruchi

Aleruchi looked like she was in a trance.

“Ruchi, what’s with you?” Catherine asked as she crawled to her friend’s side. She too fell into a trance.

“Hey, you guys!” the high melodious voice of Yasmin, the newbie that shared Aleruchi’s bunk bed sounded. Aleruchi dived onto the suitcase just as Catherine was pulling the lid over. Catherine pushed Aleruchi off and closed it before turning to face the girl with her hands behind her fidgeting with the zip.

“What have you been up to?” Yasmin excitedly asked.

Catherine grinned.

Aleruchi glanced up at the girl, got up and pulled the suitcase back into the wardrobe, locked it and then climbed the bunk bed frustrated and disappointed.

Yasmin’s shoulders fell.

Catherine offered her a packet of wafers, but Yasmin shook her head solemnly and sat on her bed.

Catherine climbed her bed and turned to face the wall. Ever since her eyes fell on the company registration certificate, she’d been hoping that Aleruchi could sell her father’s company to her father. That way her father would be able to bring her mother back home. She was lonely. The only person she could confide in was Aleruchi, but the poor girl had so much on her plate. The rest of the documents were her assets, a briefcase full of money.

Aleruchi and Catherine in their different beds tossed and turned for hours for various reasons: Aleruchi noticed a few dated letters in her mother’s handwriting, a recent one by her father. Catherine just wanted her

parents back together.

They eventually fell asleep. Someone poured icy water on them simultaneously.

Aleruchi jolted upright.

Catherine screamed.

Determined to fight the cause of their assault, they scrambled out of bed. As soon as they set eyes on Lady Grouch, they halted. Reverend Sister Claire Roary a.k.a. *Lady Grouch*; her presence knocked the air out of your windpipes and brought the stiff and blistering cold whizz of the wind that tickled the hair behind your ears. She never did her dirty work, not when the senior students were at her beck and call. A student was on the ladder of Aleruchi's bed, and the one that doused Catherine was already behind Sister Claire Roary.

"Both of you, take your books and come with me."

It was during the Harmattan season, and in the northern part of Nigeria, it was very cold. Even colder when walking around soaked in ice water, much worse in the night. As their punishment, they were to read act four Scene three of *Julius Cesare*. Lady Grouch drew a line across the blackboard. One side for each of them to write; 'I'll not miss class again' one hundred times in a clear and concise motion.

At the end of their literary punishment rain began to fall. It hadn't rained in a long time which meant the rainwater was going to itch. No one knew why it was so. The students simply concluded that the first rain washed away the toxins in the air. Aleruchi and Catherine stood by the window and just stared at it drip down the louvres helplessly.

"If I had known I would have carried an umbrella,"

Catherine muttered.

“Really?” Aleruchi mocked and looked behind her to see if Lady Grouch was close. She cleared her throat and shrugged, “I don’t have an umbrella.”

Catherine looked at her skin and grimaced. “Do we risk it?”

“I don’t have black soap o!”

“Neither do I but this rain might not stop today. I want to enjoy my sleep too.”

“Me too o.”

Lady Grouch cleared her throat.

“I think we better run for it,” Catherine whispered.

Aleruchi was already ahead of Catherine and running towards their dorm room.

Catherine stopped running when she saw Alfred head towards her with an umbrella. It was big enough for both of them, but she signalled him to stop. He stretched the umbrella to her so she could take it from him, but she shook her head.

Alfred’s shoulders slumped. He was always doing something wrong. Why was she doing this? She had to teach him a lesson, but what lesson?

“I’m sorry for what I’ve done, whatever it is.”

With a frown on her face, she sized him up and down several times. “You’re forgiven, just don’t do it again.”

He sighed slowly, wishing she would at least tell him what he did wrong. He opened his mouth and closed it as he walked her to her dorm.

He was breathing hard, and she smiled mischievously believing he was afraid. It was hard to avoid the grass, and she knew he was afraid of snakes ever since one tried and successfully swallowed one of his frogs yet she

nudged him towards the grass. When she got to the door of her dorm room, she turned to watch him run to his own. She laughed lightly when she saw the umbrella go into the shape of an up-do. Catherine stood by the window and watched him then smiled.

He doesn't know it yet, but I already know he is my husband.

"When you have finished admiring your reflection you can come so we can go and take our baths." Aleruchi glared at Catherine with arms akimbo, an iron bucket filled with water beside her. When Catherine turned to face her and raised a brow. "What are you grinning at?"

"You," Catherine said lightly and danced around her.

Aleruchi hissed. "Hurry up! Before this sleep disappears!"

Catherine pulled her bathrobe with a thud and a clank; something she hadn't put back had fallen. She had to grope in the dark to find what was making the clanking sound because the moon didn't cast its light near her bed. The senior prefect didn't like her and would punish her if she broke the lights-out rule.

A few students murmured their irritation. Fortunately, it wasn't that late because late-readers lighted candles. She shook her head. Aleruchi was one of those late-readers. Although her father wasn't in support of her using night light to read, she just wasn't interested in studying. She managed to pass her first year in secondary school because she sat beside Jacinta, copying off her.

Jacinta was the only person in class who didn't shield her papers with her hand in the exam hall, and her handwriting was big, clear and concise that she didn't

need to stretch her neck to the length of a giraffe's to see what was written down. She had to paraphrase most of them and leave out some because she wouldn't be able to prove her result had they been the same.

She wished she could put an extra effort since there was no assurance of Jacinta coming back.

She'd rather write to Jacinta. There was no way Jacinta won't be back. The girl loved education the way the Cook's cat loved its milk.

"You are indeed absent," Aleruchi observed as she applied the soap on her sponge.

"Pardon?"

Aleruchi hissed, pausing to lather the sponge.

"What?"

"Never mind."

"Please tell me *nawh*." Catherine pleaded.

Aleruchi gritted her teeth. "I just said, 'never mind'."

"Na wa o!"

"What's that?"

"How many times do I have to say it? Never. Mind."

"That's what I was saying."

"Okay," Catherine started humming.

Aleruchi eyed her suspiciously - Uncle Fabian once had a nervous breakdown, and Catherine was acting the same way. She hurriedly washed off the soap lather, wrapped the towel around her and started heading out.

"Wait for me *nawh*,"

Aleruchi waited, but she stood close to the door in case Catherine, like Uncle Fabian, aimed for her eyes.

Jacinta

Jacinta blinked.

She inhaled deeply and tried to get out of bed. Sleeping properly was beginning to be a problem. “When you want to get up, turn to your side before getting out of bed,” the midwife had said.

She winced and rubbed her stomach when she felt movement in it. Her stomach wasn’t protruding yet, but she felt like she had drunk a lot of water which had refused to pass out, and she could no longer close her legs properly when she sat down.

Her mother was talking with a woman who was weeping profusely. They were speaking in hushed tones. Jacinta frowned and wanted to go closer, but her legs were numb. She looked down and realised she had fallen asleep on the desk. She looked around their bleak house.

Is this what will become of me? If only I discovered it before my mum did. I would have aborted it. I can still do it, after all, I can claim it’s a miscarriage.

“Nkiru, come o!” Her mother called.

What does she want this time? Glad that her mother had not seen the money from Ferguson’s trousers which was now safely in the bank, she proceeded to meet her mother.

“My dear, sit down,” her mother said then tapped the woman beside her.

Oh, that smile! She wants something. Wearing a placid smile, Jacinta sat on the stool opposite her mother.

“Nkiru, do you know Elóhò?”

Jacinta raised an eyebrow as she looked at her

mother, the woman and back at her mother wondering if it was a trick question.

Elóhò shook her head slowly. "I don't think she does."

"Yes o, that's true. You were a baby at the time. How time flies," her mother said getting up, adjusted her wrapper and patted the cushion beside her.

Jacinta took a deep breath and went to sit beside her.

"Do you want to drink something? Yes, you do." Her mother asked quickly and hurried to the window and popped her head out and shouted, "Ebenezer, come here! Ebenezer, come here, right now!"

Jacinta heard light but rapid footsteps.

"Take, buy Fanta, bring my change o!"

This request must be huge! Jacinta exhaled slowly and rubbed her eyes simultaneously then tightened her lips.

Her mother patted her back gently and cleared her throat. "Wait, you hear? Let your brother bring your drink."

Jacinta folded her arms, tucked her legs beside her and tapped on the lintel. She was hungry and couldn't wait for the conversation to be over. She felt awkward when the lady smiled at her.

Her mother harrumped, rubbing her earlobe then said in a very gentle voice, "My dear, I want you to go and stay with this woman, that is until you put to bed."

Jacinta scrutinised her mother feeling sure something was fishy. She crossed and uncrossed her arms trying hard to hold her tongue.

Elóhò's eyes widened just as her mouth hung open but she adjusted her stance correctly after Jacinta's mother winked at her.

"She will take care of you until you give birth and

even pay your fees so that you can complete your studies. What do you think?"

"Why is she helping me, us?"

"My sister," Elóhò started, but Jacinta's mother signalled her to stop.

"Nkiru, I have already decided. Just know that it is for your own good. You know you can't have a child here. Who will take care of it? With what? It's not like I'm working."

Jacinta shook her leg in frustration. *Whose fault is that?*

"I helped her mother, and her mother asked her to help me in any way she can. I've told her this is the only help I'll need." Jacinta's mother lied smoothly. If Jacinta was looking she would have known her mother was lying, she always licked her lips when she did.

Desperate for the discussion to change, Jacinta asked, "How will you cope with the boys?"

"We will manage, just like we did when you were in school."

Indeed. I have some money so I can abort it there. There should be plenty of opportunities to get rid of this thing and head back to school. With my scores, even if I start in second term, I should be able to pass. "So..."

"So nothing, you will go and pack your things and get ready, so you people can at least meet the last bus."

Jacinta got up almost too quickly and calmed down in case her mother suspected her.

She didn't need to pack; her good clothes were already in the bag. She had few and guarded them jealously. She was about to leave the room, then she remembered some footwears Mma Nosé had given her; a

golden-yellow rubber and leather sandal with adjustable straps, a baby-blue clog and a pair of brown lace court shoes.

She heaved the mattress off the spring bed to get to the corner of the bed where she had hidden them, then sighed with relief when she realised that rats had not gotten the best of them.

“Nkiru!” Jacinta’s mother cried out. “What is keeping you?”

On hearing her mother’s voice, she quickly rearranged the room, wore the clogs that her mother gave her three years ago. It was much smaller, and she had to nurse the heel of her feet any day she had them on.

She saw Elóhò exchange something with her mother, but wasn’t interested. She just wanted to be out and ready to look for someone to help her get rid of the pregnancy.

Jacinta’s mother heard the clank of Jacinta’s shoes and quickly yanked the rolled-up money from Elóhò and tied it to the tip of her wrapper. She then passed a piece of paper to Elóhò just as Jacinta said, “I’m ready.”

Her mother gave her a perfunctory hug which was quite awkward for Jacinta as they’d never shared one.

Elóhò looked at Jacinta and shook her head before dabbing her silk handkerchief to the corners of her eyes. She had never conceived much less missed her menstruation yet a little girl who was two years younger than her littlest sister was pregnant.

Elóhò looked out and sighed. She didn’t understand

how God could be so unfair to her. She had for the past seven years gone to see medical doctors then proceeded to native doctors, herbalist, prophets and seers.

There was a time when she had to do a three-mile hike through Idanré town and two-mile hike up the hills on an empty stomach because she was 'supposed to come fasting' to see the seer. She was too dehydrated to enjoy the view. Little wonder she didn't die of heat stroke like a few of her friends did.

Close to the top, she took a break and gasped at the beauty of the undisguised greenery intersecting the grey curves of granite inselbergs of Kajuru-Ludo hills enthralled her. She had only ever known of Zuma rock and never glanced at it whenever she visited her ex-boyfriend, her first love.

She exhaled deeply as she reminisced about him. She wondered why she thought he was handsome; but he was so flighty it was hard to pin him down. With her husband, she was grounded. Perhaps, too grounded. She couldn't help but wonder how her ex-boyfriend was faring and if she'd turn him down if he'd proposed all those years ago.

She reprimanded herself for thinking of her ex-boyfriend.

Jacinta caught Elóhó smiling sheepishly and thought the woman was mad. She sighed, desiring to be optimistic about being with this kind-hearted woman as her mother had stated. However, her mother was a poor judge of character. The driver nodded endlessly yet there was no sound coming out of the car radio. She

had forgotten the novel on the desk back at home. She looked out of the window. The air around her was most repugnant, someone had farted in the car, the cow dung and the fumes from the cars that sped past didn't help, but it was better than the smell in the car, a smell that refused to disperse.

The trees were sparse, the cattle and cows stalled the cars, hawkers seized the opportunity to force their wares through opened windscreens, drivers were cursing as they got stuck trying to manoeuvre the network of cows and cattle. Idle construction workers in their little clusters gave the scene a geometric design of water waves and paisley. It was too mundane a distraction to douse her greatest desire, which at the moment was to get rid of the pregnancy.

She looked down. She was already showing. She just wanted to go back to school where her mind would be centred on her studies and the annoying senior students who would incessantly request for help in writing poems and love letters.

It was already dark when they arrived at Ibadan. She wondered why there were so many people going in and out of the house, perhaps it was because it was a huge house. Although sleepy, she appraised the building that dwarfed her a hundred times. The driver dumped her bag on the ground. She bent down to pick it up and winced.

Nobody seemed to notice; they all seemed to be in a hurry, in a hurry to get out and in a hurry to get in. She had never seen so many species of her kind scantily clad in one place and even more bare than her mother.

She slowly strapped her bag across her body like a crossbody satchel. The entire building and the ones across the room were well-lit, and cars outside zipped back and forth. There was so much to see that made her wonder what daylight would look like.

This woman must be super rich. So why would she use a rickety cab? To hide her wealth? Perhaps she knows how greedy my mother is.

She raised a questioning brow when the Elóhó woman asked the girl behind the counter for her room key and was given a letter as well. They didn't speak to her with respect or awe.

It isn't her house. If it isn't her house, who owns it? What type of house is this? I will not be surprised if they pay to collect their keys. Maybe that is how people live in the city. I can't wait to rent a house where people would pay to keep their keys!

Elóhó nodded her thanks and beckoned to Jacinta.

They entered a small space with a few other people. It then made a sound, and the doors started closing. A little startled, she looked around. Everyone seemed comfortable, relaxed even. She shrugged and moved to one corner behind Elóhó. Then there was a slight tremor, and her heart felt like it would hit the roof. She bent her head, closed her fist tightly beside her and closed her eyes praying. Elóhó had gone out and was waiting for her.

"Nkiru, come out."

She opened her eyes and noticed everyone staring at her. Some frowning, one of them rolled her eyes. Elóhó slanted her head in embarrassment. Jacinta got another glimpse of the woman who'd rolled her eyes, she

couldn't shake off the feeling that she had met a *bad girl*. She was told that it was only *bag girls* that dressed up in skimpy clothes and wore so much make-up that they looked like a geisha. She refused to believe all the girls she saw downstairs were *bad girls*.

"We are going to spend the night here, then tomorrow we'll go and see my mother before we head to my house."

"Okay, where is this place?" Jacinta asked and looked around.

"This is a hotel." Elóhò frowned at her, surprised.

"Hmm. It looks like a house," Jacinta observed. She has been in a lift and has also stayed in a hotel. Maybe her fortune has changed.

Elóhò closed her eyes, shaking her head. She yawned and looked at the time. "Are you hungry?" she asked Jacinta as she picked up the phone to order room service.

They ate in silence.

An hour later, she gave Jacinta the duvet because Jacinta said she wanted to sleep on the floor.

What she didn't know was that Jacinta didn't feel comfortable sleeping on the bed with a stranger whether she owed her mother a favour or not. Jacinta lay awake until the early hours of the morning; she smiled at herself for longing to be bothered by the senior students at Saint Francis High. She tried not to cry as she imagined what was likely to be different.

Catherine must have added a lot of weight by now, comfort food and all. Aleruchi, that wicked girl. After she promised, after she promised to meet me. I didn't need to go, but she wanted us to, now look where it got me. All I

ever wanted to be... hmm. There is no way I can get into the convent now just because of water, no food.

CHAPTER SIXTEEN

1980

February

Catherine & Aleruchi

“Stop it!” Aleruchi cried as she tried to swat the hand that was tapping her with her fly-swatter - made with strings, a handkerchief, and broomsticks.

“Wake up. Ah, it’s ten o’clock,” Catherine griped.

“Get away from me.” Aleruchi wrapped her blanket around her and turned her back to Catherine.

“Oh no, hurry up.”

“Look here, if you make me lose this sleep you won’t like me very much. Go away and come back later.”

“That’s what you said two hours ago.”

Aleruchi pulled her blanket over her head.

Catherine surrendered. “I’ll be back in one hour and no more excuses. Let’s pray the bank isn’t closed by then,” she mumbled.

“Bank?”

Catherine climbed into her bed and turned her back to Aleruchi smiling.

“Cathy, what about the bank?”

Catherine was trying hard not to giggle.

“Please nawh!”

“I thought you wanted to sleep. I’ll wait for another hour.”

Aleruchi tugged at Catherine’s bed sheet. “Okay, I’m sorry.”

"I was only pulling your legs. You know we're going on midterm break next week."

"Obviously," Aleruchi scratched her ear, already out of patience.

"So, I have an idea..."

Just then Yasmin came in and dropped her books on her bed.

Aleruchi rolled her eyes. *Every time!*

"Hungry?" Catherine asked Aleruchi who just stared at her like she'd gone mad. "Yes, you're hungry." Catherine opened her locker and brought out Danish cookies and started heading out of their dorm room. She returned when she didn't see Aleruchi behind. Tugging Aleruchi's dress with one hand as she struggled to hold the cookie tin in the other, stopping only when they got to the verandah.

"I've been thinking about that your daddy's stuff."

"What about it?"

"Relax, just that it's been with us this long. It's high time you parted with it. What I mean is, it's time to put it in the bank."

Aleruchi hesitated. "Do you know how much is in there? The bank will... my step-mother –"

"Let me kill the bird before you cook it, okay?"

"Sorry."

"You know that woman that makes Yasmin's hair."

"Mh-huh."

"She wants to be an actress."

"Okay," Aleruchi started hopping from one foot to the other.

"Am I boring you?" Catherine got up knocking over the contents of the cookie tin.

Aleruchi shook her head still prancing awkwardly.

"You're getting me a new one," Catherine grumbled as she stared sadly at the spilled cookies and raised a brow at Aleruchi. "What is it?"

"Oh-oh." She couldn't hold it in anymore. She ran to the toilet.

"Wow," Catherine covered her mouth. She had never seen Aleruchi run to get anywhere. If it rained, she would walk through it while everyone else ran. She quickly picked up the cookie's and crushed the ones that landed on the sand while muttering 'ten-second rule.' But she lacked the courage to eat it as she stared at the dirty verandah.

Yasmin came out and sat beside her. Catherine sized her up, "are you alright?"

Yasmin nodded, got up, and walked back inside.

Catherine watched her go back to their dorm then spread a large piece of paper on the ground and thought: *There seems to be a weirdness disease spreading around this place.*

"Sorry 'bout that. *Ehen*, you were saying?" Aleruchi asked eagerly as she eyed the football field and started making her way towards it.

"I'm no longer in a talking mood." Catherine retorted as she followed her friend.

"*Na wa o!* Every small thing you get angry."

"Before *nkó!*"

Aleruchi shrugged and looked for a good spot on the grass.

"Ruchi, my mood has nothing to do with you. It's just that a lot of students have been acting weird around me. I don't understand it. Even Yasmin, she just came

here, sat down, and left without saying a word.”

“Okay, that’s odd.”

“That’s what I thought too. Anyway, you’ve revived my mouth. The girl wants to be an actress so we’ll prepare her, but we have just one week to perfect my plan.”

“Wow, thanks for letting me in on *our* plan.” Aleruchi pursed her lips, eyeing her friend.

“What is wrong with you? You seem distracted, is it because of the midterm break? I’ll be here with you *nawh!*”

Aleruchi lay down facing up.

“Okay, if you’re not ready to meet the girl that’s fine. I do hope we can find someone who isn’t intelligent to play the part. I haven’t discussed the plan with her yet. I was made vice president of the drama club not that my best friend would congratulate me or anything. You didn’t come, and I’ve forgiven you.”

Aleruchi’s brows furrowed then she raised her eyebrows tapping her chin in tandem. Crossing her hands, she smiled ruefully; She’d been listening to Catherine, but if she acknowledged her friend’s ingenuity, she would boast about it as long as they remained friends. She would, however, make a few tweaks to the plan, or she could lose everything. She wasn’t expecting money to be inside the flight bag, but that could be all that would secure her future. She had to count the money, every single note before she could make a better plan. The hairdresser would be a good decoy, but she was green-eyed.

Sighing, Catherine mumbled. “I’m sorry, I just can’t shake off the feeling that something is odd, and it has to do with me.”

Aleruchi shrugged.

“I’ll leave you to your brooding then.” Catherine patted her friend. “I have to go and meet Alfred.”

Aleruchi nodded absentmindedly.

The following day, Catherine and Aleruchi discovered why most of their classmates were acting funny around Catherine.

Alfred had boasted about sleeping with her. Catherine, to most of her classmates, was like the egg that was rotten on the inside, hence their reaction towards her. She cried all day, her plans with Aleruchi was put on hold. Catherine blamed herself for nagging him into being normal; he now talked too much and where he had nothing to say he would exaggerate the truth. She didn’t feel like going anywhere, so Aleruchi snuck food into the dorm for her. She desperately needed someone to believe her. She hoped Aleruchi believed her when she said she hadn’t slept with him, but Aleruchi only nodded.

Aleruchi saw the situation as an opportunity to work on the plan on her own, her own way. By disguising herself with makeup, dressing up like adults do and a lot of confidence, like Lady Grouch, always said; ‘confidence takes you places’. She had overheard Miss Aria talk about a current account and listened in when she discussed the advantages. Her final idea was from a movie in which a woman presented a cheque with a forged signature.

Acknowledging Catherine’s keen interest in her father’s company papers, Aleruchi moved the documents to another bag. Four days later, she went to the bank. Once she reached the counter, her confidence

faltered, and she couldn't ask for the manager.

"Good morning," she murmured and cleared her throat.

"Good morning Ma'am. How may we help you this morning?"

"I'd like to open a current account, please."

The lady's smile broadened. "Right this way, Ma'am."

CHAPTER SEVENTEEN

1980

March

Jacinta

The cock crowed again. It seemed to be standing over her because the sound was close. She opened her eyes and yawned; it was still dark. She yawned again, wondering how people managed to sleep on a mat on the bare floor. Her body ached and stretching was difficult. She promised never to complain about the flat-pan mattress back at home.

It's been two days since Elóhò left for Lagos. Hopefully, she would be back with books for her to read. She had studied the textbooks on the box discarded near the old woman's house. She tried praying and fasting to give birth prematurely, so she could write her exams.

The old woman, Jacinta discovered wasn't Elóhò's mother but a woman she hired to house Jacinta until she gave birth.

Elóhò had gone back to the US to inform Maxwell that she was pregnant. She didn't want interference from any member of his or her family, and he suggested she stayed in Nigeria until she was almost due. She agreed because it was convenient for her plan to work.

He came over to visit her, spending weeks on end. She wore her baby bump well and most nights it would shift, and she'd pray he never saw. When she needed him to touch her, she would remember the bump, and cry. She needed to stay married not because she cared much for the man that lay beside her in bed, but she hadn't been independent for years. She had let him talk her out of earning an income when they got married. Her stipend in a month was twice what she received in a year, but she regretted it a few years later.

She was due to head back to the US. Maxwell had even helped her pack. Her plans were beginning to go south and she didn't know how to ditch Maxwell to complete the journey or she would have to explain how she had paid the doctors that had done the scan and that the baby thumping in the monitor wasn't his or hers. The woman had even called her and told her that Jacinta may give birth earlier than the stipulated date. She was supposed to be due in two weeks and she still hadn't come up with an excuse that would keep him away until she got back with the baby.

Luck came knocking at four in the morning the following day, Maxwell's associate asked him to come over to Abuja immediately. He had been able to arrange a meeting between them and the Minister of State for Housing for 8a.m. that morning. Maxwell got up and was ready within minutes.

"Elóhò, wake up," Maxwell called as he gently tapped her.

She'd overheard the discussion and adjusted her baby bump which had been way out of place. Feigning a struggle, she roused and when he tried to help, she

backed away, yawning.

“Good morning.”

“I have to leave for Abuja right away,” he said as he slipped his foot in the second shoe.

“It’s four in the morning,” she retorted, feigning anger.

He tucked in his shirt and adjusted his trousers. “Yes, but you know Lagos traffic *nawh*.”

“But we’re just ten minutes away from the airport.”

He unhooked his jacket from the coat hanger, walked over to her and sat beside her. “Elóhò, today is Friday. I didn’t pre-book a flight to Abuja. Do you know how many people travel to Abuja on a *Friday*?” Maxwell sighed. “I’ll call you as soon as I arrive. You’re a strong woman so hang in there ’til I get back, okay?”

She turned her head away.

He pulled her into his embrace and kissed her head. When he got to the door, he turned. “Should I leave the light on?”

Elóhó shook her head and weakly waved him off.

He blew her a kiss, turned off the light and shut the door.

She scrambled to the window and lifted one side of the curtain to watch him leave. As soon as he was out of sight, she started to dance and jump not bothering about the falling baby bump.

A light flashed and faded. It was not until the groaning sound of the side gate made her look out of the window that she realised someone had come. Unsure, she dove onto the bed, forgetting the bump. She barely tucked herself and the bump beside her underneath the blanket before the light came on. She squinted at the same time with adjusting the difficult bump.

“I forgot my organiser and the documents we’ll need; can you beat that?”

Yes, your timing is impeccable.

He climbed the bed to rub her stomach, but she put her hand in the way, so he kissed her instead and almost ran out.

She didn’t realise she was holding her breath until then. This time she remained in bed until 10 a.m. when he called to inform her that he was in Abuja. As soon as she was ready, she hired a cab and headed for Akuré.

CHAPTER EIGHTEEN

1980

June

Jacinta

The old woman's house was at the edge of the village, anytime she took a stroll into the village — people would come to assist her when she winced, some even carried her wares to the house for her or insisted on fetching her water for her – perks of motherhood.

The baby pushed itself to one side of her body giving her belly a contorted shape, the pain stalled her contemplations, but she didn't mind, it was, after all, the joys of motherhood. She didn't remember when she'd lost the hate and losing the opportunity of being a reverend sister didn't hurt anymore.

Not long, she'd promised. *Not long now before the baby comes*. She could still taste the pungent brew from the broth she was given every morning to reduce the size of the baby. She'd heard stories of the pain but didn't dare to think past the birth of the baby. Her only desire had been to get the baby out of her by any means necessary. Elóhò had kept her promises so far, but she couldn't quite shake off the feeling of dread that kept nagging at her, a constant reminder that something was not right. Chucking it to her usual distrusting self, she ignored it.

There was a time when she would glare at her bloated stomach with disgust. Now, she had grown to glow with pride at what was forming inside her. She didn't care much about the sex of the baby, but she'd very much prefer a boy, a boy she would teach to treat women with respect and his wife as his equal and make sure he'd be nothing like his father, whoever it was. But then again, he may end up a reverend father, such reverence.

She glared at Yimika and then rolled her eyes. Yimika had been brought to assist Jacinta; she mumbled anytime she was to do anything. It annoyed Jacinta so much so that she would make up an errand where there was none or eye the girl wickedly.

One day she was feeling hot and took off her dress and tied a wrapper loosely around her waist: the hut she so hated was cool. Leaning against the wall reminded her of pouring cold water over her head on a very hot day. While she savoured the moment, the old woman came in and saw her massaging her rotund stomach.

"You shouldn't get attached. You're too young to understand but you will one day."

Jacinta frowned at the woman's tone. "But young people get married and love their –"

"But how many are single eh?"

She sighed deeply. *You will not spoil my mood.*

The baby stirred, and she braced herself for what followed only this time nothing did. It usually kicked wildly then moved to one side of her stomach and remained there for hours. Her stomach always had an unusual shape whenever she woke up. Today her stomach was void of contortions, maybe the baby was

fatigued from making her restless through the night. She didn't think she should worry, but then she mentioned it and the woman gave her a vile broth mixed with alcohol to drink.

"Me and my big mouth," she muttered under her breath.

A few hours after it went down her throat, the baby started kicking. It kicked wildly. The shock of the pain caused her to double over, holding onto her stomach then fell back with a thud. She blinked. It was different because she felt like she saw flashes. She shook her head, but it didn't deter the flashes. It stopped.

Relieved, she stretched her hand out to take water but froze when she felt a sharp pain in her stomach. It felt worse than the first one as if someone was piercing her with a knife slowly. She didn't think it was the baby kicking and blamed it on the broth she was given. It stopped a few minutes later.

She went out for her morning exercise and heard hush tones. Not seeing anyone, she assumed it was her imagination, but still returned to her hut get a wrapper around her. Suddenly, she felt like she was dragging a ton of fruits around her waist and couldn't move.

She looked up at her green and brown striped dress on the line and smiled. Her mother had given it to her the first time she saw her period. Unlike her friends, she had started seeing hers since she was ten. *Maybe that was why she fell pregnant*, she thought.

She sat on a small stool singing nursery rhymes then rubbed her belly soothingly to calm the baby in the bid to ease her pain. She smiled briefly as she remembered threatening to starve to death if they didn't get her baby

things. The woman told her that Elóhò had prepared a room for the baby in the city. Jacinta didn't want to hear that, she wanted to see for herself. She frowned when she saw the rest of her clothes on the line, remembering that she'd not done any washing. Rising, she heard those voices again.

"Maybe the wind is carrying it this way," she muttered and made her way to the new pit-latrine that Elóhò had just constructed for the old woman; changed her mind and vied to the kitchen which was closer to the old woman hut. Every building in the compound was new, large and higher than most huts in the village, all Elóhò's 'kind gestures'.

She knew the old woman was out and Yimika had gone to the market for the old woman's friend. This time she heard her name being mentioned and decided to pay attention. Following the sound, she found it was coming from the old woman's room. She kicked off her slippers and looked for an opening to hear them clearly. By the old woman's window, she doubled over in pain and fell to her knees.

"As I was saying..." Elóhò opened the window, peered around not looking down and then shut the window. "What was I saying?"

Jacinta bit her lips as she held onto the lower part of her abdomen, rocking herself until the pain passed.

"You were talking about how we were going to break it to her," her mother said coolly.

My mother is here? What made her come now? What do they want to tell me that would be worse than my rape?

She suddenly felt the urge to pee; the pressure was so

much that she gritted her teeth and clenched her stomach. Instinctively, she closed her legs but peed on herself anyway. The baby writhed violently. The baby seemed inconsolable because no amount of soothing massages worked.

Elóhò sighed. "I say, we tell her, and then I'll pay her off. She's still very –"

The old woman shook her head mournfully. "I told you before, she is attached to that baby, no money will compensate her, nothing will."

"You're to take care of her not to proffer an opinion." Elóhò hissed at the old woman.

"Don't worry about it," Jacinta's mother said then patted the old woman. "Look, you have done your part. I will tell her myself. How has she been?"

Elóhò raised her brow. "Now you ask?"

"She is strong," The old woman said slowly.

"Good. Because I need to be on the next flight to the US before my husband finishes this business of his in Abuja."

"What if he gets back before you do?" The old woman asked.

Elóhò glared at her in disbelief. "That's my business! So, what are we waiting for?"

"I gave her the broth. Let's give it time to work."

Jacinta's hand was over her mouth. *I knew it. Oh, how I've buried myself. All this time, I knew her smile was too nice, way too nice. My own mother, that woman will sell a human being for a pot of rice! O God, please help me! Ew, what do I do nawh, eh? My groin is on fire. I can barely walk much less run.*

She felt the need to go to the toilet and to be on the

safe side, she covered her bum and ran-walked to the pit-latrine. She sighed as she relieved herself. She didn't have time to get toilet paper, so she stood up and tore some plantain leaves and used it to wipe her bum. Her stomach calmed a little.

Jacinta knew she had to think fast when the old woman shouted her name. As the old woman approached, she snuck into the kitchen and hid behind the door. It was always dark, and they never cooked in it. Another pain stilled her thoughts which were now centred on steadying her breathing. What seemed like an hour had passed before she was able to lift herself off the ground and head to the house. Hoping she could make a run for it, she grimly returned to the hut to get the bag that she'd hidden money in.

She'd walked for about a few more seconds before another bout of pain shot through her whole body. She broke her fall with her hand and inadvertently twisted her wrist, but the pain in her groin was of a higher threshold than that of her wrist. She clawed at the ground as she let out a piercing scream, wetting herself simultaneously. They tried to pry her off the ground, but she was as stiff as stockfish until she passed out.

When she came through, she saw the old woman carrying a basin of water; her mother and Elóhò flanked her as they pulled her into the hut that she lived in. The old woman went out and returned with another basin of water. As the old woman prepped her, her mother paced while Elóhò looked on eagerly. Each time she screamed, Elóhò would look away cringing and then look on; her mother would pause and return to her pacing while the old woman continued murmuring something

indistinguishable.

Finally, the old woman spread out a large blue mackintosh and gestured to Elóhò and Jacinta's mother who in turn lifted her so that the old woman could spread the mackintosh underneath her. The woman began to sing as she poured salt into the half-filled basin of hot water beside them then dropped a large pair of scissors and a few strings in it.

Jacinta's chest beat faster and unsure of what they were about to do but ready to fight them, she watched keenly. The old woman knelt between Jacinta's parted legs and signalled the other two women, who in turn held her hands just as the woman clasped her feet with something cold.

When the next contraction came, Jacinta squeezed her mother's hand so hard that her mother yelled. Her mother successfully extricated her hand when the spasm passed. She tried to fight the urge to give birth, but the baby had a mind of its own.

Jacinta cried again. It was not about the pain as much as the betrayal of all the women that seemed to be helping her.

Tears streamed down her face as the old woman cut the umbilical cord; she would never see her child again. The old woman wrapped the baby up, kept it on the bed then quickly knelt in front of her and pulled out the placenta. Jacinta's eyes were on her mother the whole time. Not once, did her mother look her in the face.

"What is it? A boy or a girl?" Jacinta pleaded.

They didn't mention it, but she knew.

The midwife had turned her back to Jacinta so she wouldn't see anything, but in that position, the old

woman was facing a mirror as she cleaned the baby. The woman was about to hand the baby over to Elóhò when Jacinta stretched her hands out.

“Can I please hold the baby? Just this once,” Jacinta pleaded.

Elóhò and Jacinta’s mother shook their heads at the old woman who ignored them and gave Jacinta the baby.

“Nkasiobi,” Jacinta whispered and smiled dreamily as she snuggled the baby letting her tears drop on its face. And then she burrowed her head by the baby’s head and whispered. “Look for me, my child. Ask me why I did what I’m about to do now. Let my tears guide you back to me.”

Her daughter cried out in agreement.

Elóhò rushed to its side, took it away from Jacinta and headed out of the hut.

She stared at her daughter; her focus was on her daughter’s lip which was lined with her granddaughter’s blood. Her daughter’s eyes were distant. She knew she had lost her, for no apology was going to change this day. Unless time was to turn back but that was just wishful thinking.

Her grandchild was a blessing in disguise because she now had a house she could call her own. Nkiru would not understand until she was older. Although it was a small three-bedroom house, it was rent-free. For herself, the rest of the children and Nkiru, if she ever wanted to come back home, which was, also wishful thinking.

Jacinta turned away from everyone and lowered her head for a moment to tuck her baby's earlobe under the pillow.

The old woman nodded at Jacinta and as she gave her another broth, said in Hausa, "I'm proud of you!"

Jacinta gulped, wishing it was poison and dozed off almost immediately.

Her mother left her a note which bore their new address and a flight ticket.

Catherine

Catherine took down notes she felt would help to add points to her report. She hated jotting hastily because she almost always forgot half of what was written because she hadn't formed a unique shorthand, so she carried a camera. She wanted to get a head start writing her report so that she would have enough time to prepare for their test. Tired of her grades being compared to Aleruchi's, but reluctant to make any changes.

She was distracted; her head was still wrapped around Alfred, her mother's new surname and her father's disappearing acts. She preferred thinking about Alfred, but Adebayo (her mother's new surname) was like a dye that was unintentionally tipped into a glass of water.

Adebayo, why ever will she marry a Yoruba man? She knows I don't like Lagos. Does she hate me that much?

In a way, she was glad to be compared with Aleruchi because it spurred her on to do better for herself. She

had managed to scale through her junior WAEC without any re-sit. Competing with her best friend gave her leverage but was tasking, and now she desired to go into politics which still surprised her. She looked at Aleruchi and knew she was already writing her report.

She always means business. Ever since her father died, it was like there was a wall she had to climb to get through to her friend. What should I expect? She doesn't have a boyfriend. Thank God Alfred didn't join us today. He loved current affairs, and he would have been like a bee to flower with Aleruchi.

If only my dad would see me differently. He never looked her in the face when they spoke to each other even if she was right in front of him. She was sure it was because he thought she was a carbon copy of her mother.

Shaking her head, she looked out of the window and sighed ruefully. There were specks of cotton balls in the sky. The sky was the best colour of blue she'd ever seen. She pulled the blind half way to keep the sun away from her eyes and tried to close her eyes just as the intercom announced their approach to Abuja. She fastened her seatbelt and groaned; she hadn't slept properly in days.

She grimaced. Lady Grouch was right. She had to get her act together.

Aleruchi

Aleruchi had never been on an aeroplane before, so she was filled with excitement and trepidation so much so that she forgot her dislike for sightseeing. Lady Grouch always had somewhere for them to visit and then make

their teachers demand a report. This meant they had to carry notepads; their shoulders fell when they realised it was a museum.

Aleruchi's eyes narrowed when a boy stepped on her and walked on. Determined to put him in his place, she went and tapped his shoulder. He turned slightly, slanted his eyes then turned to face her smiling.

"Yes?" He asked, his eyebrows raised.

Aleruchi opened her mouth and stared at him. "Not even a word of apology?"

"Apology? For what?" he asked, amused.

Aleruchi glared at him. "Wha-at?" Her stomach churned, and her heart beat faster. Her legs started shaking. She put her arms behind her as she realised that it had begun to tremble too. Lady Grouch used her wooden ruler to push Aleruchi's chin up and glare at the boy in tandem.

The boy nodded curtly and walked on to join his friends.

Aleruchi watched as he and his friends shook hands, bumped shoulders and giggled.

Lady Grouch looked at Aleruchi and twisted her mouth to one side, frowned and raised one brow at the same time. Her classmates had tried to mimic that expression when the senior students placed a bet for who would win but to no avail.

Catherine nudged Aleruchi. "You like him."

Aleruchi shook her head vigorously, "oh please."

Catherine scoffed. "That's what I used to say about Alfred."

"No, it's not."

"There's nothing wrong with it, you know. Besides,

we're in SS2 and you don't have a boyfriend."

"You still good with Alfred?"

"Nice try, shifting focus will not work o! Did you get his name?"

"No. What's with you and your *boyfriend*?"

Catherine sighed ruefully.

"Oh-oh, that's not good."

"If you ask me any more questions about Alfred I'll go and get that boy's name and tell him you like him."

Aleruchi looked around, not seeing the boy she beamed. "You wouldn't."

"Try me."

"Are you two fighting again?" asked Lady Grouch from the ticket stand.

"Yes, Sister," Catherine answered and then to Aleruchi said. "I warned you, didn't I?"

Aleruchi scoffed.

Catherine shifted to the left side of their group. Aleruchi didn't like being at the back because it was hard to hear anything.

"I'm coming," Catherine whispered and slipped away from the group.

Aleruchi didn't hear her; she was already on her knees looking for her pen which was being kicked around. She finally found it at the edge of Lady Grouch's grey-blue dress and shivered. She picked it up slowly and abruptly got up; her sudden rise caused her head to collide with a student's elbow. She nursed her head, furtively looking for Catherine.

"Make sure you're taking notes," Lady Grouch warned without looking back.

"Yes Sister," the students chorused.

“Sorry,” Catherine told the student and helped her nurse her elbow.

Aleruchi sized her up and whispered, “Where have you been?”

“Did you miss me?” Catherine asked, smiling mischievously.

Aleruchi hissed.

“Yes, you did. Also, this is for you!” Catherine waved a folded piece of paper in front of Aleruchi.

Aleruchi tried to swipe it off her friend’s hand as she asked. “Why are you smiling and waving that thing at me?”

Catherine pretended to throw the piece of paper at her. Winking at Aleruchi, she hid her hand.

Aleruchi chuckled. “What?”

Benedicta, the class prefect who was done nursing her elbow, kicked Aleruchi on the shin while Catherine slipped the paper into her bra.

“Aww!” Aleruchi turned to glare at her attacker but turned to a semi-statue when she saw a rosary swinging in front of her.

Benedicta, in a clenched smile, murmured, “Sorry.”

“What mischief are you up to?” Lady Grouch asked Catherine.

Catherine’s eyes widened, her palms spread out simultaneously and squeaked. “What did I do?”

Lady Grouch nodded suspiciously. “Young lady I want you ahead of this litter.”

Catherine looked around for a litter.

“Catherine Elizabeth Spencer, come with me!”

Catherine lowered her head as she walked behind the reverend sister and said under her breath, “She seems

to be in a bad mood.”

Everyone giggled.

Lady Grouch halted and turned to appraise Catherine who kept a straight face. Benedicta was standing so close to Catherine that Lady Grouch didn't notice her give Benedicta sweets to bridle her tongue.

Aleruchi strapped her seatbelt and thought of the past years since the death of her father.

She had told the hairdresser to go to night school. Now she had gained admission into the University of Jos and increased the money for making hair. Catherine got into a fight with the hairdresser and to get back at her, told the students that the hairdresser used student's hair for *juju*, so she could pass her exams – the hairdresser had to move her business to the market.

Aleruchi smiled. It was two years ago but students, new and old, bought the story. She had once presumed that Catherine had a secret agenda that made her go that far, but over the years she'd come to know how vindictive her best friend could be. She didn't think she would ever forget it, nor did she want to. Aleruchi put her hand over her ear and rubbed them vigorously, one at a time, trying in vain to unplug them when the plane took off. Idaro told her to clear her throat so the feeling would go away. She felt it was unladylike to do so, so she endured until she forgot about it.

While their classmates were talking about their activities or reading novels, Aleruchi had already started her report. She knew that the money in the bank would only last for a short period. Last month the price of

Garri had gone up three times; therefore, their school fees was bound to increase. Catherine's father was wealthy and even though he gave her and his daughter pocket money – of which Catherine always took an extra forty percent from her – it wouldn't last forever. She was desperate to pass the test to get a scholarship or two.

CHAPTER NINETEEN

1980

June

Catherine

Since Alfred joined the football team, a lot had changed and if his school won, he would get the much-needed scholarship to study Medicine. His father threatened to cut off funding if he didn't study business. He hated business studies and never seemed to get the hang of it; there was so much disparity between gross profit, net profit, and gross margin. Meanwhile, he could give answers to any questions in chemistry, biology or physics in his sleep.

There was a time his life was surrounded by flies, frogs, lizards and once or twice a bird which earned him the name Batrachian.

He washed and set his shin-guard aside before examining his worn boots. He smiled when he remembered the day he got them. Catherine had brought him his favourite delicacy - roasted tilapia - but he unwrapped the oil-stained newspapers to discover that they were football boots. He was so excited that he kissed her and then the rest of the term things became awkward between them.

Then last term, while the football competition was in the quarterfinals stage, one of the strikers of the opposing team got injured and Alfred's team's captain was given a red card. Alfred, who was benched the

whole time because the teacher detested him – he corrected the teacher in class - was called to join his mates. He was an excellent striker and in ten minutes, scored two goals even though they were short of a teammate.

He became the teams' new idol to the consternation of the captain. During the finals, there was uncertainty and tension, because both teams wore the same uniform, in one of such confusions, the referee gave his team a yellow card, a red card and awarded the opposing team two free kicks which guaranteed their rival a win.

They had no captain, everyone wanted to make their individual mark. One almost hit the referee in anger. So, during the halftime, Alfred ran to the kiosk a few yards from the school compound, bought all the cellophane bags with yellow and black stripes. As soon as he got back, with the help of his teammates, he tore the bottom and sides of the bags and made them wear it before tying the sides to secure it. They were fortunate to score a goal then a member of the opposing team accidentally dropped the ball in their net giving them the equaliser. Alfred's teammates were used to playing football for hours because of their coach, and this gave them the much-needed leverage for extra-time.

Although they won the cup, they didn't get the scholarship. No one knew why or when the scholarship was scrapped. Alfred was heartbroken. Studying Medicine was his dream. His teammates had all kinds of advice for him, even about his relationship with Catherine - He didn't seem to have a mind of his own and it was beginning to affect his relationship with her,

the person he hoped he would one day make his wife.

There were too many girls, like a moth to the flame, everywhere he went even in the night. His newfound friends were only too eager to take whatever the girls brought him and rarely ever dispersed the ogling entourage. Catherine had come a few times, and before he could make his way to her, she'd be gone. She complained about it and had grown weary of fighting over him. A few days to their last exam paper she broke up with him. He failed and had to retake his maths exam.

That was two years ago. He'd asked Catherine to sleep with him last week because he was called a wimp. "What was the big deal with waiting a few more years when I would still make you my wife?" He'd argued. "It's not like I'm going to cheat on you." So, he tried to seduce her, and she poured her ice-cream on him. She was going away for a day, but it felt like forever as he spent the day looking at the time.

He was concerned that they had started to drift apart and was more worried that if she broke up with him yet again, it would be final.

Aleruchi

It was the last term of the school year, a harmattan season. There was a stormy rainfall weeks before and it left the largest hostel roofless. There were no rooms to accommodate the affected students, so lots of students were made to share their bed with others. Half of the teachers who'd been away were delayed by a communal clash which cut off transportation into the nearby

villages. This gave the boys several leeways as they were stuck in school during the holidays.

They came into the girls' dorm rooms unannounced. Visiting time was negotiated amongst them, but the boys always pretended to have forgotten. It was only when the boys graduated to visiting at night and early in the morning when the girls were likely to be naked that the girls decided to do every *naked business* in the bathroom. This displeased the boys, but they couldn't get into the girls' bathhouse as it was heavily-guarded and the walls were smooth and high.

On one of such occasions, Alfred had come to visit Catherine.

Aleruchi just got back from weaving her hair and was looking for a rubber band to wrap her hair.

Alfred walked in playing with a new necklace, a gift from another student which he'd worn to make Catherine jealous - she still hadn't slept with him.

Aleruchi finally found a rubber band on the ground a few inches from where Alfred stood, bent down to pick it. As she roused her hair got stuck in the eyelet of Alfred's necklace.

Unable to unhook it, he twisted it until the hook and eye were in front of him and Aleruchi's back was turned to him. Catherine came in just as he unhooked it.

Aleruchi sat on Catherine's bed, relieved, nursing her scalp and oblivious to Catherine's entrance or Alfred's discomfort.

Catherine eyed Alfred as she walked towards her bed and glared at her friend a while before shoving her off her bed.

Aleruchi who was nursing her scalp switched to

nursing her bum and knees. She glared at her friend, feeling that Catherine was in one of her moods, she walked round to her side of the bed and sat down.

Catherine pushed her away and poured water on the full length of her side of the bed.

Aleruchi watched Catherine wide-eyed with mouth gaping open, she blinked and pinched herself twice to ensure she wasn't dreaming. Her knees became weak, so she sat on the bed and jumped up from the wet coldness. The other students within their bunk space hadn't gone off for the weekend as it was too close to end of the term, she couldn't hijack any bed. Aleruchi had to sleep on the cold concrete floor. Her blanket wasn't warm enough to protect her from the cold floor and the draught that came in through the broken window. She cried herself to sleep and made a solemn promise never to share anything with Catherine.

Two weeks later, while they were reading in the classroom, Aleruchi glanced at Catherine and shrugged. She may not have fully forgiven her, but they were still friends. Deciding that she would give Catherine time to come around on her own, she looked out sighing as she remembered Jacinta and wondered if she had gotten to the school that she had always dreamed of.

In a year, she would be through with secondary school and in university. She had learned that getting into the University of Cambridge was more difficult than she had imagined. Her chances of getting in were slim, but she was determined all the same. She also suspected Catherine was interested in the scholarship exam even though they both knew she didn't need one.

The following day, Catherine passed an English textbook with a bookmark to her.

Thinking it was an apology Aleruchi gingerly opened the bulging page then unscrolled the piece of paper and grimaced. She sighed and slanted a look at Catherine who looked back with the same indignation and curiosity of a snake seeing its reflection for the first time. Aleruchi raised a confused brow as Catherine continued to gesture.

Catherine shook her head, poking the air with her finger. She sighed, tore a page from her jotter and waved it to her in one hand and the other pointing at the textbook.

“Yes Catherine, please explain the purpose of the white flag,” Mrs. Irene Irving, a substitute teacher, asked.

Aleruchi saw a boy’s name at the top of the paper in the textbook that was passed to her. The teacher’s voice startled her into closing the book, thereby sustaining a paper cut.

Catherine looked down.

“Get up!” Mrs. Irene snarled.

Catherine got up slowly.

Aleruchi quickly slipped the paper out of the textbook, folded it quickly, and tucked her hands under her desk to push it into her bike pushers.

“Please tell the class what I said.”

Catherine gritted her teeth.

“Come here.” Mrs. Irene Irving murmured rubbing her forehead with the back of her hand as she waited for Catherine to come out. She wanted to use Catherine to set an example but softened when her eyes fell on

Catherine's trembling arms. Another student was giggling and became the unfortunate example because her head was covered in chalk dust.

"Go back to your seat."

"Yes, Ma." Catherine rushed back to her seat and sighed with relief.

As soon as Catherine was seated, Mrs. Irene struck the large desk in front of the class with a ruler to get the full classes attention. "Today, we are going to have an interactive class. First, we'll study *She Stoops To Conquer* –" she looked at the door to find out who had interrupted her.

The vice principal didn't wait to be invited in as was customary, but the students were already standing. They chorused, "Good morning Sir!"

"Good morning class. Aleruchi Amadi, come with me."

Aleruchi's heart jumped when she heard her name. She got up, dragging her unwilling legs. When she saw a few policemen at the principal's office, she began to tremble. On the chair by her right sat a colossal policeman with a mane of grey and black hair. His breathing was ragged, and he talked fast but stopped when the principal nodded in her direction. He cleared his throat and pointed to the chair beside him.

Aleruchi shook her head vigorously.

"Miss Amadi," the principal started sternly, reclined and added calmly, "please sit down. You're not in trouble."

She sat down lowering her head, her hands clasped tightly between her thighs as she waited to find out what trouble she could be in.

The principal nodded to the policeman that sat beside

her who then waved at the ones standing around. As soon as they left the room, he cleared his throat.

The colossal policeman slanted his head to face her. "Child, I've come with good news and bad news." He waited for her reaction and then looked at the principal who nodded. "The case of your father's death had been dragged out for long enough. The good news is that it has finally come to an end. The bad news is..." the policeman cleared his throat. "Your mother and uncle have been convicted of murder and manslaughter respectively. Your uncle will be out in ten years, but your mother, she will be serving... she would be there a long time."

Aleruchi slumped on the chair then remembering the school rules she straightened her back.

"It's okay, sir. We'll take it from here," The principal said, nodding.

The policeman let out a sigh of relief, and immediately got up and left the room, causing the warm air of the hall to rush in behind him.

Catherine ran to Aleruchi. "What happened?"

Aleruchi shook her head.

"Don't give me that o! See your dress, did he hurt you?"

"No. Oh, the blood?" She pointed the finger at Catherine. "It's from this finger, and it's your fault."

"How's a wound on your finger my fault?"

Aleruchi glared at her.

The bell announcing the break period sounded, and they headed to the school's dining hall.

A short while after they had finished with class activities Aleruchi decided to write a letter to Eduardo. She was desperate to talk to someone, anyone who wouldn't probe her state of mind. Not sure of what to write, she chose to ask questions about his school.

The following day, she berated Catherine who reluctantly agreed to go with her to town. By the time they got back to their room, there was a letter on Aleruchi's bed. Eduardo had sent her a message. He wanted her to meet him at a club called *Chaos*, but she had never heard of it.

Catherine did some research and found out where Club Chaos was. Since she was supposed to meet him at 10p.m., it was going to be impossible to leave the school premises. Catherine was against it and told her to write to him telling him to fix a time when the sun was still up. Aleruchi refused, arguing that he would think she was yellow-bellied.

The day finally came, Aleruchi loosened her hair and combed it out to a giant afro with the help of her bunkmate, Rahab who frequented the club.

She wore a tight neon dress with a fringed hem and a pair of matching platform sandals while Rahab wore a sequined mini dress with similar shoes in white. They carried a few old wrappers to spread over the fence.

At the fence, Rahab set the wrappers, climbed over the fence and waited for Aleruchi. Aleruchi started her climb then the heel of one of her shoes got stuck in a hole in the fence. She shook her foot vigorously, a pain shot through her leg and she let go, falling full length to the ground.

"What's keeping you?" Rahab asked in a loud

whisper. Not hearing anything, she climbed up the fence to see Aleruchi sitting on the ground moaning and let out a long hiss. She climbed back into the school compound, annoyed because she couldn't go out anymore. Rahab touched the place Aleruchi placed her hand, and Aleruchi winced.

Angrily, Rahab ran back to their dorm. When she got there, she tried to wake Catherine unsuccessfully. Unsure of what to do and not wanting her route of escape from school life to be discovered, she ran to her bed, tugged a suitcase out from under her bed and changed quickly into her nightgown. Then she took her wrapper from under her pillow and a knapsack and headed back to where she left Aleruchi.

Meanwhile, Aleruchi thought she had been abandoned and started dragging herself. She propped herself on a log of wood and rested. Rahab returned and stuffed the old wrappers in the knapsack and then helped her up.

As soon as they got into their dorm, Aleruchi tossed her set of keys to Rahab who in turn unlocked Aleruchi's wardrobe and flung a pyjama at her. Tired of watching Aleruchi struggle to pull up her pyjama-bottom, Rahab mumbled and forcefully pulled Aleruchi's pyjamas bottoms up and cussed.

Aleruchi groaned. There were few scratches on her shin, the ankle was now swollen. Soon after, they tidied up their bed and threw on their dressing gowns. Aleruchi hopped on one leg to the door.

Rahab was already in bed.

Aleruchi beckoned Rahab and whispered into Rahab's ear.

Rahab grudgingly nodded in reply.

Aleruchi placed her hand on Rahab's shoulder, and together they threw the door open with a bang just as Aleruchi started moaning. Some students who were woken by the loud bang went to wake the hall prefect, Ibironké.

"What happened?" Ibironké asked, trying to keep her eyes closed while she stood at the edge of Catherine's bed.

Aleruchi hadn't thought of an answer yet, so she continued to moan.

"Both of you, go and get the nurse," Ibironké yawned at two other students who were woken by the commotion.

The hall prefect watched the two girls leave, she hushed the other girls and sent them to bed then turned to face Rahab. "What happened?"

"I don't know o!"

"You don't know, *abi*? Are you not the one she was leaning on?"

"Yes but –"

"Start talking before I get my cane."

"Senior, I'm telling the truth," Rahab fell to her knees. "I just saw her at the door when I went to ease myself."

"So, you let her stand there until you got back?"

"No Senior, it was when I got back –"

"Which one is it? When you went or when you got back?"

"I went and came back and saw her there, leaning on the door crying so I rushed her in."

"Good Samaritan, you rushed to help her so much so that the whole room is awake."

“Ronké,” the nurse called as she set her kit down.

“Yes, Miss.” Ibironké murmured.

“You may go now.”

Ibironké nodded, eyed Aleruchi and darted a warning finger at Rahab who was making uncomfortable furtive glances to the door. Lady Grouch walked in, passing Rahab by the doorway. She had seen the nurse and followed her. Most of the students who were up quickly laid down when they saw Lady Grouch. Rahab watched the nurse treat Aleruchi’s feet, with trembling hands hidden in the dressing gown she retreated slowly to the exit.

While everyone’s focus was still on Aleruchi, Rahab withdrew and went back to the fence, pulled a scarf out of her pocket, used it to wrap a stone and toss the stone over the fence. Right then she heard muffled voices and slamming of a car door. She ran back to her dorm. On hearing the car engine rev, she waited until the sound faded before going in.

Ibironké, the hall prefect blocked her path. “This has you written on it. If this happens again, you’ll go to another hall.”

Rahab feigned fear, and after she walked past Ibironké she turned around and stuck out her tongue.

Ibironké stopped abruptly and turned around. “What are you waiting for?”

Rahab scampered ahead of her.

Lady Grouch was back an hour later; she checked the beds one after the other and noted the ones that were unoccupied as she had done in the other hostels the past hour. Both girls were glad they didn’t go to Club Chaos because there’ll be more chaos for the girls who

weren't in their beds at light out. Lady Grouch was back two weeks earlier than she was supposed to be. One of the girls that were absent was Aisha. Lady Grouch was only too glad to have the girl as her victim because Aisha's father was an obnoxiously self-righteous man.

The following morning, the students who weren't in their dorm rooms at lights-out were suspended and three were expelled.

Lady Grouch discovered that the girls who were absent from their beds were due to the roofless dorm which gave an uncensored right to boys sharing dormitories with the girls. That same morning, to get Lady Grouch out of his office the principal ordered the repair of the roof.

The boys didn't like it. It was the only place they could leap over the fence without being detected. It was also a short distance from where they could purchase *burukutu* - a locally brewed gin made from fermented corn.

CHAPTER TWENTY

1981

February

Aleruchi

Catherine always giggled whenever she read Alfred's letters, but this time she was sullen. Aleruchi hated to find Catherine in this mood, especially when she decided to explain why or how she felt it was like words were going to get scarce any minute. This time, she didn't say anything, surprising Aleruchi who continued flipping through the pages she was reading on digestive organs.

"I think I'll do it," Catherine muttered.

"Do what?" Aleruchi asked, not looking up.

"Never mind." She frowned and looked over Aleruchi's shoulder. "How does she expect us to draw this as an assignment? Me, I can't do it o!"

"Okay." Aleruchi rolled her eyes, lifted her book, and moved to the next desk.

Catherine followed her. "Are you seriously considering doing it?"

Aleruchi hunched over the textbook with a sheet of tracing paper on the textbook. "No, of course not."

Catherine threw her pen down and stalked out of the room.

Aleruchi took a deep breath and exhaled slowly, *not this time*. She had more than enough to concentrate on,

and her nerves were already frayed.

She hadn't been sleeping well either. The school's counsellor suggested that she'd start exercising, Catherine suggested a boyfriend, but Yasmin suggested alcohol and even snuck some *Burukutu* into school for her. She settled for the first advice, her body ached, she slept longer though not better, which made her try Yasmin's idea only to find herself on the ground the next day, and her bed covered in gut-waste. She had apparently said a lot of mundane things which earned her *Ngwa-ngwa* as a nickname. Lesson learned, she reverted to exercising.

She wrote to Eduardo a few times, and he always had poems for her, which she liked, but knew he didn't write. He had sent her a bottle of non-alcoholic wine on one occasion and two boxes of chocolate on another. Although she was made aware of it, she never received them. She didn't dare ask about it. The teachers had a knack for taking the gifts their students received. Luckily, they didn't intercept the letters except when it came from an unknown address.

Aleruchi was now old enough to stand in her father's stead concerning the company. Besides, she owned fifty percent of the company, a share she inherited from her mother, a share that was held in trust for her by her aunt. She prayed that her aunt would be granted parole, her release was taking far too long. She was, after all, only defending herself at the time.

Aleruchi brooded, feeling like a palm fruit in a basket full of corn – too big for the crowd and yet so alone.

Eduardo was expecting her to visit him at his university, but she wasn't ready to go to Jos especially as it was rumoured that there was unrest. She also didn't want to make the mistake of sleeping with him as she was unsure of her feelings for him and most of all, she had stayed this long and was better off waiting for her wedding day.

Eduardo is desperate, she thought. She suspected Catherine had made up her mind to visit Alfred and was a bit jealous. She wished her father was still alive, his absence was better than this void.

Catherine numbly caught a butterfly. "Fancy, seeing you here while others are out on the field."

"Why are you limping?"

"Twisted my ankle," she said, wrinkling her nose.

"How?"

Catherine frowned. "Alright what's up?"

Aleruchi sighed. "I'm bored."

"Let's take a walk."

Aleruchi laughed as she watched her friend struggle to get up. "I see how."

"Help me up *nawh!*" Catherine mumbled, stretching her hands towards Aleruchi.

Aleruchi limply helped her up, and they fell on the flower bed beside them.

"It's not funny o! I'm in serious pain here."

"I'm sorry," Aleruchi said remorsefully, still laughing.

"Hmm, you seem to be in a jolly good mood."

Aleruchi hissed. "Jolly good mood indeed."

"Are you by any chance going to the show?"

"What show?" Aleruchi asked, taken aback.

We sure need a sane person here. "The pantomime

thingy.”

“It’s a dumb show.”

“Hence the name, pantomime,” Catherine said matter-of-factly, emphasising the ‘mime’.

That was the third one in one week. Aleruchi thought it was repugnant, a total waste of time.

Catherine smiled mischievously and nudged her friend. “There’ll be lots of boys there, you know.”

Aleruchi tugged at her tight sleeve which was restricting her arm. “So?”

“Well, I know you’re bored, and you need the distraction plus you’ll soon be finished with secondary school.”

“Physician, heal thyself.”

Wearing a crooked smile, Catherine nodded, “I think I will.”

“You’re not really considering –”

“I am, I have.” She bounced the lawn tennis ball she picked up from Yasmin’s bed. “Before you give any advice, think about it.”

Aleruchi sighed. *I don’t have any advice to give. I don’t even know how I feel about Eduardo. Perhaps, waiting isn’t such a good idea.*

She watched a butterfly settle on her dress for a while and decided she could wait.

What is the worst that could happen? He’ll get another girl, of course!

She shuddered at the thought but wasn’t afraid of losing him.

Maybe I don’t love him enough.

Her father’s words clawed into her thought: “Love and

duty go hand in hand”. She sighed. *Another meaningless proverb!* Snippets of things her father said and what they did when her mother was alive had invaded her thoughts a lot lately.

CHAPTER TWENTY-ONE

1981

April

Aleruchi

Prudence's elder sister Gretchen had invited Aleruchi to come over to Port Harcourt for the Xmas holiday, but that was months away. She weighed the necessity of going there, and the odds were beginning to stack up against her: she hadn't attended her father's memorial service, and it had been postponed a number of times. However, Prudence insisted that she shouldn't show up because her elder sister Gretchen was a bad influence and that she was going to Asaba to meet her aunt Elóhó who is coming in from the US with a cute little girl.

Aleruchi knew nothing about board meetings but was expected to attend this one as a major shareholder. She hadn't set eyes on her aunt since her first year in this school. They barely wrote to each other until a few months ago when she received a letter from her aunt about her release on parole.

Aunt Sylvia was the best woodpecker Aleruchi knew, the only one. She'd peck into every loophole, snide remark or contingency in the board meeting. She tried to be glad as worry gnawed at her. After all, all the movies she'd watched showed parolees weren't allowed to travel. Aunt Sylvia's case had to be different.

Aleruchi sighed as she packed a weekend bag. Aunt Sylvia had booked a room at the airport hotel in Port

Harcourt for her.

She angled the four-inch mirror with some books, and appraised her reflection; she glossed her lips, reset her lopsided wig, tucked her feet in her clogs, and left her room. As she stepped out onto the alcove, her shoulders fell; it was raining. She had forgotten her umbrella and raincoat in the cab.

Aleruchi adjusted the audio and tapped the teal Walkman to make the music start. You couldn't exactly say it was a gift since her aunt was using it until she got herself a hot red one of a newer model. Aleruchi shook it and tapped it again this time harder, but it didn't respond so she removed the headphones and hung them loosely around her neck.

The sun was beginning to rise, its golden glow soothing the violent embers of glint from the louvres on the two-storey duplex across the street from her. It was more or less a landmark building in the area of bungalows but looked lopsided.

She jogged on the same spot as she fidgeted with her hand-me-down electronic.

A car revved.

She looked around to find where the sound came from but couldn't see it. It was equally challenging to find the revving car with all the streetlights glaring back from the parked cars' windshields. She could still hear an engine revving. She shrugged, hoping a little soliloquy would overwhelm the loneliness that had since become the custodian of her thoughts.

She continued her power-walk, staring at the hot pavement trying not to look back. She sighed with relief

when she heard children's laughter and looked up to see a woman and her children at the bus stop. She reduced her pace and turned her attention back to the problem with her Walkman and moaned. It seemed she made it worse just as she had done with everything else. Perhaps the tension in her aunt and lawyers were getting the best of her.

She had just about given up when a song replayed in her head and slapped her forehead as it dawned on her - it was the last song on that side of the cassette. She flipped it and replaced the headphones in her ear, glad the music was loud enough to keep the world out.

Getting to the street she resided in; she opted to finish her power-walk with a jog. As she turned onto the street that led to her house, she heard a car revving over her soothing symphony. She checked her wrist, an involuntary movement she had copied from her father since she was a little girl. She looked left and right before stepping onto the road, digging out her keys simultaneously, the keys fell.

As she bent down to pick it up, a car sped past her. She could hear it screech to a halt as she raised her head. The screeching and the smell of burning tyre made her feel a little lightheaded and nauseous, which was worsened when she saw a goat wedged between the tarred road and tyre.

As soon as she opened the gate, a girl about her age bumped into her before lowering her head. Aleruchi stepped aside to let her pass and caught the gateman covering his mouth in shock and knew the girl must have spent the night in his room.

Kara, the housemaid, came out to greet her. She

frowned because the girl hardly ever spoke to her. Her aunt also seemed to have had fun because she was wearing her dressing gown inside out and was playfully shoving the unfamiliar man's hand off her thigh. Aleruchi sighed when she noticed the man snuggle her aunt, his hand between her aunt's legs almost made her jump out of her skin.

"Aunt Sylvia, good morning," Aleruchi coughed gently and grimaced as she walked briskly towards the kitchen. *I seem to be the only one not having fun!*

Aunt Sylvia jumped holding her robe tightly around her when she noticed her niece. "Ehen, how was your run?"

"T'was okay," Aleruchi retorted, not stopping.

"Ruchi, hold on."

Aleruchi had already shut the kitchen door.

Kara jumped spilling a brown liquid on her yellow apron. She quickly hid her hands behind her and curtsied.

"Kara-"

Aunt Sylvia opened the kitchen door and grumbled, "Ruchi, I've been calling you *nawh*."

"I'm sorry, didn't hear you."

"It's alright," Aunt Sylvia sighed and paused glaring at Kara whose head was tilted in their direction. "Leave us."

Kara curtsied and left.

"The girl is so nosy," Aunt Sylvia rolled her eyes and cleared her throat uncomfortably.

Aleruchi chuckled and patted her aunt gently. "Aunt Sylvia, it's alright to have a man in your life."

"I'm sorry I didn't join you today," Aunt Sylvia

murmured, scratching her arm.

“Psst. What are you having for breakfast? You know we have an early day today.”

“Hmm... whatever you’re having. I better go take my bath.”

Aleruchi nodded knowingly. She brought out a crate of eggs, stock cube, and salt. She had just finished chopping the onions, pepper, and tomatoes when she heard a loud, harsh noise. She couldn’t tell where the sound was coming from as the kitchen window was open. She peered out of the window and cocked her head, but there was no one in sight, she shrugged and began to hum. It happened again, this time it was continuous. When she realised it was coming from her aunt’s bathroom window, she shut the kitchen window, shook her head, and opened the cabinet to look for the vegetable oil then grunted her irritation.

As Aleruchi went in search of her coin purse, she saw her aunt’s wallet and took it instead then went in search of Kara. The driver and Kara’s head were locked, whispering and giggling.

“Kara.”

Kara jumped and curtsied.

“I can’t find the oil.”

“Oil finish, Ma!”

“And butter?”

“Finish, Ma!”

“Hmm,” Aleruchi gave her a condescending look. *Why am I not surprised? There never seems to be anything with you around.*

“I’ll go market later, Ma. Anything you want to add?”

Aleruchi shook her head slowly as she stared daggers

at the driver. He was new, attentive, a little too eager to please, and he liked Kara. He was a graduate, and Kara wasn't; probably why he found Kara so interesting. When he finally caught Aleruchi's eyes on him, he nodded to Kara and walked off. Kara turned her attention back to Aleruchi who brought out some naira notes from her aunt's wallet and handed it to Kara.

"Take, buy bread, the sliced one. I repeat, the sliced one. Butter, Planta not Blueband o! Hmm, then the oil and some wafers. I'll check the change when you get back. Please hurry, Aunt Sylvia will finish taking her bath soon, you hear?"

"Yes, ma!"

A few minutes later, Kara was back with only the oil. She went back again even before Aleruchi could stop her. Aleruchi briskly fried the egg and juiced the oranges, all that remained was the bread and butter. Kara was taking far too long. She sighed heavily and took her plate to the dining deciding that she could do without the bread. The phone in the living room rang, and she dropped her plate with a clatter on the table as she rushed to pick the call.

Unknown to her, Kara had been back but was waiting just outside the kitchen door. She watched Aleruchi leave the kitchen and tiptoed toward the tray Aleruchi had set for her aunt. A few furtive glances and an inclined ear later, she extracted a vial from her blouse, poured the remaining half of the liquid over the egg and jiggled the plate, replaced the vial and sighed with relief. She stared at the mess on her apron where the other half was displayed, shook her head, and left the kitchen.

She saw a plate on the dining table and frowned. Looking around and seeing no one, she quickly emptied the last droplets in the plate. She didn't have time to jiggle it because she heard approaching footsteps.

Ten minutes later, Aleruchi came into the dining room and slapped her forehead; she had forgotten her food, again. It was now cold and a little dry. She took it into the kitchen and emptied it into the dog's bowl, and the dog immediately started lapping it up.

She scoffed, *Kara finally bought everything else*. She looked at her empty wrist. *Why do I keep doing that?* She removed a plate from the rack and buttered a few slices of bread and went upstairs with them.

While in the bedroom, loading her mouth with bread, she stared at the clothes she'd spread out earlier and proceeded to the outfit in the middle, a navy-blue trousers suit and a beige silk shirt and wore matching shoes - another gift from her aunt. When she saw the time, she yelped and ran into the bathroom for a quick shower.

A few minutes later, she was ready. She stood tall and smiled her approval.

"It might be true that clothes give confidence."

The new wig her aunt got her was sleek, straight, and cupped her face perfectly.

Aunt Sylvia, however, wasn't ready. Aleruchi could hear her moan and at some time give strident demands in words she didn't think her aunt could utter. She pondered for a while, wondering how long she had to wait. She would give her aunt a few minutes and then they'll head for the meeting whether her aunt was in her

clothes or not. She grimaced hopefully and knocked on her aunt's door.

Aleruchi had never been to her father's office except the one at the house which was later turned into his study when he got his first office space.

She was eight by then. Her father came back with a big sparkling box. She was sure it was chocolate, only after unwrapping it did she find out it was a doll. She hated the doll because of its eyes. Its eyes were as round as balls and white so for comfort she set it down, for when it was laying down its eyes were closed. She smiled at the memory.

Her stomach churned, she had never understood how she came to be the heir apparent but was glad her father never got the chance to change his will in the six years he was married to her step-mother. Aleruchi hated the fact that there were lawyers who were willing to fight for her step-mother after it had been established that she had killed the man whom she married and the wife before him, her mother.

Aleruchi was already tired of the contest for the content of the will, but she'd rather die than let the woman lay claim to anything that once belonged to her parents.

She reckoned they would give her a small chair and she'd have to stand on it and talk to people who would crowd her until she cowered under them, shrinking. She smiled at herself, *how silly*.

A few hours later, while on their way back, the car

belched continuously until the driver parked by the side of the road – there was no shoulder for miles. Aleruchi didn't like the idea of the driver leaving them, but he had to get a mechanic. She thought it odd because he was supposed to be a mechanical engineer. Surely, he would know a few things about cars. As soon as he left, Aleruchi asked her aunt how much she had in her bag.

By her calculation, it would be enough to take them home no matter how much the cab cost.

Aunt Sylvia didn't seem bothered, and her eyes were distant as she sat in the car with legs hanging out. A few minutes later, she got up abruptly and walked cautiously into the bush.

A car slowed down, and she wondered why the driver of the vehicle was peering at them. It was not until he reversed, parked behind them and ran towards Aunt Sylvia, who was coming out of the bush that she recognised who it was. It was her father's former business partner before they split, the year her father married her step-mother.

Aunt Sylvia stopped in her tracks. "Jesus! Abbas, is it really you?"

The man nodded, smiling.

Her aunt ran into his arms. Then touched him gently as if he was delicate and whispered. "They said, they said you were dead." Aunt Sylvia burst into tears, and he pulled her closer and wrapped his arms around her.

Aleruchi glanced at one person to the other, confused.

"Ruchi?" he asked.

"Yes?" Aleruchi eyed him suspiciously while trying in vain to shield her eyes from the sun – he was a very tall man.

He let go of her aunt and turned to face her striking his chest. "It's me, Yomi's father, Abbas."

"Good afternoon, sir."

He looked at her aunt and back at her. "What are you doing in these parts?"

"Our car broke down," her aunt gestured.

Abbas looked around stealthily. "Come with me, this place is not safe one bit." Aleruchi stepped back from him pretending to pick something up. He turned to her aunt. "We have to leave this place now."

"Yes. Ruchi, please bring our bags," her aunt said still in Abbas' arms.

Aleruchi rolled her eyes but did as she was told. She watched her aunt lean on Abbas and was puzzled that she was the same woman who was with another man earlier in the day. Relieved to be out of the sun, air conditioning in a jeep never felt so good. She leaned back and slanted her head to look at the tree and caught sight of their driver on an *okada*.

Glad that the car would be fixed for Gretchen's wedding the following day, she sighed. Three *okadas* rode past them followed by two others and all stopped by the car they'd just abandoned. Aleruchi frowned. Not only were they too many, but none of them also had a tool with them. More so, they seemed to be looking for everything outside the bonnet. One of the *okada*'s passengers raised his shirt then pulled something which he pointed at their driver. A second later, the driver fell and she could only see his foot.

She turned sharply to look at her aunt, but the woman was busy talking and holding hands with Abbas, oblivious of what had just happened.

When they got home, her aunt insisted that she pack an overnight bag, but she feigned a headache. Her aunt was too eager to go over to Abbas', but did she need to tag along?

Her aunt's expression had turned gloomy and hesitant. She decided to pack a bag for her aunt. When Abbas arrived, Aleruchi brought the bag down and handed it over to her aunt and told her good night. She practically pushed her aunt out of the house, but the woman was too excited to notice. It was only then that she found Kara's message; 'My mother is ill, and I have to go see her.'

How convenient! Aleruchi crumbled the paper.

Her head ached. It felt like an orchestra of timpanis was crammed into her skull, banging away. As the numbing pain increased, she hurried to her aunt's room to find any pill that could cure it, took two pills and instantly felt sleepy. She staggered to the door and locked it before sliding into her aunt's bed before she realised it. The covers felt like silk and cashmere. She made a mental note to take the sheet to school with her even though it would be too big for her bed.

Dozing off, sounds filtered through her mind - a gust of wind reminding her to lock her aunt's windows; an indistinct chatter on the TV reminding her to turn off the TV. Another gust of wind came through, followed by crashing and banging sounds downstairs. Unwilling to part with the comfort the bed offered, she pulled the duvet snugly around her and sailed away. She thought she heard someone banging on the door and attributed it to the common disturbances of rain pattering on the window and curled up further.

“Ruchi? Are you okay? Ruchi? Ruchi? Ruchi?” Aunt Sylvia cried.

“Aunt Sylvia is it morning already?” she asked groggily still eager to go back to sleep.

“Are you okay?”

“Yes, sorry about the bed.”

Her aunt hissed and started laughing. “You slept through it all? Now, that’s a first.”

Aleruchi grimaced and frowned simultaneously. “Sleep through –”

“Get up, come, and see for yourself.”

“How did you get in?”

“Abbas broke the door.”

“I see,” she looked at where the door once was and at the door leaning on one side of the wall. She used her hand to remove some jagged edge of wood from the door frame. They went into her room together. Her suitcase was open, her clothes lying around, picture frames on the floor with their glasses shattered. The wardrobe was thrown open its content on the floor near it. Her bed was ruffled too.

Downstairs, most of the chairs had been toppled. She could hear the crunch of glass under their feet but couldn’t identify where the shards had come from. The television, the video player and cassette player even the TV stand were all gone. Aleruchi still felt sleepy and was thirsty. She quickly scrambled for the kitchen and poured herself a glass of juice and water. She gulped it at one go and shivered, it was really cold.

Aunt Sylvia didn’t want Aleruchi returning to her room,

so she took all her niece's things to her bedroom. This, she did because her niece's bed had been ridden with bullets. If she had her way Aleruchi would have been taken back to school with the next available flight, but her presence was required at the next quorum for directors or most of the employees would lose their jobs.

She was shocked that her brother-in-law didn't change his will after he had caught her sister with another man. He merely forgave his wife. She wished she was half as lucky. If she were, she wouldn't have had to defend herself to the point of death of another, a man who hadn't even proposed to her. Fortunately, she had earned a degree in business law even though she knew it would be almost impossible to work as a lawyer with her past looming around her. She couldn't possibly go back to England, not after tasting freedom she had missed for so many years before she went to prison.

The lawyer didn't come back at night as he had promised which was to her benefit.

She had to protect her niece. At the board meeting, everyone had assumed that she was her niece's legal guardian. Abbas confided in her about a trust that put Aleruchi's step-mother in a better position if Aleruchi was dead.

However, Aunt Sylvia was concerned about the clause in her late brother-in-law's will. It allowed Aleruchi make decisions as a director and shareholder but didn't allow her access to the money until she was thirty. Her brother-in-law was good at complicating things, but she didn't expect it to be this complicated.

How can I possibly protect you until you're thirty?

Aunt Sylvia looked at her niece and smiled.

You look just like your mother.

“Aunt Sylvia, why are you smiling?” Aleruchi asked wearing a mischievous smile.

Aunt Sylvia shook her head, picked up a newspaper and wondered if Aleruchi still remembered anything about her mother.

“Good morning, Ma, I hear what happened,” Kara said.

“Hmm.” She gave Aleruchi a knowing glance.

“Ma, is anything that you want?”

“As a matter of fact, yes,” She flipped a page of the newspaper. “Go and pack your things and go to your mother’s. We won’t be needing your services here any longer.”

“Ma, no place to go, Ma.”

Aunt Sylvia cocked her head. “Your mother *nkó*?”

“She die yesterday,” Kara retorted.

Aleruchi eyed her suspiciously.

“Hmm. What a coincidence!” Aunt Sylvia murmured from behind her newspaper.

“Oh, what a pity, was she that ill?” Aleruchi asked at the same time.

“Yes, Ma.”

“Don’t worry. I’ll pay you six months arrears, but you can’t stay beyond this day.”

Aleruchi felt pity for Kara, but she didn’t like her from the day she first saw her, and she had learned not to defy her aunt.

“Ruchi, get ready we’re eating out and remember this is your room now.”

Aleruchi was about to speak but fell silent.

She had received a letter. Not thinking it was important because it was in a brown envelope, she cast it aside and watched her aunt lock her room and put the key in the pocket of her denim skirt.

Aunt Sylvia caught Aleruchi's glance and reciprocated with a tight-lipped smile.

She didn't understand her aunt anymore. It seemed Abbas had infected her with his paranoia. She turned her head to see the humourous banter on TV but not liking comedy she got up and started pacing. She got thirsty and went downstairs. She saw the state of the sitting room and grimaced as she sat gingerly at the edge of the stairs for a while.

Sighing, she shook her head to erase the memories of her sufferings with her step-mother.

It's my house now.

She would treat it the way she'd wanted. First, she'd remove anything that didn't belong to her parents. She rolled up her sleeves and went into the kitchen. Her aunt was not one for cleaning, but she had every cleaning product you could imagine. Aleruchi brought out the one that had her aunt's favourite scent: lavender.

When she returned to the sitting room, she realised that Abbas had broken the front door too. One after the other, she threw things until she had taken out a third of the debris. She discovered the brown envelope again. As an excuse to take a break, she decided to open it. She dusted the envelopes and began to tear it when she heard people shout. She knew it was the couple who

shared their back fence and was intrigued that age had not changed them.

Not wanting to take the gloves off, she used an old nail file to tear the envelope open. It was from her step-mother. There wasn't much written in the letter except for the funny smell. She pitied the woman; her children had abandoned her, the letter said.

Aleruchi walked to the closest window and smoothed the sill as she reminisced.

The lawyers weren't pleased with the outcome. They had not expected her aunt to be party to the proceedings; Abbas had handed his share of the company to Aunt Sylvia, shocking her. By the end of the meeting, her aunt had already found a buyer for the twenty percent share belonging to her step-mother; shares that were to be bought while she was still imprisoned. She stumbled over a mug and picked it up, the caption 'player' caused her to remember a particularly dark, thin and tall man in clothes that were bigger than him walk in on her parents. They stopped fighting to attend to the man. His name was Nathan Abahor. He was the buyer.

Nathan Abahor, Aleruchi's father's first and oldest employee. It was weird that he would be buying more shares while planning to liquidate his ten percent share. Perhaps it's because he was retiring. His wife had disappeared on him with their only child eleven years ago.

Aleruchi smiled in realisation of what her aunt had done. Her aunt had found Nathan Abahor's daughter. She had once mentioned bumping into the ex-wife in a restaurant where she endured the woman's description

of how he had mistreated her. Conveniently leaving out the role she had played. Aunt Sylvia was glad to be *of assistance*. Aleruchi knew her aunt was good at never missing opportunities, but now she had to doff a cap for her aunt's ingenuity. An ingenuity she hoped to one day learn.

CHAPTER TWENTY-TWO

1981

October

Catherine

Catherine's heart sank as she read Alfred's last letter. She wished she had never opened it. She bit her lower lip, desperately in need of someone to talk to, someone who would listen and give her good advice. She looked over at Aleruchi, and her shoulders fell.

Her best friend, Aleruchi was unavailable, present yet unavailable. Lately, she'd spend a lot of time alone, she no longer came out for picnics; instead, she went for long walks. When she wasn't reading, she seemed to be lost in her thoughts. Now, as she gazed at Aleruchi, she wondered where her best friend got the strength to cope with everything she'd been through. Catherine knew that contestation of the will was only a part of Aleruchi's grief and wished her friend would confide in her, even though she had a lot on her mind.

Catherine let out an exaggerated sigh to get Aleruchi's attention. Being unsuccessful she decided to take a cue from her friend and take a stroll. She came across two students holding hands and sighed ruefully remembering Alfred. He was no longer endearing in his letters nor talked about how much he missed her.

She could cope with his never-ending complaints about how bad some of his lecturers were, but now he

just talked about his classmates. Five pages and it was all about his female classmates, giving her an analysis of their 'assets'. She initially thought that the letter was intended for someone else. It was hard to get him to talk about anything when they started dating. How she missed running to him with her banter, and he'd nod and hug her.

She reminisced about the time he played football for their school and how the school had allowed him to write his WAEC and JAMB a year earlier because he had brought back the cup. How she never got to see him because of the girls who flocked around him. How she used to fight with them until one poured pepper into her eyes and told her to learn to share. How he used to pester her to give up her virginity.

Tears streamed down her face: *I can't afford to lose him to another girl, not after all these years. He's all I've got. And perhaps Ruchi too, if we weren't fighting so often. He'd only ever asked one thing of me. I'll do anything for you, Alfred.*

Catherine sighed again. He was her stableness. Of what use was her virginity if she couldn't be with the love of her life. Knowing nothing about her ovulation, she began to feel agitated.

Frowning, she exclaimed excitedly. *Wait! Why am I so worried? Alfred is after all in his second year, so he'll be able to give any advice on this. And learning to be a doctor, he would know what is best.*

She brushed off all trepidation, determined to stamp her mark on her man, and she was not sharing this one. Her mother had agreed to share her father with other women, and so did her father, and she wasn't going to

end up like them. On her way back to the field, she heard her name and froze.

It was another student the teacher was calling. One of the teachers looked at her curiously. She lowered her head and hurried toward the football field and then was startled by the sudden outburst of clapping, chattering and shouting on the football field. She laughed at herself and steadied her breath, straightened her dress, and shook herself free like a bird did when drenched in the rain.

She gasped when she saw a man put a long knife in his mouth. She didn't know the school had invited a travelling circus. Feeling queasy, she slid and twisted her ankle. She yelled and the students that were near hushed her. She was whimpering so much that some boys lifted her up and dropped her a few feet away oblivious to her pain.

The weekend before their midterm break was received by all with relief, especially Catherine. There were strong gusts of wind that Saturday morning forcing most of the school to remain indoors even though the sky was cloudless. Catherine was unperturbed. She pressed her knuckles then made a fist as she drew tentative conclusions of how she would broach her appearance in Alfred's university.

Her ankle still hurt and would make for a reasonable excuse, one that would most likely keep Alfred beside her.

During the week, she gave her father a good reason for needing money. He didn't object as he needed her to

build a strong relationship with her mother. By the end of the same day, he credited her account with much more than she needed. A letter from her mother had revealed that she would be out of the country for about four weeks. Her father did not see eye-to-eye with her mother, therefore, her absence would go unnoticed. Then she gave Yemisi a letter and paid her to post it the following week in case the school went on a quest for her whereabouts.

Frowning suddenly, she wondered if she was indeed manipulative, calculated, and selfish. She shrugged it off, concluding that Aleruchi was angry when she said those mean words and therefore didn't mean it.

That morning, Catherine and Aleruchi left in the principal's car for the airport. She had never been to Calabar before, but she heard they were warm and friendly people. Overwhelmed with the desire to talk, she was glad that Aleruchi was engrossed in the novel she was reading.

Fidgeting as she watched her best friend, wishing she wasn't going to Port Harcourt. She never got to ask her what she was going to Port Harcourt to do. If she did, she would have to offer her reason for going to Calabar. Besides, they wouldn't be able to speak freely because the principal was the one driving them to the airport.

Still she longed to tell Aleruchi what she was up to, but the only time Aleruchi looked up from the book was when her flight was announced. She turned to Catherine and mouthed, 'safe journey' and hugged her. Catherine's flight was delayed. She watched Aleruchi walk through the departure gate and became sullen, crossed her arms, and rested her chin on them. She

absentmindedly rubbed her chin on something then curiously checked and realised that it was Aleruchi's book. She assumed Aleruchi had forgotten to take it until she saw a note inside. It said;

*'I hope you know what you're doing.
You're my best friend so I'll support you.
It doesn't mean I like it, but I support you.
In case it happens remember contraceptives o!
Prevention is better than cure!
Abstinence more so!'*

Catherine rolled her eyes.

Easy to say, try wearing my shoes and tell me how it pinches.

It was very much like Aleruchi, to give her support and not offer any. She wanted to read the book but changed her mind as she didn't like it. It was the umpteenth time Aleruchi would be reading it.

"What is it about this *Things Fall Apart* book, Ruchi?" Catherine muttered to herself.

She clapped her hands with the book in between and slanted her head when she noticed a little boy trying to play peek-a-boo with her and giggled when she caught him. She tried not to wince when she saw a sore near his ear as his mother forced him into a chair. The hem of the woman's dress had mud, and the sweetheart-shaped neckline of her brown *kaftan* was yellowed. Her skin was dry, and her feet in a pair of gorgeous, golden slippers looked chapped. She wondered what the woman would look like if she saw her face.

She drank the scent of the perfume that wafted from

a man that passed her and chuckled as the scent of wood and musk reminded her of her father's favourite perfume. She looked down at the book in her hand and flicked through the pages then looked up. A man brushed past an air hostess who was giving a tag to an old woman sitting at the end of the seat beside her.

Her interest was piqued, his resemblance to her father was uncanny. Her father should be in Lagos, yet she was curious. He stood tall in a royal blue brocade with his hands in his pockets, casually looking around. She gulped and lowered her head unsure if the man had turned around completely. She looked back in his direction, but he was no longer there. She scanned the crowd of people that were rushing to the departure exit wishing she had taken a direct peek at him.

She huffed; *Surely if it were my father, he would have seen me.*

She sighed and urged the plane to arrive soon enough for take-off. Not seeing him, she decided to read Aleruchi's book when she heard a familiar voice. Quickly retrieving a mirror from her bag, she laid it in the book she held and covered her mouth. It was her father. She quickly lowered the cap on her head.

"How long have you been waiting?" He asked the woman in the yellowed brown kaftan.

"Not long I'm afraid." The woman ostensibly grimaced.

Her father looked angry. "I see, you said it was urgent."

"Apparently," the woman paused and searched for something in her bag. "Here, just in case you're unsure I took the liberty of doing this."

He hesitated then took it off her, after reading it, his

shoulders fell, and he started slapping his forehead lightly, turning around to face Catherine's direction.

She had slipped to the floor involuntarily. Her brows furrowed. *What is he doing here? Is he going to my school? What if he goes to my school and doesn't find me? Well, tuff I should be with my mother anyways.* Worried, she slanted a look at her principal who seemed unperturbed with his head buried in the newspaper he'd bought when they arrived at the airport. She whimpered silently. *Nothing can keep me from seeing Alfred o!*

A man bent over her squinting, "Sister, u dey okay so?"

She hid her face, nodding, and willed him to go away. After a few moments, she tentatively looked up. Relief washed over her when she noticed that he was no longer there.

The white-washed walls of the two-storey building on her far left was low. She grinned at the word scribbled with green paint on the wall near the main gate: *Malabo*. She knew the girls in the university called themselves *Malabresses*. She was in the so-called big university and wasn't that pleased with the hype it had garnered for itself of the years. Unlike her school, the grass was neither patchy nor brown.

She would have doffed a hat if she had any because unlike the university that Lady Grouch dragged the class to visit, this one had tarred roads leading in various directions. It even had road-side bins with a 'keep it clean' sticker on them, and for her, that was a first. She cast trepid glances at the students she came

across, some chatting and making jests. And as she listened to them, she promised herself that she would find out what 'terms paper', 'kolo', 'lecturer' and 'department' meant, even though department sounded vaguely familiar.

She felt like a child who had just come out of a quaggy terrain and felt like being invisible, and she was. Nobody noticed her as it was close to the end of the final term in that session. She needed to distract herself especially as she had started becoming too fidgety. Feeling uneasy, she decided to work it off by walking down to the boy's hostel.

She wasn't allowed in – girls were not allowed in until 2p.m. The porter gave her a condescending glare which made her want to explain that she had come to see her fiancé but with no ring lacing her finger, she nodded and went outside. She shielded her eyes from the sun as she tried to decipher the time; the sun had not yet risen to its peak; *it could be between 11.30a.m. and 12p.m.*

She looked around, every corner seemed to be occupied by students, some were cosying up intimately, some were incongruous with a novel, a book, a magazine and a group of boys were head-locked nodding and looking around suspiciously with glasses-shielded eyes. But none appeared timid. She inhaled and held her breath as she considered her next cause of action.

Avoiding the group of boys in sunglasses instinctively and pretending not to hear one of them beckon her, she walked briskly but not fast towards one of the kiosks. She had never seen that many kiosks in one place, all lined with plastic chairs and tables. She ordered a bottle of Coca-Cola, a meat pie, three buns and paid for it.

While she was being handed her change, someone spoke from behind her.

"I hope you're buying something for me too." It was the same voice that had beckoned her.

She shifted and tried to slip away, but he blocked her path. Seeing nowhere else to turn she faced him looking up with a raised brow.

"Are you not Catherine Spencer?"

She turned away slightly and tried not to wrinkle her nose at the same time. "Do I know you from somewhere?"

"I should think so, Alfred's friend. Etekamba." He slanted his head as he stretched his hand.

She looked at it for a few seconds before reciprocating. "So, Alfred's *friend*, where is he?"

"Reading, he has Clinicals in a few days?"

"Clinicals?"

"It's the most dreaded exam for a medical student."

Are you one of them? "Are you a medical student?"

"Nah, just a law student." He mumbled, gawking at her plate. "Can I have some of the -"

She folded the change into his hand, discretely. "Why don't you order yours?"

Some time later, he was back with only a bottle of fizzy drink and was still gawking at her plate. She pushed the plate toward him, holding onto the pie; surprised at how quickly he'd returned and surprised herself, even more, when she didn't ask him how.

"Thanks, my sister, it's the end of the term and the only money I have is the one that will take me back home."

"I understand," she answered solemnly.

He tapped the table rhythmically, slowly at first, then rapidly then he slowed down again.

“Do you want me to show you his bunk space?”

“Oh no, don’t worry.”

“I have somewhere to be. I’ll show you and head out with my friends.” He said matter-of-factly.

She didn’t want his help, but he wasn’t going to let her be. *What’s the worst that could happen? Oh-oh, I’ve just jinxed myself.*

The woman who refused her entry saw her again and frowned. She was about to say something when Etekamba appeared, and she froze. “She is my sister o!” Etekamba said, and the woman nodded slowly, her hands shaking.

Catherine decided to survey her environment and slanted a suspicious look at him. They walked for about fifteen minutes, she was sure he was trying to confuse her because she had already passed the same dissembled stove near the wall, with the Bob Marley poster on the ground, a paint bucket of soap suds, an open shaving powder container and the smell of shoe polish three times before he gestured at the top bunk.

In those minutes, she realised that the place had gradually become quiet. The first time there was a student in an off-white t-shirt and blue boxers holding small nails in his mouth with part of the poster on his foot, an old shoe with heel up and the poster which she couldn’t make out. The second student was bent over the paint bucket scrubbing; she remembered a giant dollar sign dog collar that swayed as he scrubbed. There was a third student in white trousers, one leg pulled up, and he was barebacked polishing a pair of brown

loafers.

This was the first time she didn't carry her pepper spray or the irritating alarm that was shaped like a bell – a gift from Sister Friar on her first day at St. Francis High.

She tried not to show her fear as Sister Friar always said then, "Surprise is the key! Do not show fear, pretend to agree but think and think real fast. Your virtue as a woman must be guarded at all cost". Right now, she would do anything to hold on to her virginity. She lowered her head while her eyes darted everywhere else in search of something she could use as a weapon.

"Come *nawh*, I know what you came for and I can give it to you."

"I don't understand," Catherine said with a frown.

"Come on, Alfred said you haven't done it before."

"Done what?" she asked with mock curiosity.

"Look here, stop playing, you dey hear me so?" Etekamba bellowed.

Catherine urged her heart to slow its pace and asked. "Why don't you explain to me so that I can understand?"

"What? Did you hear a thing I just said?"

"Sorry, I'm a bit distracted. Can you repeat what you just said?"

He unbuckled his belt.

Her heart raced, and her head started thumping.

He began to remove his trousers and said, "You don't have anywhere to go, and you don't want to waste my time."

As he kicked off his trousers, she saw something that looked like a cosh near his feet.

"Oya *nawh*." He summoned angrily.

Catherine walked towards him slowly, her feet heavy. He smiled and nodded as she got closer; she sat at the edge of the bed and said, "Can you please turn around."

"Of course!" he said excitedly.

She bent down as if to take off her shoe and pulled at the cosh-like thing. It was heavy, she got up still bending, spread her legs like she was taught in shotput, and swung it. It hit him squarely on the back. She heard him yelp and fall on his knees and started to run, but Etekamba caught her leg, and she used her free leg to kick him in the face. As he held his nose, she ran until she bumped into Alfred who was running into the hostel in search of her.

He immediately took her outside, where a car was waiting. She slid in, and they left for a hotel. He didn't talk to her throughout the journey, and she didn't draw attention to herself. As he lined the extra pillows to demarcate the bed, she felt embarrassed and said, "Nothing happened."

"I know." He sighed. "I just hope you didn't kill him."

"You more concerned about him?" she asked angrily.

Alfred sighed. "I'm concerned about you."

"And that's how you show it?" Catherine cried. "I shouldn't have come."

"Yes, you shouldn't have." he retorted coolly.

Shocked at his remark, she slanted her head to hide her face. As tears rolled down her eyes, she asked: "So you don't love me anymore?"

Alfred exhaled exasperatedly. "Why didn't you tell me you were coming?"

"What do you care?"

He grunted and closed his eyes. "It was an easy

enough question for goodness sake. If someone hadn't seen your ID..." He held his head in his hand as he bent over the table. He got up and slid to the ground holding his knapsack.

Catherine hissed mournfully. *This is going to be a pitiful week.*

"How long will you be staying?" He asked as he produced three textbooks from the knapsack and a notebook and then lay on the ground perusing them. She looked at him and closed her eyes, fighting back fresh tears. She covered her face with a pillow and started sobbing. Alfred shook his head, carried his books to the toilet, and closed the door.

In frustration, she kicked off all the pillows from the bed.

Three hours later, Alfred came back and stuffed his books back in the knapsack. He watched her sleep and came over to her side to cover her with the duvet. He laid awake restless. He looked at her and grunted, desperately longing for her. He looked down at the bulge in his boxers, groaned and sat up.

He was glad that he had finished his exams, also glad that he had saved enough money for his fees for the next session - from writing term papers and other students' exams. He still had a few more exams to write at a secondary school in a village in a communal clash. He couldn't confide these risks to Catherine; she would misunderstand like she did everything else. He loved her. He, however, was worried about her insecurities.

He looked back at the bulge between his legs and

grimaced. He would wait until he had made her his wife: she had begged him to wait. It was what she wanted. Now she mounted more pressure than his studies gave him and made it worse by visiting. In a few years, they'll take their vows. In just a few more years, he'll be able to take care of her, as a man should. He would give her paradise and maybe that would stop her from being edgy and end this barrage of torment she was always dishing out.

Alfred needed to breathe; Catherine was becoming more of a thorn than the rose he desired. Everything he did made things worse; he hadn't had a proper sleep in three days, and she wouldn't even tell him what she wanted. He went for a run in his jeans, by the time he got back, he was drenched in sweat and thoroughly soaked. He walked straight to the bathroom and came out in a bathrobe when he couldn't find the towel or his cream.

As he searched in the cabinet on his side of the bed and found nothing, he went to Catherine's side of the bed and almost slipped. He turned on the light in search of what caused it and found her on the ground, splayed around her were empty bottles of coconut liqueur, champagne, and wine. He carried her to the bed. She was wearing nothing under the light blue nightgown which barely covered her lower regions. He ogled her nipples, which looked like they were about to burst through the satin and groaned in frustration.

Why are you torturing me?

He was beginning to feel hot in between his thighs, and his member refused to obey him. He probably needed to go for another run.

What good will it do? I've already reached my elastic limit.

He decided to test a theory of alternating water temperature when taking his bath. It didn't help but calculating the money he'd make from impersonating a candidate in the next set of WAEC eased his desire for a masculine-feminine interlacing.

It seemed to be working until he re-entered the room and cussed himself for not remembering to cover her up. Desperate for a distraction, his eyes fell on the bottle of wine. He took one of them, pulled the chair to the window and imagined what the future would be like for them. She had said she didn't want children and he clearly wanted children and hoped a few years of marriage would soften her.

He, without realising it, had finished the content and had reached for another bottle as he relished in the fantasy of what their future together would be. Alfred had never taken alcohol before, and it knocked him out but not before he spewed in the sink and most of the bathroom floor.

At some point in the night, Catherine woke up, shuffled into the toilet to ease herself and became nauseous as she was hit with the overpowering aroma of gut-waste that had formed a semi-aerial mosaic design on the floor.

Thinking she was the culprit, she decided to clean it before she'd be discovered, then threw the windows open, before using her perfume as disinfectant, glad she had the initiative of leaving St Francis with more than

one of them. Decidedly, she locked the windows in the bathroom, hoping the scent of the perfume was strong enough to mask any smell of barf. Unsure, she returned to open them but shut the bathroom door in an attempt to keep the draught out.

As she washed her nightgown and took her bath, she wondered about clothes; that part had skipped her mind. She didn't think she'd need them until Alfred's outburst.

She looked at Alfred as she slid into the blanket on the bed. He slept peacefully – he was the first boy she had met that didn't snore and hoped that she didn't. She scoffed; all her cousins snored, and yet they were much younger than Alfred.

Having him so close caused heart palpitations and it didn't help that he was shirtless. She didn't even know he had well-toned muscles, no six-pack, just well-toned. His skin was lighter than his face. He even had a moustache, it looked like he'd just shaved. She longed to touch his face so much that she started biting her fingernails again. He seemed more handsome with his new haircut that reminded her of RMD.

Catherine smiled mischievously; glad that she would be the envy of other girls, especially in his university. Then her shoulders fell; *he is probably sleeping with some of them anyway, that is why he brought me to a hotel*. She shrugged it off and chastised herself for thinking of him in that manner. She knew it was for her protection but then considered that it was convenient as she had given him a plausible excuse.

I must have spoilt his chances, that's why he's furious. Catherine kicked off the blanket, and he stirred. She

saw him leave the room early, and head for the bathroom.

He must have taken his bath, so I don't pick up the scent of another woman on him. Why wouldn't he be sleeping so quietly, when the first thing that he did as he woke up was to go and find one of these Calabar girls, while I'm still here." She mourned. *Perhaps, the rumours about Calabar girls were true.*

She paced, pondered and wondered and each time her steps took her back to the edge of the bed she would glare at him and urge herself not to wake him up.

He stretched his hand over her side of the bed and her heart raced, even faster than before. Her yearning for him trumped her anger for him. As fast as a cat she slipped into the bed and stretched. His arm fell to her waist, and he pulled her closer. She lay still, unable to think, holding her breath, and wondering; 'what next'.

She counted to help steady her breathing. One minute nothing happened, two minutes nothing happened. One hour nothing happened. Her breath grew even more unsteady, but this time it was fuelled by anger. She shook her feet until sleep took hold of her.

A few hours later she felt him move closer and she reciprocated. They kissed clumsily. She nudged her nightgown up, and he climbed over her resting his weight on his forearms. She winced as he tried to penetrate her.

"You entered the wrong place," she said edgily.

He hesitated and tried again.

"Aw, wrong place!" her voice slightly raised.

"Maybe we should just -"

“Here, wait let me guide you.” She said in a steel voice.

When she did, he looked into her eyes and asked, “Are you sure?”

She nodded and held her breath.

He thrust into her and pain seared through her that she exhaled heavily through clenched teeth.

Alfred ejaculated almost immediately. He got off slowly and turned his back to her.

Catherine bored her eyes into his back disappointed. *What’s the big hype then?* She’d overheard girls in school mention how excited they got after the pain passed, but hers never passed. She twisted her mouth. But she longed for him and hated herself for it. She wondered what she did wrong that would warrant his turning his back on her. She remained where she was until she felt the draught then turned to her side, her back turned to him and hoped he would hold her in his arms again. Pulling the blanket as she curled up, she cried herself to sleep wishing she hadn’t come to visit him.

Catherine closed her eyes tightly and used one of the pillows to cover her face to keep the light out, felt movement and knew Alfred was getting off the bed. She knew he was awake as she was for hours, only she didn’t get up to read as he did. She rolled her eyes in her closed eyelids. She planned to eat nothing he ordered. She would ignore him and indulge in her chocolate and Aleruchi’s novel even though she hated reading any book a second time.

Alfred didn't know what to do to save face. He was embarrassed so much so that everything he read in magazines, novels and books seemed to have been wiped off his brain. None of the books said what to do if you came too quickly. He couldn't bear to face Catherine; the girl he would have to spend the rest of his life with and couldn't get her to climax.

He let the water pour down his head as he tried to focus on the topics for the exam he was going to write. It was a few days away, but it was all he could think of doing. The one he was writing in a few hours, he could do in his sleep.

"You shouldn't have come, Catherine," he grumbled under his breath. Sighing, he came out of the bathroom.

"Good morning." He said softly avoiding her gaze.

Catherine pursed her lips as she brushed past him and locked the door behind her. She filled the sink with water and sat in it. It wasn't comfortable, but it was soothing. She didn't understand the setting and had to endure the intensity of the water. She couldn't find the bathrobe, and she didn't feel like tying a towel around her chest, so she stalked out of the room to get hers where she left it.

Angry and relieved when she didn't see him in the room, she returned to the bathroom to brush her teeth as she emptied her bowels. She wondered how Aleruchi managed to do the two things at the same time; she'd have to know how if she was going to have a successful holiday. A few minutes later she came out in search of a

memo pad.

Alfred looked at the time as he entered the hotel. In the lift, he remembered a note he had made. He had one more chance to make it right with Catherine what he needed was the opportunity.

As soon as she opened the door, he walked straight through to the bathroom, produced the note and read it, now resolute on proving himself. He couldn't have anyone take his place in her life. Being in the bathroom too long, he flushed the toilet. Catherine knocked. He tucked the paper in his pocket and opened the door.

She rushed in, shoved him out and locked the door.

Alfred shrugged and went to order dinner.

Catherine was more interested in sitting in the warm water, she still felt sore from last night, and she didn't want him hanging around. Also, she couldn't possibly use the sink while he was around. She'd wait for him to leave the room which was in a few minutes, she hoped. She'd forgotten the towel in the room again.

While she waited for Alfred to leave, she took her bath bearing the cold water. It was already dark in the room except for the TV. She groped for the towel in the semi-darkness, but it was stuck. She tugged harder and realised that Alfred was on it and winced.

She made to leave the room, but he held her hand. She forcefully shrugged it off and ran to the bathroom. Alfred was just as fast. She stepped into the shower's cubicle to turn off the water and almost choked on the water that spurted into her mouth as she exclaimed. The water was now too hot.

Alfred limped into the bathroom – she'd slammed the

door on his foot - the minute he saw her fair skin, wet and glistening, his eyes dilated and, in that instant, he forgot his rehearsed plots and entered the shower.

CHAPTER TWENTY-THREE

1981

December

Catherine

“What’s amusing you?” Aleruchi asked as they spread old newspapers on the veranda to sit down.

“Nothing.”

“Hmm?”

“Nothing,” Catherine repeated giggling this time.

“You’ve been smiling so much I’ve been thinking you’re on laughing gas.”

Catherine shook her head.

“You don’t want to say.”

Catherine shrugged. “There’s nothing to say.”

Alarmed, Aleruchi squeaked. “Oh my God, you’ve done it!”

Catherine raised her brow. “Done what?”

“You know? Copulating.” Aleruchi retorted in a loud whisper, eyes widened with curiosity.

“You don’t have to be quaint, it’s sex...”

Aleruchi saw Lady Grouch with the Reverend Mother and gulped. The Reverend Mother branched off towards the Chapel, but Lady Grouch continued towards them. Aleruchi cleared her throat conspicuously, but Catherine didn’t stop.

Catherine got up and gestured like she did when she was stressing a point in debate class.

Aleruchi kicked her.

“It’s what a boy does to a girl and then she orgasms and -” she turned to query Aleruchi and froze.

Lady Grouch was standing behind Aleruchi, her face as red as raspberry; her eyes looked more significant than her eyelids. With her hands on her hips, still glaring at Catherine she said, “Come with me,” And then sized Aleruchi up as soon as their eyes met, and she beckoned her to join them.

Catherine looked up at Lady Grouch and rolled her eyes. She never liked excursion. No one liked Lady Grouch’s excursions because there was always an assignment at the end of it. She knew that when she finally finished schooling at St. Francis High School the excursions would be the one thing she wasn’t going to miss.

This time, Lady Grouch took them to a village about two kilometres away, to a haunting grey building stark against the towering greenery around it. The lone building looked a lot like their classrooms, except it didn’t have the steps outside. There was so much noise emanating from inside the building, which made Catherine believe it was filled with children. Flies perched almost everywhere, forcing the girls to produce their hand fans.

The girls gasped as soon as they entered except Aleruchi because she knew something was up when Lady Grouch covered her nose with her handkerchief. Inside stank of urine, rotting wounds and other unidentifiable smells which mostly came from the girls.

There was a lot of emotional outbursts which startled Lady Grouch's entourage. Lady Grouch looked proudly at the girls she had come with, in their pristine white dresses, white socks and white plimsolls then gave the few pregnant girls she came across a condescending gaze, sometimes shaking her head and stretching her hand like she was protecting her girls.

Lady Grouch smiled broadly at the elderly lady that came to welcome them and tapped the side of her dress with her fan. The girls immediately curtsied and chorused their greeting. Her eyes were on the elderly woman's outstretched hand, but she didn't reciprocate. The woman looked at her hand for a brief second and tucked it in her coat and walked ahead. A few seconds later, the elderly woman cocked her head. Lady Grouch smiled even sweeter and stamped her feet twice, and her pupils followed her into the building. The elderly woman explained her job and what care the girls were getting.

Aleruchi became irritated with the way the nurses treated the girls. She knew it wasn't their fault that they were forced to get married before their body was prepared for motherhood. Two of their classmates had died from unattended deliveries, and one bled to death as they couldn't get a specialist doctor to her on time. She moaned, understanding the predicament of not having a choice.

Some of their classmates had to be taken out of the room in droves because the smell made them nauseous, Catherine was one of them.

"What did she say VVF was?" Catherine asked, scratching her ear absentmindedly.

"I dunno," Yasmin mumbled, uninterested.

Aleruchi's skin crawled as they passed through another hall, filled with girls that were worse off and was surprised that she hadn't passed out from the smell. She joined her classmates outside just as Catherine repeated her question.

"Vesicovaginal Fistula –" Aleruchi hissed, shaking her head.

"Jesus! That's a mouthful!" Another student exclaimed.

Aleruchi tried to stifle a chuckle then mumbled something to Yasmin, and they started scribbling and talking in a hushed tone. The only word Catherine heard was "...thrush."

"Who has thrush?" Catherine asked in a loud whisper, making both girls jump.

"No one." Yasmin retorted.

"But–"

"Yasmin was asking about the pictures that we were shown yesterday. Remember the one that had a girl with brown plumage and spotted breast." Aleruchi was talking, and because her head was bent over her writing pad, she didn't realise that Lady Grouch stood in front of her with a contemptuous smile.

Catherine cleared her throat conspicuously to get Aleruchi's attention, but Aleruchi had already seen the gentle sway of her long wooden rosary. Lady Grouch raised her hands up, and the whispering stopped, she inhaled and clasped her hands then said, "Girls, I have it in mind to make you assist the nurses." She raised her hand to stop them from responding. "However, I expect a report on female genital mutilation." then looked coolly at Catherine.

Most of the girls beside Catherine moved further away from her because with Lady Grouch, you are guilty by association. Lady Grouch clasped her hand, "And you, Catherine, are going to do a report on Vesicovaginal Fistula. Now, let's get back to school before I end up with a bad case of retches. My gut pleads."

Catherine looked at everyone confused then glared at Lady Grouch who had gone on to talk to the doctor. While Lady Grouch and the elderly woman were still talking, a thin, tall man rushed in, calling for help.

Doctors were needed because there was an accident.

The elderly woman left with all her colleagues except for two nurses. Lady Grouch followed them. The students frowned but were relieved that they would be out of her scrutiny for a little while and walked to the field beside the building to play. While the girls were playing outside, Aleruchi had organised most of the pregnant girls to join her in cleaning the inner hall where the worse-off girls were. The cleaner lent her boots and the cook her apron, which was large enough for two people.

Catherine was bored, uninterested and thirsty as she sat on a newly cut tree stump staring at the others. Tura beguiled, Yasmin insisted, and the rest of the girls went with them to visit the town. As soon as they got to the market, they split up in threes. Catherine tagged along hoping she would find water. She bought *kili-kili*, *robo-robo* biscuit, *Choco-milo* and paid for it but didn't have the appetite for it so she put them in the crossbody bag she was holding for Aleruchi. Alarmed, she gasped; they had left Aleruchi behind.

They finally found ice cream, yoghurt, and *Kunoo*.

Lilian refused to return until she had *Suya*, but *Suya* sellers didn't come out until nightfall. Since it was Yasmin's idea to go to the market, it fell on her to find a solution. Yasmin suggested that they looked for one of the *suya* sellers. The seller wasn't there. His son wanted to make a few quick bucks, decided to make it for them and gave them a mat.

They waited for him until he was finished then began to leave when a boy threw a stick at the tree closest to them. Some fruits fell, and something entered Lilian's dress. She tried to shrug it off but only made it worse. As her hands flayed so did the items she had in them. The *suya* dropped on some of the other girls' pristine white dress. The twin girls who were careless enough to buy coloured yoghurt spilled it on themselves too. A few of them started to cry for fear of what Lady Grouch would do to them.

Yasmin had noticed Lilian's reaction to the falling leaves and deftly pulled the person closest to her, Catherine. Catherine turned to glare a warning at Yasmin and noticed that Maria, a Spanish student who had joined the school a term before started struggling to breathe, her face was beginning to swell; she was allergic to something she had eaten, but she always had something in her mouth and pockets. In their confusion, Catherine called out for help but no one came, so she told Yasmin to run back to the building they were visiting to get help.

While she did that some of the bigger girls helped carry Maria back. Lady Grouch was already waiting for them at the entrance. On seeing them, she sighed with relief and immediately wore a stern look. While the girls

were in their various hysteria, Lady Grouch gave Maria an injection. By the time the commotion had died down, and everyone was ready to get home Lady Grouch was already standing on the path of the exit, her arms crossed, her face wrinkled and her eyes cold blue as she saw her once pure pupils defiled by peasants' grub. Then she frowned.

"Where is Miss Amadi?"

Just then, Aleruchi appeared. Her uniform still pristine although she was heavily scented with disinfectants. It was the first time any student had ever seen Lady Grouch smile. It started with an unusual giggle followed by a peal of chirpy laughter. She dapped the inside of her eyes, sighed, and smiled broadly at Aleruchi.

Catherine saw the pride in Lady Grouch's eyes and wondered if one day someone would look at her in that way. (But Alfred did, always, she just never noticed).

CHAPTER TWENTY-FOUR

1982

January

Aleruchi

It was the eve of her seventeenth birthday and only a few days to her father's memorial - which had twice been postponed because *the family* needed a more befitting house for the *guests*. She didn't even know she had an extended family when her father died because only fourteen people attended his burial, his colleagues and her aunt of course. She wasn't allowed to attend his lying-in-state because she had collapsed twice since the funeral commenced.

First was the excuse that a month was too short a notice for them to rally airfare and hotel accommodations, even though they all lived in the same city. She'd since discovered ten cousins and six aunts, whom she might have blown off but for her Aunt Sylvia. Four days ago, it was the windows they wanted to replace because *louvres were old-fashioned*. The following day they had to remodel the toilets and bathrooms in every room because they were *obsolete* and *museum pieces*. More annoying was the fact that Aunt Sylvia nodded in agreement with whatever they suggested. After the old house was renovated, the *family* decided that they needed a tent for the guests.

The clanking and banging were beginning to get

under her skin. She just wanted the event to pass so she could forget the so-called family members, but her aunt would soothe her and say, "I want your father's memorial to go smoothly so don't infuriate them."

The hired hands worked through the night, while the *family* came in to use or take anything that caught their eye. The sun was not yet up on her birthday, and they'd returned for something else, but she wasn't allowed in that meeting, 'men only' they'd said. They let her aunt joined the proceedings because her *husband* insisted. Her aunt nodded to anything they said, on occasion she'd cough noisily, or shudder as if she had a convulsion and they'd *feel* her sorrow. The *fake* husband - the man Abbas hired, would then wrap his arms around her while grieving people would shake their head in pity and the guilt of their greed would sober them.

Aleruchi was amused. She didn't believe a man could agree to such a thing and wished she knew why her father's so-called sisters never visited or why she never saw any member of the family, not when her mother died or when her father died. More annoying was the fact that they seemed to be taking everything, and she could do nothing to stop them.

Catherine had told her there was a contribution each member of a family did towards the success of an event, any event but these seemed out for blood. She glared at them like an anonymous statue, she wished the noise would stop, but it seemed that they heard her wish, and increased the banging.

The evening breeze lifted the curtain, causing it to glide effortlessly in the air, and she mused over the

feeling of what it would be like to glide like that, freely. The headache pills still hadn't taken effect, so she decided to go for a walk but not before disguising herself with a boubou, a scarf around her head and sunglasses. She left a note for her aunt and snuck out.

There was a newly tarred road just behind their house, the only tarred one that went through her village in Mbuitanwo. Aleruchi didn't like sunflowers but seeing its yellow petals merge with the velvet green of the elephant grass from a distance, she couldn't help but admire its boldness. She walked beside it, just as a car was passing by, lifting the dust to her nostril. She coughed lightly and closed her eyes while fanning her face then climbed the plank used as a bridge to cross the gutter and blinked. She could breathe better now that the acrid smell of burnt tyres had settled with the dust.

As the dust settled, she saw a cluster of huts ahead. It was the first time she'd seen mud huts with thatched roofs outside a picture. Gathering the oversize dress, she slanted her head to the cheerful jeer and saw two men wrestling in the space between the huts.

It eased her mind to know that it wasn't a proper fight when she saw some old men a few feet from the wrestlers, not watching. The children jeered at them and made music of it. A woman with a basin of cassava tubers set it down by the door of one of the hut after shouting a name. A young boy of about eleven ran to her, and she flogged him with her wrapper and told him to carry the basin.

Aleruchi walked on and reached a tall tree that stood alone and used it as a marker to find her way back. As

she shielded her eyes, walking backwards, she was nudged out of the way by a half-dressed woman chased by a man holding up a machete and holding his loose wrapper with the other hand.

When the man got close, she stepped aside to let him pass. He eyed her suspiciously and continued after the woman shouting, 'Who be the papa?'

Aleruchi shook her head. (It was fast becoming a standard in these paths for men to chase their wives with cutlasses, ever since the village chiefs had stopped the custom of women swearing an oath of their fidelity to their husbands. It was abolished as a sign of equality; the women had been demanding that men start taking the oath too.)

She walked on for a while and stopped when a squeaking sound caught her attention. Following the sound, she turned to her left and saw two guinea pigs in a cassava farm. It looked like they were being chased, one before the other. A skinny auburn dog galloped passed her and a sound she couldn't quite understand followed. It sounded like a monkey and remembering what Aishatu had told her of monkey scratches *'their scratches has a rabies effect'*.

She looked surreptitiously around. She realised it wasn't a monkey and lost interest; it was a palm wine tapper bopping up the palm tree with an unusual harness. The thought of palm wine caused her to salivate, and her stomach groaned. She'd been so distracted that she'd forgotten to eat yet again.

Not wanting to miss the setting sun that she always watched from her balcony and being in a hurry, she didn't calculate the distance before jumping over the

gutter. Limping, she rested on the fence behind her house, then stood still when she heard rustling for fear that it was a wild animal and then shook her head in amusement of how ridiculous the idea was. She was about to continue her journey when she saw three men walking towards her. She considered running, but she couldn't move quickly enough. As they approached, she started praying fervently; three men and an isolated path were a terrible combination. She pressed her tiny frame against the fence, hoping the darkening sky would make them oblivious of her.

She knew one of the voices, her father's uncle. Trying to make herself smaller and still. They were discussing the house, and her eyes twitched when they mentioned the room she and her aunt slept in. By the end of the conversation, she realised the man wanted the house to himself, but he needed the documents in case she turned up one day to demand her father's property. Relieved that they had passed by without noticing her, she waited until they were on the other side of the tarred road and limp-ran to the house relaxing only after she'd secured the kitchen and sitting room door bolts. She limped back to the kitchen and almost screamed when someone's hand touched her from behind the fridge door.

"Ruru, is that you?" her aunt asked excitedly.

Aleruchi held her breath and tapped her feet to calm her nerves before her aunt would notice her anxiety. She was still holding the dress up and let it drop, gritting her teeth as it grazed her injury. She tiptoed out of the kitchen and limp-ran upstairs to change into something else.

“I have news o! you will not believe it.” Aunt Sylvia closed the fridge, looked around, and shrugged when she realised she was alone.

The next day, Aleruchi went into the ceiling in her late mother’s room to get the documents her father stashed there. She riffled through them and but couldn’t find the papers for the house. She took all the documents that she saw there and hid them under the bed except for a few that she read and figured there would be of some importance. She bit her fingernails as she thought of what to do, the Will would finally be read the following day after the memorial service. She had agreed with her aunt to sell the company to the real man in her aunt’s life, Abbas, now her fiancé. She came to this agreement after she discovered how many cousins, she had who had very good WAEC and JAMB results but didn’t have money to further their education.

“Why do you need a satchel? We’re only going out for a few hours?” Aunt Sylvia asked amused.

“I’m thinking of doing some drawings on the way.” Aleruchi lied smoothly, startling herself.

Aunt Sylvia raised a brow then shook her head smiling.

Aleruchi kept her distance.

There seemed to be a reason why they hated her mother. Initially, when she broached the topic, her aunt would scold her, and now she just thinned her lips and sighed ruefully. She pushed her problem aside focused her thoughts on Catherine and then on Nkiru who hadn’t responded to any of her letters. She didn’t realise that her aunt was speaking to her and when she didn’t answer, her aunt didn’t pester.

After the Will was read, her father's relatives left the house with their proverbial tails between their legs.

Against her aunt's advice, she secured scholarships for all her cousins, classmates Hadiza and Yasmin through the sale of the company. To allay her aunt's fears, she put some money away in two fixed deposit accounts, one for tuition and the other for a rainy day which she was sure would never come. After an argument, she agreed to put some away for when she had completed her masters.

Unknown to Aleruchi, Hadiza had been murdered by one of their senior prefects, Karen. Her male counterpart, Akilu, discarded Hadiza on discovering that she was pregnant then took Karen to meet his parents. Karen, in turn, used it to taunt Hadiza. Karen and Akilu's fathers were powerful and influential, but no one knew Hadiza's uncle was the commissioner for police for Kaduna state.

The weeks preceding her return to school, her WAEC result arrived. Even though she'd excelled, her aunt insisted that she should take her final exams for her testimonial and bid her friends a good send-off. Her aunt had become too protective of her, especially since they'd all discovered her aunt was pregnant.

Feeling smothered, Aleruchi now yearned for school more than ever.

The eve of her returning to school her aunt confirmed that Abbas was going to see her kinsmen that she would need to be there. In other words, Aleruchi must join her.

The following day, at sunrise, before her aunt woke

up, Aleruchi took her bath and called a cab, dropped a note for her aunt and left for the airport. Her aunt saw the note, grimaced her disappointment and smiled her pride - it was the first time Aleruchi had done something so daring.

CHAPTER TWENTY-FIVE

1982

February

Catherine

Catherine blinked; she was sure she didn't fall off the bed of her own accord. She frowned because Aleruchi was supposed to be in Port Harcourt. Unsure, she looked around and sighed, somewhat relieved. Aleruchi always pushed her off the bed to wake her. She'd been waking up late since before Aleruchi left for Port Harcourt a second time.

For weeks Catherine had been unable to keep food down. The school nurse gave her medication for stomach ulcer, but each passing day, she grew weak and tired. She slept better in the afternoon even though it was in class.

On Thursday's eve, a student had forgotten to blow out the light from their candle before falling asleep. The matron came in and saw the foggy room and flogged everyone to get them out quickly as she threw the windows open. It was when the fog had dissipated that they discovered it had burned down the girl's mattress. Worried that the girl had been burnt too caused a wave of panic which ended quickly as someone had found the girl in the library sleeping.

Catherine started feeling nauseous right after that, and she rushed into the bathroom to puke.

"Are you alright?" Yasmin whispered and slowly washed her toothbrush.

"Yes, why?" Catherine snapped.

"Nothing o," Yasmin looked away and was taking too long to wash her toothbrush.

She eyed nosy Yasmin who would make her retching, a topic of discussion in school. Unknown to her, she already was. One morning, she passed out in class and was rushed to the hospital before the principal arrived. She was returned to school the following day. Lady Grouch, the school nurse, the matron, and the vice principal invited her to join them in a meeting. What she didn't count on was her parents being there. She didn't even realise that they were in there until the typist closed the door behind her.

She found herself shrink within herself. Feeling naked and placed on a pedestal for all to see. Her suspicions were true. She prayed it was a nightmare and pinched herself. Her heart raced as she wished for her non-existence. She couldn't look up. The vice principal's voice was loud and distant and sounded like mumbling. She saw fair legs in brown leather sandals and knew it was her father's. He was pacing, he stopped at the door and turned, gesturing, "There's your daughter."

"What?" her mother squeaked, getting up with an outstretched hand, then adjusted her head and sat down slowly. She watched her mother grind her teeth, then roused slowly and walked to her. She morosely watched her mother lift her hand and place a folded sheet of paper in it. She held onto it like her life depended on it. Looking at her mother with tears

running down her face forced her to hold back hers. She felt her mother's lips on her forehead and nothing else. Her mother opened the door and left. Catherine remained rooted to the spot until she crumbled to the floor. Everyone left the room except Lady Grouch, who wrapped her arms around Catherine and guided her to her dormitory.

Catherine climbed into her bed and covered herself in the thick blanket, shielding herself from the world. She wailed until she was exhausted.

Aleruchi arrived an hour later, the news of Catherine's pregnancy reached her; a roommate who was eavesdropping told her. She looked for Catherine. Giving up her search, she headed to the dorm to get herself a snack. She saw the sole of someone's shoes on the bed, under the bright blue blanket and she knew it was Catherine. She went to lie beside her and patted her friend gently until she slept.

The next day Catherine's things were moved to the Reverend Sisters' quarters. For days, Catherine refused to eat. She had cried until her eyes were so swollen that Aleruchi had to lead her to the toilet whenever she needed to ease herself. Finally, she confided in Aleruchi that Alfred had provided contraceptives, but she forgot them in school the last time she went to visit him and lied to him about it. She didn't think he would want her to keep it. Her dad had disowned her, and her mother's right over had long been withdrawn.

One Thursday afternoon; after she'd fainted and had been moved to sickbay, Alfred came. Aleruchi was asleep on a chair beside her, holding onto a book.

"Hey," Alfred brushed Catherine's cheek.

She squinted, then opened her eyes wide to make sure it wasn't a dream.

Alfred pinched her.

"Ouch," she moaned, glaring at him as she nursed her arm.

"I just wanted you to know it's the real me."

She roused herself to a sitting position, cleared her throat and asked. "How did you know?"

"Ruchi sent me a letter, but I didn't know you were pregnant until now."

She grimaced.

"I'm almost a doctor. I was careless. I should have—"

"It's already happened. I—"

"Hold that thought," he cut in.

She frowned and licked her teeth before yawning into her palm to check her breath. She raised a brow as she appraised him. He hadn't shaved, and he looked so different... more mature.

"I have a surprise for you," Alfred said and quickly left the room. When he returned, he was holding hands with a much older woman. He led the woman to Catherine's bed. "This is my mother. She's been longing to meet you."

The woman shrugged his hand off and waltzed into the room, her arms outstretched. "Hello, my daughter."

Catherine was a little startled. "Good morning, Ma!" she liked Alfred's mother's smile.

"Good morning my dear!" The older version of Alfred retorted as she sat on the bed. "How are you feeling? Alfred told me that I was going to be a grandmother."

Catherine's eyes widened.

"You will be coming with us if that's okay. I have

prepared a nursery, well, it's on the works."

Catherine slanted her eyes at Alfred. He looked hopeful. She couldn't go back home as her parents wanted nothing to do with her – her mother was *polite* enough to do it in writing. She considered her options; she was supposed to be leaving with Aleruchi the following day, she couldn't possibly leave to stay with him, but her pregnancy was Alfred's responsibility. She heard the hinges of the door creak and watched a few students rush in waking Aleruchi up.

I will have to discuss this with Ruchi before I decide

One of the students gave Catherine a letter. "Mrs. Gumel said to give you this."

"Who's Mrs. Gumel?" Alfred's mother asked in a gentle voice.

Aleruchi frowned. "The vice principal."

Alfred's mother left to meet the school nurse, and Alfred went to check on his school son, giving Catherine enough time to sort things out with Aleruchi. Aleruchi seemed more excited about the news than Catherine but Aleruchi was right, she'd gained a mother.

Alfred had just entered his fifth and final year when he found out that Catherine was pregnant.

He hadn't disclosed to her that his father had disowned him. He suspected that she would be pregnant when he received a letter from Aleruchi asking him to hurry to Kaduna State and seeing her confirmed his fears. He loved her and was going to do right by her.

His mother went with him to get an engagement ring for Catherine. He wasn't sure of what she would like but

knew she loved silverware and always talked about the one they had used on their cruise to Belfast. He sighed. She would see Belfast again as soon as he graduated. He'll take her anywhere in the world she wanted to go.

Catherine toyed with her engagement ring. It was kind of Alfred to propose. However, she wasn't sure she wanted to get married without her parents, her family may not have been closely-knit, but they were her family. Her cousins wouldn't even associate with her because she was *unlucky enough* to get pregnant. Her father was the breadwinner to his siblings and their children, so it was expected that they would wear a screen and follow him blindly. Fortunately, her father had asked his cousin to represent him. She would have gladly given them up as parents if she had an income.

Alfred had stood by her from the day he realised her parents had disowned her. He blamed himself mostly, she knew, from the way he spoke. His parents had proceeded with the traditional marriage rites, but there was no one to receive the dowry on her father's behalf because he told them not to. In other words, she was a bastard, a child who was no longer convenient to his status. Sometimes she wondered why they bothered giving birth to her. Her cousin confided in her that her father was presently 'out of the country'.

She didn't think Alfred's family could cope with her as an extra mouth to feed, and it seemed his father didn't like her. She didn't realise that her father-in-law was one of the wealthiest men in the eastern part of Nigeria thanks to marrying the only daughter of an oil magnate

who was also a paramount ruler.

The weather was smelting on the day of the white wedding. Luckily, the ceremony was over in an hour giving everyone more than enough time to reach the reception venue. An hour later, the couple joined everyone else at the reception hall. Aleruchi quickly snatched the light-blue knickers that caught on Catherine's dress. As the MC introduced the new couple, Catherine belched on seeing their three-tier porcelain-like cake, causing the MC to pause. Alfred gestured that he should continue.

Catherine had mixed feelings and wondered if it was the wedding that does that or if it was the baby or perhaps it was because she missed her mother and tried to fight off the tears that prickled her eyes when she was called to cut the cake. To detract from her thoughts, she decided to focus on her guests.

Aleruchi was her chief bridesmaid and seemed more excited than anyone else. Three of her classmates appointed themselves her bridesmaids; Yasmin was one of them. Some of her classmates came along with the help of Lady Grouch. It was the first time they'd seen lady Grouch in ordinary clothes; the blue dress looked like an extension of her eyes. Lady Grouch squinted even more without her glasses, making her pert nose more noticeable.

A gangling bald man in white brocade shirt and orange trousers gate-crashed and secured a seat beside Lady Grouch and leaned into her whispering. Whatever he said made her turn red from her neck up, her mouth hung open with widened eyes. She composed herself almost immediately and signalled the waiter, took two

glasses of red wine from his tray and glanced at her students then stealthily emptied the wine on the man's crotch. The man quietly took one of the programmes to cover his stained trousers and left.

Alfred tapped Catherine looking concerned. She smiled politely in response. If she hadn't seen his shaking hands and noticed the spontaneous clearing of his throat, she would have believed that he wasn't nervous. He wasn't his chirpy self, and he was usually nervous at any gathering, but she saw something different this time. Her heart sank as she remembered that he would be back in school in a few weeks. and she would be at home alone except on the days his mother would visit.

She looked down at her stomach and sighed.

CHAPTER TWENTY-SIX

1982

April

Aleruchi

Catherine slammed the books on her desk and mumbled, “One would think after you didn’t show up, he would write you.”

“Why are you taking *dogonyaro* for my malaria *sef*?” Aleruchi asked as she filled a glass for Catherine.

“It’s annoying me, especially as you like him so much. Maybe I shouldn’t have gone back to get his details.”

“I never said I did. Besides he’s history.”

“Keep telling yourself that. I’m not just meeting you for the first time, dear.”

Aleruchi grimaced. “I hate it when you call me *dear*.”

“Get used to it.”

“Why?”

“Because we’ll be best friends for life.”

“I see.” Aleruchi closed the book unable to concentrate any longer.

“You don’t,” Catherine wrapped her arms around Aleruchi from behind.

Aleruchi seemed distracted, blinked and shrugged.

Catherine knocked on the desk. “Hello?”

Aleruchi looked up and sighed. “Do you think Jacinta was one of the girls raped that day?”

“Wow, why would you remember such a thing now?”

“I don’t know. It just occurred to me.”

“Nothing just occurs to you, Ruchi. How long have you been thinking of it?”

Aleruchi flipped the pages of her textbook and grimaced. “For a while now. If she was, then I’m to blame because I’m the reason she went to the stream that night.”

“Or me, you remember the principal ordered her to be fetching water for me.”

Aleruchi nodded slowly.

“It’s one of the things I’ll fight against when I become president.”

“President, you say? You didn’t even say governor or better still commissioner.”

“What’s wrong with my wanting to be president?”

“Well, this Nigeria will not be ready for a female president even in the next fifty years.”

“You never know.”

“When you become president, let me know.”

“I wouldn’t tell you, wish-rope-cutter.”

“Hmm. I agree!”

Catherine smiled coyly. “That’s why I love Alfred, he always supports me.”

“Yes, even when you’re doing the wrong thing. Which university is he at?”

“Unical.” Catherine frowned. “I thought I told you?”

“Hmm?”

“University of Calabar.”

“Oh!”

“What do you mean by ‘oh’?”

Aleruchi shrugged. “Nothing.”

“You’re ‘nothing’ usually means something.”

“Uncle Fabian studied there.”

“Ah yes, you know you never told me what transpired in the principal’s office that day.”

Aleruchi hissed.

“Okay, what’s wrong with the question I asked?” *Na wa oh!*

“It’s not important.”

“So why the big *secret*? Or, you’re afraid I’ll goof.”

Aleruchi sighed.

“I still wonder how we managed to become best friends.”

I wonder. Because your mouth is like a dysfunctional clapperboard. You don’t notice when someone doesn’t want to talk or listen. I haven’t asked for a listening ear.

“Why are you so quiet?”

Aleruchi rolled her eyes. *Don’t you ever get it?*

“I feel like you’re ignoring me.”

Jesus Christ! Aleruchi rubbed her cheek on her shoulder, willing Catherine to be quiet.

Catherine absentmindedly toyed with her earrings for a few seconds. “Have you heard from Eduardo?”

Aleruchi held her breath and released it slowly. “No, I don’t want to hear anything about him.”

Catherine twisted her mouth. “Therefore, you don’t want to hear anything about Alfred either.”

“Touché.”

“Ah! You’re in a mood.”

Finally, she gets it. Aleruchi glared at her friend and stood up abruptly.

“Well, suck it up. I need you.” Catherine nudged her to sit back down. “Your eyes aren’t scary, so sit down. Sit down nawh, please?”

Aleruchi was a little startled.

"I need your advice, and yes, it's about Alfred."

Aleruchi shrugged. *Here we go again.*

"You know we've been fighting but not the reason you think." Catherine rubbed her stomach looked at her then got up and tucked her hands in her pinafore before she started pacing.

"I have tried to make him happy, you know. Even losing weight –"

"I thought your weight loss was attributed to your family doctor. If I remember clearly, you said it will kill you."

"You were listening?"

Aleruchi stared at her, amused.

"You were listening," Catherine threw herself on Aleruchi knocking them down.

Aleruchi unhooked Catherine's arms from her neck. She adjusted her dress and gave Catherine a querying look.

"You usually don't say anything. I can't believe it!" Catherine squealed excitedly. "I thought I've been talking to myself all these years. How come you never said anything?"

"Like what?"

"Wow, you're even replying." *I do hope this is a good thing.*

"Are you okay?" Aleruchi asked and froze.

"Yes, of course, don't I look okay? You, on the other hand, look like you've seen a ghost." Catherine giggled. She frowned when her friend didn't flinch and followed her friend's gaze to the man standing a few inches away from her.

Uncle Fabian?

"Is that not your Uncle?" Catherine asked in a loud whisper.

"Unc-le Fabian good afternoon," Aleruchi got up slowly. He looked old in the tattered blue shorts and a short-sleeved shirt in a matching colour. She looked at him tentatively; he was barefooted, no longer balding as his head was now covered with a glossy black afro, his skin shimmered, and was almost translucent.

"Sit down Ruchi," He gurgled and cleared his throat. "I'm sorry for all I have put you through. I loved your step-mother so much I didn't think through half the things I did. I just felt you should know that I love you so much and I know I'm now doing the right thing. No harm shall come to you I promise. Be strong!" He cleared his throat and walked briskly away.

"Is that all?" Catherine asked, angrily and shrugged simultaneously.

Aleruchi's heart fell, and she knew something was wrong. She rubbed her arms and moved closer to the window to feel the warmth of the sun then pondered on the possibility of her uncle escaping prison. *What did he mean by all that? How could he give that excuse of not thinking it through? He killed a human being, a full-fledged human being, his only brother, blood brother for goodness sake. He has no excuse, none whatsoever. Imagine that, telling me to be strong.*

He should have waited until I've finished my exams! Aleruchi hissed. She rocked herself and stared at the ground angrily.

What a way to steal someone's happiness. She was beginning to open up, and now this. Catherine scratched

the back of her head, not sure if it was right to say anything. She hoped her friend would return to her overtly bright mood then turned her head to the sound of rapid footsteps.

A handful of their classmates were panting when they got to where Aleruchi sat with Catherine standing with arms akimbo beside her. One of them told Aleruchi that Lady Grouch wanted to see her. They all wanted to know what Aleruchi had done to warrant Lady Grouch's attention. Aleruchi got up. She already knew they were going to tell her that her uncle had escaped from prison. She lagged, pulling her very pregnant friend with her and whispered. "Don't tell anyone who we just saw."

"Okay." She said shrugging Aleruchi's hand off her sleeve.

In the office, Lady Grouch sent everyone out except Catherine, who refused to leave her friend's side. A few minutes later, they walked to their room, crying all the way in each other's arms. Catherine was crying because she had seen a ghost. Aleruchi didn't know why she was crying. Uncle Fabian was dead. He had died hours before she saw him. Was she crying because she had no other family or because he was a coward to have killed himself rather than face the consequences of his action or simply because he apologized too late?

As soon as they got to their dorm, Aleruchi stopped crying. Shaking her head, she decided not to cry anymore.

Late that night, Aleruchi was called to the sickbay because Catherine wanted to speak to her, but it was Catherine's mother-in-law who spoke to her: Catherine

had lost the baby.

CHAPTER TWENTY-SEVEN

1986

February

Catherine

Saturday was not a day she liked to go visiting, but her mother-in-law was *the* Mrs. Angela Osuji, her best friend, mother, father, and sister. Her father-in-law, Chief Raymond Osuji, always had a condescending look on his face whenever he saw her. Alfred had not reunited with his dad, but he consistently inquired about his welfare. She had just acquired a car, it was second-hand. It had a new engine, but the bodywork had seen better days. She honked several times before the gateman peeped out of his window. He stared at her for a few more seconds until she wound down the windscreen and peered out of the car.

Sighing when she saw her father-in-law's jeep, she'd hoped he'd be out before she'd arrive. Soon after opening the gate for her, the gateman was beside the driver's side of the jeep. She sighed again and greeted her father-in-law whose reply was the same as always, a nod. The gateman seemed to be in a hurry.

"Small madam, I greet o! No vex my shift just finished and -"

She waved her hand, and he stopped.

"Small madam, you want anything? Sanitation go soon start o."

“I know.” A little irritated then she softened. “No worry.”

He nodded just as the second gateman walked in and closed the gate mumbling. The first one glared at his counterpart who in turn smiled an apology.

Catherine shook her head then looked back to where the jeep had been and sighed with relief. Chief Osuji was no longer there. She heard a buzz and swatted round herself until it occurred to her that it was her phone. There was silence at the other end. Shrugging, she shoved the phone back into her bag and smoothed her dress and was about to press the doorbell when she heard the maid greet her.

The aroma coming from the kitchen caused her to smile. “*Hanh*, something smells nice. I’m going to eat o!” Catherine strolled into the kitchen chuckling.

Angela, Mrs Osuji was chopping onions, while Chief Osuji whom Catherine thought had left the house was whirling a glass of brown liquid at one end of the kitchen. As soon as he heard her voice, he got up, gulped it, and left the room. She watched him go and smirked under her breath.

“Of course, my dear Catherine, this house is as much yours as mine.” Mrs Osuji retorted with a smile.

“Angela,” Catherine chuckled and cleared her throat as she pulled out a high stool from under the breakfast bar.

“Sit down, let me stir the soup and I’ll join you in a bit.”

Catherine didn’t wait for her but walked in tow behind her.

Chief Osuji came over and kissed his wife on the

cheek before leaving. Catherine lowered her eyes. She hadn't forgiven him and doubted she ever will. The memory of that fateful day was still fresh, and no amount of effort to suppress it quelled it. It's been three years now since he abandoned her in the car to check on his *business partner*.

Catherine shuddered as the memory resurfaced. *A few minutes after he picked her up, Chief Osuji turned the car in the opposite direction of the hospital and told her it would take him five minutes. Five minutes to pick up the file because his business partner would be waiting at the gate of his building with the files he needed. They got to a place with cobalt-coloured gates and fence that was almost double the height of the neighbouring gates. There was no one standing in front of it, so he had to go inside. She waited a few more minutes since she didn't experience any pain but then dreading the next one she changed her mind.*

She climbed out of the car and went into the compound to look for him. It was an estate of Swiss houses with slate roofing. There was no gateman and no one to ask directions and worse of all she didn't know which house he had entered. She was surprised at the long stretch of houses, and suspected there was a power outage when she saw the lights go off until she noticed that the houses further down still had light.

Still contemplating what to do, another spasm coursed through her, and she screamed. The pain had left her exhausted than she was previously. Feeling she wasn't going to get help in the compound, she turned around to leave. She only took two steps before pain shot through her again, but this time she passed out.

She woke up four hours later, to find Alfred holding her hand tenderly. Chief Osuji looked like he'd shrivelled as he stalked back and forth, taking snapshots of her from time to time. She caught her mother-in-law wiping her face and knew. Her stomach felt empty, her nightmare had seeped into her reality. She had lost the baby, another baby. Their first child didn't make it. Now the second? After everything they'd been through, it didn't stick around?

She held her breath for a few more seconds before turning around to face her mother-in-law whose back was still set to her.

"Are you okay?"

Angela nodded, but her shoulders were hunched.

"Are you sure?" Catherine asked frowning and turned her mother-in-law, so they were eye to eye.

Angela let out an exaggerated sigh and patted her on the shoulder. "I'm alright, my dear."

Just then Chief Raymond Osuji popped his head in and cleared his throat noisily.

Angela raised her brow at him.

"I have an appointment."

"Okay," Angela mumbled and exhaled slowly. "Will you be back before dinner?"

He paused for a while. "Most likely, hmm."

Soon after he left the kitchen, Mrs. Osuji and Catherine made light conversations, and she advised Catherine about making her marriage work especially as it was evident that Alfred still loved her. She looked at Catherine and smiled then harrumphed but harrumphed so violently,

Catherine looked up concerned then intercepted her

mother-in-law's advance to the cooker. Mrs. Osuji gestured, and Catherine turned off the gas then Mrs. Osuji stalked off to the cabinet by her right and retrieved a bottle of cough syrup. Catherine watched her for a while and brought out a spoon to where her mother-in-law sat.

From her position, she could see her father-in-law's reflection on the glass cabinet. He was hovering, probably listening in to their conversation. When she saw him drive off, she immediately signalled Catherine to pass her the phone. Catherine watched her mother-in-law dial a number on her phone and turn on the speaker. Catherine was surprised but said nothing.

"He just left."

"I see him, but I can't come in yet." The voice on the other end was female.

"Why?"

"He just parked outside."

Angela snickered.

"All right, he's about to move... Hold on. He is talking to your gateman. I don't think it'll be wise for me to come in."

"Why not? My goodness, we've been waiting for this."

"I know, but I don't feel good about this."

"Wait. Catherine, go and meet my lawyer."

"But Mrs. Osuji, she isn't supposed to be part of this as the executor of your will and..."

"Shush, let me think." Mrs Osuji got up and walked to the window.

Catherine crooned her neck to look at her mother-in-law and was surprised to read distraught on the woman's face. She exhaled slowly as she pondered on a

polite way to question her mother-in-law. *Was there a polite way?*

"I'll call you back." Mrs. Osuji harrumphed again. As soon as she calmed down, she pulled Catherine closer. "Don't say anything, just listen. I'm dying. I think Alfred's life is in danger too. You're the only one I can trust," she sighed. "I can't think of any family member who wouldn't kill my son for my wealth. I've advised him to take you abroad. I've signed the house in Nottingham over to you. Please, my dear, don't wait until you can conceive, you can adopt. My son is willing, but you are as always..." she harrumphed again. "stubborn as a mule. I sent for my lawyer, but she believes my gateman is my husband's spy."

"Wait, oh, sorry! I just wanted to ask if she is outside?"

Angela nodded.

Catherine gestured as she roused from her chair. She needed a breath of air. The information she received put a damper on her good spirit. As soon as she stepped outside, she raised her head up and inhaled the receding Harmattan air. There was still a chill in the air, causing her to rub her exposed arms and walked briskly to the gateman.

"Abdul."

"Small Madam, good morning."

"Good morning Abdul. I need your help."

"Anything, small madam? You know me, anything you want." He licked his lips, knowing that she would make his day by greasing his palm with money. "Please go and buy me *kwili-kwili*."

Abdul scratched his head nervously. "Oh, eh... small

madam. The woman for this side of the road has gone to Mecca, and the other good one is far far far.”

“Not to worry, just lock the gate and go.”

“Okay, small madam. *Ehen*, the money to buy the thing, eh... the *kwi*...”

“I’ll be right back.” Catherine waltzed inside and was back in a few seconds, wallet in hand. “Here,” she gave him the money, “don’t lock the side gate in case I want to go out.”

“Go out small madam?” Abdul stammered.

“Yes, the *African salad* girl will soon pass and...”

Abdul nodded in agreement. He quickly scurried away to get what she ordered so he could keep the change.

She waited for at least three minutes before going to the gate. She opened the gate and bumped into a lady. She frowned when the lady brushed past her and walked right through to the kitchen.

Still stunned, she bolted the gate and walked back towards the house and stopped in her tracks when she heard the voice of the girl hawking African salad. To keep up the charade in case she needed it, she went out to beckon the girl. The hawker didn’t have enough change and not being in the mood for a conversation she discharged the girl.

Just then the lady that brushed past her earlier repeated the same action, almost knocking down the hawker who had barely balanced her tray. Catherine blinked and shrugged. She helped the hawker pick some of her utensils. As the hawker nodded her thanks, the gateman pushed past the hawker, but she was alert this time, and deftly moved out of his way.

The gateman didn’t see the lady leave he was looking

at the hawker's cleavage as he prepared to make his order. He quickly locked the gate after the hawker left and nearly jumped out of his skin when he heard a car horn. Wiping his forehead, he quickly reopened the gate.

Catherine had to squint to make out the features of the woman in the passenger seat cosying up to Chief Osuji. Mrs. Osuji came out of the house, and the girl in the car's countenance changed, but there was no remorse on Chief Osuji's face.

Mrs. Osuji let out a sorrowful sigh then shook her head when she saw the anger in Catherine's eyes. Catherine moved forward, but Mrs. Osuji caught her by the arm and held her in place for a few minutes more interminable whispering. "Go home!"

Catherine nodded slowly and looked into Mrs. Osuji's eyes, searching for answers.

"Look at me, child," Mrs Osuji said sternly.

Catherine raised a brow at her mother-in-law.

Mrs Osuji gently and slowly put Catherine's cross body bag over her head and nudged her to leave. "Be strong. I love you!"

Catherine hugged Mrs. Osuji, suddenly feeling an emptiness and looked back at her when she got to the car then slanted a look of disgust at her father-in-law and glared intently at the girl hoping to deal with her when the opportunity came.

Catherine hurried to the hospital Alfred worked. She wanted him to know what was happening; it wasn't something she wanted to leave until he got home. She arrived to discover he was on call at another clinic. She asked for the address and found out it was somewhere

in the east. She sat down in the waiting room, close to tears.

How could Alfie go all the way to the east and not tell me? Has our relationship gone so sour that he couldn't confide in me? Could my Alfie be hiding something from me?

What would it be then?

CHAPTER TWENTY-EIGHT

1986

September

Catherine

“Your pistachio two scoops, strawberry one scoop with sprinkles.” The girl in yellow and red striped cap murmured.

Catherine exhaled, unhooked her bag to produce her wallet and asked. “How much is it?”

The salesgirl pouted and said matter-of-factly. “One thousand seven-fifty naira.”

“What? For a cup of ice cream?”

The salesgirl scowled.

Catherine made a mental note to use the ATM as she produced money to pay the girl. Realising the girl’s reason for cringing, she lowered her head and talked a little slower, so she would not have to open her mouth so much – she had forgotten to brush her teeth in a rush to meet the supervisor of the new building. She opened her wallet and sulked when she realised she had forgotten to give her seamstress the money she had gotten from bureau de change and rummaged through it in confusion, unsure of where she had put the last naira notes she had on her.

She managed to find enough naira notes to pay for the ice cream and looked up to see the girl looking at her up and down. She curled her lips and gave the girl a

‘what’s your problem’ stare, and the girl looked away. Grinning, she dusted her blouse around her midriff where sawdust had settled and chuckled; she’d worn her blouse inside out. Still smiling she turned, bumping into someone who was looking at something on the ground.

“Ruchi?” Catherine hugged her best friend and pecked her cheek in a hurry. “What on earth are you doing here? What happened to you?”

“Hey, cool down,” Aleruchi chuckled and exhaled dreamily. “My aunt is getting married tomorrow o!”

“Finally!” Catherine chirped excitedly.

“That is eh,” Aleruchi chuckled in agreement. “Why are you dressed like this? What happened?” Aleruchi asked as she returned to peering at the ground.

Catherine joined her briefly, wondering what Aleruchi was seeing. She sighed and rested an arm on her hip and watched her friend then looked up to see the salesgirl staring at her.

“Aha!” Aleruchi exclaimed and went under a table and came out beaming.

Catherine had to look closely at her friend’s fingertip then at her friend expecting an explanation.

“The clasp, it just fell, and I had to get it o. I better remove this necklace before it puts me into trouble. It’s for my aunt, her *something old*.”

“Hmm, it’s beautiful.”

“So, why you dress like this comot for house?” Aleruchi asked as she unclasped the lapel of her bag.

Catherine kissed her teeth and pulled out a chair in tandem. “My sister, it’s my contractor o! He mixed up my supply again. I had to sort it out or a day’s job will

be lost. You know how it is nawh!”

“Same thing she is having,” Aleruchi said to the salesgirl who didn’t hide her hesitance, but Aleruchi was oblivious to it.

“I had to go to the building site to sort it out for the foreman as I’ve just discovered that he hasn’t been on the site for the past week.”

“Why do these people do that? I wonder how they hope to get paid when you have to come and supervise what you’ve already paid them to do.”

Catherine raised a hand in agreement.

“Why are you the person supervising? What about Alfred?”

“Leave that one. He sent his cousin, and that one absconded with the whole money, that’s why we’re still working on the house.”

Aleruchi collected her ice-cream and turned to leave.

The salesgirl, aghast, looked on.

Catherine feigned a cough. “Eh, Ruchi, you never pay.”

“Psst, sorry my dear.” Aleruchi sighed, retrieved her purse and paid the grumpy salesgirl.

“Ehen, tell me something I don’t know,” Aleruchi said while scanning the room for a suitable place to sit down.

“Let’s sit over there,” Catherine said with a frown and added. “I have a feeling his cousin has gone abroad with the money.”

Aleruchi pulled out a chair for each of them. “Why?”

“Well, he’s been asking to be sponsored, so I assumed that’s what he did.”

“Nothing wrong with that.”

“Yes, but Alfred has been seeing him through Uni. He

has just one year to go. He wants the boy to finish first then he can travel abroad for his masters you know, to boost his chances of getting employed."

"And the boy is willing to throw that away?" She asked, looking over her friend.

Catherine shrugged and took a mouthful of ice cream.

Aleruchi shook her head and looked out again. "People can be funny sometimes."

"What is it?"

"Hhm?"

"You've looked outside twice. What is it?"

"Oh, my cousin and her friends are coming, and I told them we'd meet halfway."

"Halfway eh?"

"Mh-huh."

"In an eatery?"

"Before nkó, let them meet me here. Oh, don't worry this is where we agreed to meet."

Catherine nodded. Yesterday she was desperate to talk to anyone who cared to listen about her predicaments. But now, she wanted to deal with her feelings herself. She already knew why her mother-in-law had invited her over a while ago. She sighed inwardly; it was difficult to forget the fair girl beside her father-in-law. The girl must have been her agemate, give or take a year or two.

He didn't even feel any shame in bringing a girl old enough to be his daughter to his marital home. What on earth could he have told the girl to give her such audacity? Maybe he promised to marry her. However, why would she agree to such a thing? Stupid question I guess, she is probably a Yoruba girl. I just don't

understand why they can be comfortable being second wives. It beats me! She shivered at the distasteful vibe it now left her.

Aleruchi stared at her friend for a moment. “Is something the matter?”

Catherine shrugged in disbelief, still lost in thought.

Aleruchi wiped her mouth and sighed. “Cathy.” She tapped the table to get her friend’s attention.

Six months ago, I saw him in this restaurant with two women. It was hard to tell if they were intimate or the girl was just brushing off the crumbs from his beard. It wasn’t the same girl as I had seen in the car. How can a man who has lived with a woman for over thirty years turn around and want to snuff her life?

Maybe the girl had juju on him. It was now common for girls to go after married men.

What if Alfred is, no, absolutely not!

“Cathy?” Aleruchi called and kicked her friend on the shin.

“Aww!” Catherine glared at her friend then squinted at the empty cup wondering how she could have finished the ice cream and not even remember the taste or smooth coldness of it moving down her throat. She had been a bit scatter-brained lately. It didn’t help that Alfred was never around. It’s like he didn’t want to be around her anymore.

Aleruchi reclined, crossed her arms around her body and pursed her lips.

“What?” Catherine hissed and pushed her chair back so she could reach her shin. “That was painful *nawh*.”

Aleruchi leaned forward and whispered. “You were acting like a lunatic.” Then stretched. “Besides, I needed

to get your attention.”

Catherine gave her a wry smile.

“What is going on?” Aleruchi asked, quite concerned.

“Why are you in Lagos by the way?”

“I already told you –”

“But you’re still here, and she is not.”

Aleruchi sipped her canned drink. “So?”

“Well, you said –”

“I know what I said.” Aleruchi took another sip. “I think she is running late. Don’t think you’ve gotten away with that. So, back to my question...” she paused.

Catherine frowned because Aleruchi looked like she was in a trance only that her eyes and mouth were wide open. She grinned and nudged her to shut her mouth.

Aleruchi blinked. “Did you see that guy?” Aleruchi asked, with an animated look, darting her finger at Catherine in tandem.

“Welcome back.” Catherine murmured with a sly smile. “One would think you’re in love at first sight.”

“Na today!” Aleruchi sniggered and brushed off crumbs from her shirt and wiped her hand. “You know I don’t believe in such things.”

“Hmm!”

“You know I’ll make a comment when I see something nice.”

“Mh-huh.”

“He was so...” Aleruchi rolled her eyes. “You’re so boring. Does marriage cause that? I don’t mean in a bad way. It’s just... it’s just that you’ve changed. I remember a time when everything that came out of your mouth was about boys. Now, well...” Aleruchi took another sip and looked away avoiding Catherine’s eyes.

Catherine had a peaceful look which only lasted a moment. "If I remember clearly you couldn't wait to cover your ears whenever I was around. I was talkative then."

"In other words, I'm the talkative now."

Catherine, eager to withdraw from her thoughts, cleared her throat comically and hoped Aleruchi took the bait.

"Ah, you think it's funny. Evil communication corrupts good manners o, in case you've forgotten."

Catherine looked up to see three girls coming towards her.

"Hi! Are you Ruchi by any chance?" The tallest one asked curiously.

Catherine pointed at Ruchi who was frowning at the girl, she had never met her cousin, but she was told that she was slender, fair and not with so much breasts and most importantly she was supposed to be wearing fuchsia leggings and a long white shirt.

Aleruchi

"Hi, Elfie couldn't make it."

"Elfie as in Elfreda?" Aleruchi stated raising her brow.

"Yes," the girl sighed, struggling to catch her breath and handed a folded foolscap sheet to Aleruchi. "These are our measurements and Elfie's own too. Do you have any message for her?"

Aleruchi shook her head and pursed her lips simultaneously.

"Okay, bye!"

Aleruchi's eyes followed the girl and her entourage

until they left the eatery.

“Why are you looking at her like that?”

“These people don’t have manners.”

“She may be thinking the same thing.”

“Why?”

“Well hello, she is obviously older than us.”

“It doesn’t matter. Hhm, I get the feeling my cousin is dodging me. *Shebi*, she’ll need the clothes.” Aleruchi let out an exasperated sigh. “She’ll come to the house to pick it up.”

“Why?”

“Well, anytime we’re supposed to meet this happens.”

“What?” Catherine, quite confused.

“*Na wa o!* Did you see the *Elfreda* here?”

“You don’t have to bite my head off *nawh, na wa o!*”

“Anyway, it’s my aunt’s wedding. Which reminds me, will you be attending?”

Catherine shrugged.

“That indicates indifference. You know I don’t have any friends but you. Oh, it will be so boring without anyone to talk to. I need to marry too, you know so that I too can have company.” Aleruchi moaned. She was exhausted, mentally and physically. Her aunt’s wedding brought up emotions she’d thought she had overcome and would rather have left buried. It was also a reminder that she was the only singleton amongst her friends.

Catherine quickly asked. “When is it?”

“This Saturday, 1p.m.” Aleruchi retorted excitedly.

“This Saturday and you’re only telling me now. So, what if I didn’t meet you here.”

“Before you give me your manifesto –”

Catherine glared at her, and she thinned her lips. "How are those girls' clothes going to be ready on time?"

"They will be. The tailors have already been arranged."

"I see." Catherine nodded in acknowledgement.

Aleruchi stretched again and yawned dramatically. "Let's go to your house. I could use a break from the wedding plans."

Catherine chuckled. "You're the wedding planner?"

"No o, just helping."

"Good for her."

"What is that supposed to mean?"

Catherine clasped her wallet and smiled. "Nothing o!"

As they journeyed to Catherine's house, they reminisced about school life, carefully avoiding topics about university or the future. She couldn't help noticing that Catherine avoided talking about Alfred, which made her believe that there was trouble in their marital waters.

Aleruchi covered her mouth upon hearing the news and tapped on Catherine, then shook her before going into the kitchen to get water and sprinkle on her.

"What is the time?" Catherine asked groggily and tried to cover her face.

Aleruchi plopped on the settee beside Catherine's feet. "It's four o'clock."

"Why are you this wicked *nawh*, eh?"

"What did I do?" Aleruchi asked, surprised.

"Why would you wake me up at 4a.m. you know how I hated it back in school."

Aleruchi hissed. "Babe, it's 4p.m."

Catherine bolted upright. "What did you say? Ah, Alfred would have knocked on that door all day."

"Why would he do that?"

"Because we recently changed the lock and he hasn't been back since."

"Hmm?"

"Since the locks were changed *nawh*." Catherine retorted mournfully.

Aleruchi silently. Unable to bring herself to repeat what she'd heard, she decided to wait for the breaking news to be reported again. Catherine climbed out of the blanket and rubbed her arms. As soon as the news flash was up Aleruchi increased the volume of the TV. Catherine rubbed her head. She grimaced at the understanding of what it felt like to be hungover crossed her mind. She was flushed with embarrassment when she remembered what she was blabbing on about and hoped and prayed that Aleruchi was drunk too. She heard her mother-in-law's name on TV and stopped dead in her track and turned around.

"We have just received news that Chief Mrs Angela Osuji is dead. She had cardiac arrest a few hours ago and died at twenty-seven minutes past twelve o'clock. Further information will be brought to you..."

Catherine

Catherine collapsed. When she came through, she was soaked in the water Aleruchi had poured on her. She looked at the darker shade of red on the carpet, but it seemed irrelevant. She removed the bowl Aleruchi was hugging and embraced her, and they wept together.

She replayed the dream she'd had a few months ago. She had prayed about it, gone to Mass every day and lighted candles at the Blessed Virgin Mary's feet and said countless novenas hoping it will never come to pass. But then, when her mother-in-law hugged her, she knew. She prayed, she hoped, but the dread never let up. She would never forgive her father-in-law.

She walked over to the phone and dialled Alfred's hospital, then called his cousin who was supposed to join the practice in a few months and then called everyone she knew had a landline, and everyone who had a phone, and they were quite a few. Luckily, Alfred had been too busy to pick up new friends. More so, no matter how late he finished, he always came back home.

But why hadn't he?

And it hit her; they had fought in the morning of the day before after she talked him into adopting a child. He told her he would ponder on it and she flipped. She was angry mainly because he made his mother believe that he was willing to adopt. She nagged him until he left the house. She had gotten used to nagging him, and over the years he would wait till she had finished then make light of it. The last time, he carried his stethoscope, which he had absentmindedly brought home and walked out.

Catherine started to shiver and held her head in her hand, the headache was now replaced with fear, her legs shook involuntarily. Alfred was exceptionally close to his mother. Anxiously, she fervently prayed that there would be no network reception so that he wouldn't hear the news of his mother's death.

She called her father-in-law as an afterthought, but

his phone was engaged. She thought about going over to the house but changed her mind. She would only end up fighting with the man. Alfred was all she had now, and he seemed to be missing. She made a promise not to fight him when he got back even if he tempted her.

CHAPTER TWENTY-NINE

1986

September

Jacinta

Jacinta's apartment was built with planks which had a pungent smell, a smell that always overwhelmed the room so much so that she had to dap eucalyptus oil on the pillow made from old clothes and still cover her head. The advantage was that the smell kept the mosquitoes at bay. She hated the Harmattan season, the draught seeped in all the time. There was no way of telling where it came in from, and the gaping holes were sealed with cellophane bags.

She didn't know what was worse – the sound of cars passing or the fear of the cars falling into their home or the noises from the neighbouring rooms beside them which ranged from crying babies to arguing couples. It felt like someone kept replaying the repulsive motions every day.

The house wasn't hers. It belonged to Silas, an overbearing, overzealous man who thrived on bullying her. He was probably three times her age and had only one thing in mind for her.

She let out an exasperated sigh when he shuddered.

"Why you dey cry? Pesin wen see you now go think say na your first time be this," he hissed as he rolled off the mattress. He got up, pulled up his trousers, slung his shirt over his shoulder, and turn to look at her.

“Food dey wen pesin fit chop?”

Jacinta shook her head.

He grunted and left the room.

Jacinta looked around the dimly-lit shanty, the supposedly temporary makeshift home and new tears streamed down her cheeks.

How did I meet Silas?

The banging of doors and jingling of the aluminium roofs announce the return of school students. She remembered playing *oga* with Aleruchi while Catherine looked on. She never understood Catherine and didn’t like her, more so, after the principal enlisted her as the person to fetch water for her. Money; the root of all evil indeed. If she had money, she wouldn’t be in the ramshackle she now called home. Her mother wouldn’t have sold her baby even before it was born.

Oh, Nkasiobi! My Nkasiobi!

Indeed, time does fly, especially when you are doing nothing. She had been so engulfed with trying to survive in Lagos that another three years had passed by without her pursuing her plans of finding her daughter. She should have had her WAEC if things were in the right order. She would have been in an office working, maybe as a receptionist. She thought of her siblings and grimaced, but she didn’t miss them. Her mood sombre, her thoughts once again distant.

“Is this what my life has become?” She grumbled as she reminisced.

She hadn’t been to Badagry before, and the scene overwhelmed her. The roads were big enough to take two cars in both lanes. The house was the last one in a

gated enclosure, opposite it an unused space, half-fenced up and covered with a dense green of elephant grass. Seeing it made Jacinta dream of what her house would look like in that vast space of land.

She wasn't sure there was a party because the place was quiet. Tunmise's friend, whom she'd come to know as Boye, lifted the *ring-in-the-lion's-mouth* doorknob to knock. A few seconds later, a girl about their age opened the door and cast a doubtful glance at them. Boye gave her the invitation card, but she shook her head, opened the door properly and pointed to a large door by the right.

They walked in savouring the palatial sitting room, and Boye opened the large door cautiously. The place was dimly lit; Fela Kuti's *Water e no get enemy* played in the background the cloudy smell of cigarette mingled with the sharp smell of alcohol. Jacinta held her nose, and Boye slapped her hand off before giving her a warning glare. The men would be her father's age if she had any. She gasped when she saw a man slap a woman's backside. There were lots of people groping inside. Boye had to tug her along when she started pulling back.

She felt exposed as she'd never been to a club before, so she didn't know if it looked like one or felt like one. Tunmise dropped back and let Jacinta go in ahead of her. Jacinta didn't move but scanned the room contemplating her decision to serve at the party.

Tunmise nudged her, but she ignored her promptings until a woman appeared before them. She wore a black kaftan with gold embroidery. She had henna drawings on her wrists and hands; her fingers were covered with

odd-looking rings. The slits on the side of her kaftan revealed she wasn't wearing anything underneath but panties. The woman gestured, and they walked with her into another room with a boisterous crowd before walking through a door that had a sign above it: STAFF EXIT ONLY.

It was only then that she asked their names. She took them to a kitchen which was as big as Jacinta's family compound. The woman walked to the centre of the room and whispered to a rotund woman wearing a Torque Blanche, black and white striped trousers and white apron then placed her henna-clad hand on the rotund woman's back and proudly said;

"This is Julia Forsythe, the chef de partie of Rockview Hotel in Abuja. She is a dear friend." The rotund woman grinned excitedly gazing at the girls with piqued interest like they were expected to know who she was.

Boye smiled sheepishly, and Tunmise curtsied nervously – they have never met anyone that was pink as the plastic dolls with large heads that most girls got as toddlers. Jacinta nodded slightly with a thin smile.

The woman massaged her hands together then turned to face Jacinta. "I have a job for you." Seeing Jacinta's hesitation, she quickly added. "There's more than enough that I need in the kitchen since you're already here I could use the assistance."

Jacinta nodded and fell in tow with the woman. "Twenty percent is mine." The woman whispered and shut the door behind her.

Jacinta scoffed; she wasn't naïve enough to be unaware of the woman's ploy. Curious and apprehensive, she walked towards the lit area of the

room. The light came from the TV beside the bed. Moving closer, she saw a man's head, he was stark naked with his face down and assumed he was drunk. Relieved that she wouldn't need to do anything she made her way to the middle of the room where she saw clothes scattered on the wooden floor, the red polka-dotted shoes caught her attention. The shoe was familiar, albeit different.

A slender red thread that could well be the belt of the gown that had just fallen off the bed was around the man's neck. What she found disturbing was the contortion of his body. She backed away, and her foot got caught in something, a hat. She picked the hat, and tossed it to the chair behind her just as the man groaned and stopped moving. She was somewhat relieved that he wasn't dead. Unsure of what to do next, she waited as he slowly got up.

The man covered the gap between them and fell on the bed with her underneath him. It was then that she heard rushing water and a voice singing. She wondered what she was expected to do when the man supposedly had a woman with him. She was beginning to get out of breath and tapped the man. He was unresponsive. She wanted to coax him to get off her, but seeing his mouth and eyes open and lifeless, suppressed her voice.

Jacinta panicked when the water stopped running. A few seconds later a woman came out and flicked the light switch on just as Jacinta buried her face in the man's shoulder. The woman hurried towards the door. There was something odd about her shape, and she walked funny with her lopsided wig. At the door, the woman paused, bent over a suitcase, tossing things

around, stamped her feet in frustration and finally opened the door.

To Jacinta's shock, it was a man, and she had seen his face in the news, but she couldn't remember his name at that moment. He had a crescent scar that ran from his arm down to his hand. He flicked off the light without looking at the switch and shut the door.

Her breath was laboured by the time she got out from underneath the naked man. Her wig was tucked under him. She pulled at it, and it scratched him, but he didn't turn or even wince. She tiptoed closer to peer at him; his eyes were still wide open. She waved her hand in his face, but he didn't flinch. She had assumed that his eyes and mouth were open from drinking.

"Yey, *egba mi o!*" Jacinta shouted and covered her mouth as she yelped. She placed her hands on her head screaming silently. She almost yelped at the knock on the door. Not liking the odds of being found with a dead man, she quickly hid in the only place that came to her mind – the bed. She tucked herself under it and hoped in silence.

The person that knocked, stood at the door for a while before flicking the light on. She was fairer than the man that just left almost as fair as Jacinta. She tiptoed into the room and picked up the red slip on the chair, two things from the floor at the edge of the chair. She picked up one of the polka-dotted shoes, and searched for the other, slowly and then frantically. Jacinta closed her eyes and prayed that she didn't look under the bed, and just then someone else knocked. The girl dropped the shoe and ran to the door but didn't open it.

"Hurry up!" Someone growled from the other side of

the door. The girl opened the door to the man that had just left. He was now casually dressed in a t-shirt and denim. Jacinta covered her mouth when she realised who it was: Chief Desmond Osuji.

Chei! Nkiru, longer-throat will kill you o! Jacinta lamented as she waited impatiently for an opportunity to escape. Adrenaline shot through her chest and into her head. She couldn't see so she turned on the light and frantically scanned the room; held her shoes to her chest, folded her wig and wore the *woman's* own then she pulled her dress over her head and wore it inside out because it was reversible and then turned off the light and opened the door. Trying not to look back, she left the room.

Then returned almost immediately to look for money for transport. She apologized profusely under her breath as she emptied the wallet. She saw a sheer red scarf and picked it up to reveal the second red polka-dotted shoe. She must have kicked it under the bed when she went to hide. Holding her breath, she turned off the light ready to make a quick exit. She gasped when something glistened, a wedding band. He was someone's husband.

As soon as she was outside the house, she counted the money to find that she had only taken five hundred Naira from the bulk. She flagged down a cab, but since he charged way more than she had she declined. He started driving away and stopped about twenty feet from her and drove back to her.

She sighed as she understood why the woman wanted her to go into that room; the woman was running a brothel, and she was sure Boye knew because Boye

didn't join them in the kitchen. She looked back at the house and made the sign of the cross as her mind went back to the pair of shoes, red polka-dotted shoes. Boye and Tunmise were already gone because the chef had kicked them out for mixing up chives with garlic. The claim that she called them thieves because she kept saying 'chives not garlic'.

Jacinta mourned when her stomach rumbled as she walked passed Tunmise's cousin that sold *moi-moi*. Tunmise's cousin saw her and beckoned her. Reluctantly she vied to the woman's stall.

"You no go buy *moi-moi* today?"

Jacinta had a wry smile on her lips as she shook her head.

"You never buy this week o!"

"I no get money. When I get, I go come."

"Ah, you my better customer? Never go, wait eh."

Tunmise's cousin wrapped two packs of the *moi-moi* in an old newspaper and handed it to Jacinta. The gesture brought Jacinta close to tears. She sniffed and nodded her thanks. The aroma of the *moi-moi* wafted to her nostril. She was hungry but had no appetite. Fear was exhausting. She hurried to her house, took her bath ate the beans cake, all the while trying to forget what she had seen.

She pondered on what would have happened if she had stayed a little longer or hadn't hidden her face and pitied the wife of the man who would probably have been discovered by now. She stretched her hand to the cabinet and accidentally knocked down her ceramic plates and tears streamed down her cheek.

Silas touched her, she yelped and glared at him.

Could today get any worse?

Silas withdrew and went outside to sit down.

Catherine

The lawyer appeared at Catherine's doorstep as they were leaving for Aleruchi's aunt's wedding. She was accompanied by a few pensive old men, two policemen, and her father-in-law. That same fair girl clung to Chief Osuji. Catherine angered by this, walked menacingly towards them. She was intercepted by two other policemen who just joined the group. They were looking for her. She frowned and turned her attention to them.

Catherine's glass fell to on the ceramic floor after one of the policemen that intercepted Catherine spoke. She froze. The lawyer helped her to a seat.

Aleruchi gasped. She was coming out of the kitchen at the same time that the policeman spoke.

Alfred was dead. They believed he had committed suicide upon learning of his mother's death, the policeman had said. Catherine was sure it was a lie. He was too catholic to resort to suicide. The men with the lawyer wanted to postpone the meeting, but chief Osuji insisted they proceed. She watched the proceedings, deaf to it. It was only when Chief Osuji shouted that she looked at the door.

"You will not get away with this," Chief Osuji threatened.

The lawyer packed her files into a briefcase oblivious to his threat.

Catherine watched him blankly.

Aleruchi whispered. "Your mother-in-law gave you and Alfred everything. You're Alfred's next of kin. He

just changed his next of kin two days ago.”

“Oh,” Catherine murmured her eyes fixed on the girl whose arms were wrapped around her father-in-law’s.

“I will see you in court.” Chief Osuji said to Catherine.

She morosely watched him leave. One thing was certain; no one will stick his or her greedy fingers into her mother-in-law’s wealth or her husband’s.

“We will take the body to the mortuary. You need not worry.” One of the elderly men muttered.

“Yes,” another nodded vehemently. “If your father-in-law is trouble let us know.”

“No matter what you do, do not under any circumstance give him any part of our cousin’s wealth.”

The elderly men nodded; they all seemed relieved as they left. The house was quiet. She could hear her breathing and figured that it was odd to be hearing two heartbeats then blinked when she wet herself.

“Cathy, I think you forgot to wear a pad.”

Catherine raised a brow. It wasn’t that time of the month for her. Nonetheless, she got up and went to the calendar and sighed. She should have known that she was pregnant. It was the second pregnancy she would be losing in the space of six months. Perhaps her husband wouldn’t have had to lodge at a hotel if he knew she was. She gritted her teeth; four dead pregnancies, a dead husband, a dead future. She quickly cleaned up and returned to join Aleruchi, wiped an offending tear and murmured. “Let’s go before we miss our flight.”

Aleruchi didn’t have the words for this kind of situation, so she said nothing. She heaved her luggage and tagged along.

CHAPTER THIRTY

1986

December

Jacinta

Jacinta had woken up the morning after that fateful day of June 1980. As the effect of the broth wore off, she made a resolution; to get her daughter back by any means necessary. She had overheard Elóhò talk to Yemisi and then give her a piece of paper with the name and address of the person she would be working for. From their conversation, Yemisi didn't know she had given birth. She had hoped that the woman would lead her to Elóhò then she could take her baby and run away. At least, that would have forced her mother to cough up the money she had taken from Elóhò. So, she waited until the frogs stopped croaking and the moon had descended. Yemisi was snoring on the floor behind the curtain. She tiptoed to where she saw Yemisi tuck the paper and pulled it out then went back to the edge of her bed to retrieve her travelling bag.

As soon as she got outside, she ran as fast as she could to the motor park. As the lorry to Ota in Ogun State left the carpark, she wondered if she would ever miss Abeokuta.

Jacinta sighed ruefully and returned to her musing.

The woman Yemisi was to work for, lived in a quaint old bungalow. She had lived there quietly hoping to

gather information on Elóhò's whereabouts especially after she learned that the woman was the sister-in-law. The first Saturday in March the following year the woman organised a surprise party for the husband. Jacinta was worried about the cleaning, but the plates and cutleries were disposable, and the couple had a party to attend the following day she decided to tidy up late into the night so that she could have the next day to herself.

She just about finished sweeping when she heard her name. She had never eavesdropped on their conversation before, but curious and apprehensive, she moved closer to the window.

"What do you mean by that?" the husband exclaimed angrily.

"Your parents will keep bringing you a new wife until you have a child. You know I can't give you one so, go to her. We can send her back to where she came from after she has given birth."

Indignant, he retorted. "Can you hear yourself speak. That is a child."

"No, she's a teenager."

"It's child abuse, and I will not be a party to this."

"Oh, please, I see the way you look at her. You have my permission so there'll be no need to go behind my back."

"You're definitely out of your mind."

A few seconds later, she heard a slam-bang and quickly returned to what she was doing. She would have continued staying, but she noticed the man ogled her. It was not the fact that he was two times taller and four times bigger than her that bothered her. No, it was more about losing another child in the same way. She didn't

wait until morning, that same night she left that night with a years' worth of savings.

She heard knocking and wasn't prepared to answer the door so ignored it. Silas had a habit of banging on the door so that their neighbours would believe the lie that she was his cousin. The desire to remember pricked at her as she reminisced.

She ran to a car park and took an almost full bus. She was too exhausted to find out where the bus was heading. When she got off the bus, it was almost midnight. Her first thought was to go to the uncompleted building en route to the market. Exhausted, she made a makeshift bed and used the blanket to cover herself. She was woken by the sound of boys discussing the probability of Shagari being re-elected and one stumbled on her. She bit her lower lips.

The one that stepped on her bumped into another person who pushed him off.

"O'boy! Look road nah!"

"Wetin be dat?" another voice asked, pointing at Jacinta's wrapped up body.

A short man in singlet focused his torchlight on her another uncovered her and licked his lips.

"See fresh fish," exclaimed the one that had uncovered her as he unbuckled his belt.

Another torchlight was trained on her and continued to walk towards her then spoke in a deep profound voice. "My Oyibo, wetin you dey do for here?"

Jacinta didn't know what to do, urinating was on her mind. She quickly got on her knees and started begging.

"Boss, you first," the first one obviously drunk started but was punched in his face by the one with a deep

voice.

"My Oyibo, get up. You be my person nobody fit touch you for this place. Come make I show you my domot." He turned to the other men. "Any pesin wen touch am don die."

Some grimaced and moaned, a few walked away grumbling.

He took her to the end of the building facing the back. There was a door with a padlock on it. He unlocked it and ushered her in. There was no light, so he used the torchlight to show her around.

"Take," he gave her the key to the padlock. "Jazzy, show yourself!"

The one that removed her blanket came running. He eyed her and turned away before his boss would notice.

"Go bring 'er tins." He rumbled as he lit a candle.

Jazzy went away and returned a few seconds later. He waited for Jazzy to leave before he whispered to her. She nodded her thanks.

A few weeks later she met his girlfriend, Funmi. Boss was kind and unfazed by any slander concerning her that Funmi offered. Being a great cook, she managed a buka successfully and lived with them for almost a year.

One day, Funmi rushed in and told her that Boss and his gang had been arrested. She saw no option but to run away. Funmi had another boyfriend who took them in. They all lived together in a one-room apartment, and she'd be tortured with their daily lovemaking. She continued her roadside selling except for this time; she stayed on the veranda. Seeing how hard working she was, Funmi's boyfriend was drawn to her. This rapidly increased the tension between them, especially as Funmi

didn't have any skill and Jacinta was their breadwinner.

It was then that she met Silas. A gateman he said he was. He came most days to visit the house beside their own in Ijegun even though he worked at Idimu. Even when the woman moved out of the compound, he still came visiting. When he moved from Idimu to Alausa, he insisted that she should visit him.

She finally agreed and went to visit him but discovered that Alausa was where he worked, and Mushin was where he now lived. When she returned that evening, her things were outside, and the locks had been changed but the stock she sold she had no access to. Fortunately, Silas had escorted her back because it was quite late. He helped her carry her things as the plan was to stay the night and return the following day to confront Funmi.

She never did. That was almost three years ago.

There was another knock. She didn't realise that the person had entered the room until she heard an exclamation.

"I greet... *abeg* no vex. I knocked... I," he turned his back to her. "I dey find Oga Silas."

"He's obviously not here," Jacinta murmured, not bothering to pull the covers over her body.

The man cleared his throat and blinked simultaneously. "Please tell him I came to look for him. My name's Adetunji Dimeji, the Ade behind him. No vex o! Emm... sorry." He said with his eyes never leaving her large breasts.

A few minutes after Adetunji left, Silas came in with a black cellophane bag. She knew it was his usual dinner - *amala* and *ewedu* - the aroma always introduced itself. He pulled out an aluminium plate carelessly, and the

rest of the items on the makeshift cupboard came down. He started sniffing, the smell of cheap perfume still lingered. Jacinta was oblivious to the condescending look he gave her.

“Pesin find me come?”

Jacinta ignored him. She knew he was now standing over her; the light no longer shone on her face.

“No be you I dey talk to?”

“Hmm?”

“Who find me come?”

“I don’t know. He said he stays behind us.”

He hated it when she spoke to him in proper English language. He hissed as he bent down to pick out a plate from the heap. “You go eat?” he asked. Without waiting for her response, he slurped the food and gulped down his beer.

Jacinta looked on with disgust. *How did I end up with this pig? So, for over six years I’ve been stuck in this awful cycle. Something has got to change, after all, I’m living in ‘the fountain of common sense’.*

When he finished eating, he licked his hand and wiped it on his trousers. Then he picked up his twice-worn shirt and cleared his throat. “I get night work. I dey go see that boy wen find me come. I go *waka* from there.”

She swatted his hand before it reached her face. Soon after he left, someone lifted the curtain and came in. It was Adetunji, this time his chest was bare, and he had a towel around his waist and around his neck.

“Please eh, I have one hundred naira, just do this for me eh.” He opened his wallet and produced the money and stretched it towards her.

Jacinta frowned, tilting her head up a little confused.

“Ómó tóó da (good girl),” Adetunji shook the money in front of her and placed his other hand on his member.

Jacinta sized him up and hissed.

“Sweet girl” he continued in Yoruba.

I have enough to worry about and...

She squinted at the money, realising what he wanted, and what it could do for her. Her mind reeled with ideas. *This is my opportunity to get out from under Silas. Night school! The closest one is over two miles away which means okada. I estimate ₦150.00 for Monday to Friday for a month. Registration fee ₦305.00. I can walk around transport and books. A desperate man is always a good businessman, abi?*

“You can’t afford me. Please leave!” She said shakily and got up, picked up the wrapper at the foot of the bed, unfolded it and wrapped herself with it before pointing at the door.

If he increases the money, I’ll take it! One must eat a big toad abi? After all, the girls around here survive on this. If he wants me, he will have to pay well. If I charge him too much will he take off and never come back? What if Silas finds out? Mtchew, if I place food on the table will he not eat it? I need to charge him the amount that will make him come back but will sustain me too.

“I’ll add more money.” He said, loosening his towel and letting it fall on the ground around him.

She smiled mischievously. *This is good, this is very good. How much do I charge this man now? How do I do this?*

It wasn’t the first time that a man had been this brazen. Exactly three years and six months ago, a man

stood in front of her naked with the same plea. It was Funmi's boyfriend. Funmi had walked in on them and accused her of trying to steal her man even though he was stark naked, and she was fully clothed. Jacinta didn't regret breaking his head with the cold bottle of beer, which happened before Funmi got in. He immediately told Funmi that someone broke his head, and Jacinta was trying to stop the bleeding.

But now, as she stared at this naked man, an unrequited feeling was reinvigorated. Her legs began to tremble, her heart palpitated, and her mouth became dry. Already wet with hunger, she lowered her head and licked her lips. Silas never satisfied her and Adetunji's member was not just a good enough size but was hungry enough to make her toes tingle. As she tried to adjust her wrapper, her upper arm brushed her nipple, and she bit a moan.

"Please I'm dying here o!" Adetunji moaned.

"Na today? Die then but not in here *abeg!*" Jacinta cool down, you wan spoil show?

"Please tell me something nah, Ómó help man pikin nah, abeg!"

Adetunji was already stroking his erect member, increasing her desire to feel him inside her, but she needed the money more. Jacinta was standing close to him. This was a welcome opportunity, an opportunity to go back to school. She had intentionally turned away from him and let the wrapper hang loose, so it fell as soon as she raised her hand to point at the door again then slowly bent down to pick the wrapper up.

Adetunji yelped, still ogling her.

She folded her arm and slanted her head to him.

“Three hundred and fifty naira only.”

Adetunji gasped.

Jacinta glared at him.

He frowned. “*Abeg*, two hundred.”

“I resemble crayfish?” She asked feigning anger though she was about to agree.

“No vex nah, manage two-twenty.”

Jacinta hissed, turned her head away from him and smiled to herself though a little worried.

“Okay, okay, two-fifty.”

Panicked that she’d messed up an opportunity, she moseyed slowly to the bed.

Adetunji, in agony as he watched her buttocks sway, fell to his knees and said, “*Abeg*, make I give you three hundred today, tomorrow I’ll give you one hundred.”

Jacinta uncrossed her arms to let the wrapper crumble to her feet. She took the money, locked the window while he locked the door. Unsure of what her next move should be, she lay down on the bed and closed her eyes, but Adetunji was so gentle that she turned her head away to hide the tears streaming down her face.

They continued their escapades for weeks. Their rooms were the last two on either side of the lane; Silas’ room was opposite the bathrooms, Adetunji’s behind theirs and they were slender enough to walk between the wooden fence and the wall of their houses. It was no longer about the money though she still collected it, she enjoyed being him. Some days, he’d come home with one of his sugar mummies, and she’d have to leave his room. Their first assumption was that she was his girlfriend, to avert suspicion he would ask the women to

pay her for cooking and cleaning his room; or when her books lay about, they assume he was her tutor.

Any time Silas was on duty, and after night school, she would go to Adetunji's place and spend the night there. He had a rechargeable fan, the wallpapers kept the draught out. His room was bigger and better organised; at one end was a kitchenette and above it a bookshelf, beside it a wardrobe. He had a camp gas, non-stick pots and ceramic plates though he never cooked. On Silas' day offs, she'll pretend to go to the bathroom and not return for hours, or she'd stay up and read until morning so he wouldn't touch her.

On one occasion while she was with Adetunji, Silas came in unannounced, the room was dark, so she covered herself with the pillow. Silas thought it was one of Adetunji's sugar mummies, apologized and left.

She smiled as she washed her clothes; Adetunji had taken her shopping at Opebi Road. After paying for them, he hurriedly left to see one of his sugar mummies. As soon as he did, she took the clothes back to the shop. The salesgirl was her friend, so it was relatively easy to get the money back except that the girl got twenty percent of it. She rushed to Yaba to buy *bend-down-select*. Adetunji wasn't pleased, but she didn't care, it got her five more clothes for each he purchased at the high street.

She assumed Silas suspected something because he no longer told her his day-offs and visited Adetunji more often. A week passed, and he'd gone nowhere. She decided to stay away from Adetunji since she hadn't saved enough to get a place of her own; and having experienced the financial weather in Lagos she couldn't

take the risk. Coincidentally, Adetunji had gone to his hometown. She finally ran out of money. Fortunately, she had told the school she would not be able to attend for a week.

It seemed bleak even though the sun was shining in the cloudless blue sky - it was the third week of missing night school. She could only think of what she would need to do to get money. She hated not having something to fall back on; it always made her feel lost more so now that she'd tasted financial independence.

It was a Sunday. Most people in the compound had gone to church. She hoped Adetunji would be back soon. She needed money, but mostly, she missed him. *If a first-class graduate like Adetunji could use his body to get what he wanted, why can't I? But I can't be as daring as the girl's in this compound.*

She knew Silas was watching her from where he sat as she spread out her garments. She could try a little seduction on Silas. After all, being naked was all it took to get Adetunji to grovel. She decided against it, remembering that she'd deprived him for months. He'd ogle her, and she'd pretend not to notice. She looked better now: her skin glowed, hair groomed. If he didn't notice, their neighbours made sure he did by commending him for taking good care of his *cousin*. He knew better than to ask how she got the money.

As she returned from spreading the clothes on the wire, she changed position, so her back was to Silas then bent down. From between her legs, she could see him ogle her again. She smiled, satisfied that she'd

gotten him where she wanted.

Silas took his frustration out on the transistor radio. He had suspected Ajebó of being the reason for her courage, but little did he know that she had never lost it.

Jacinta continued washing, relishing in his discomfort. She looked back and found an empty bench. Silas had gone away. She sulked but to be on the safe side hurriedly washed the remaining clothes. The plan wasn't working, not that she had fully implemented it. Frustrated, she quickly dried the rest of the clothes, so she could get changed into something less revealing before Silas would return.

"You look take-away-ish," Silas said as she walked into the house.

Jacinta hissed. The cabinet had obscured her view. She'd made quite a number of changes to their room; added the cabinet and a cupboard the old bench became the makeshift table because she was sure she would get her place and go with them. Annoyed, she unlocked the cupboard brought out *golden morn*, *peak milk* and sugar and then the ceramic bowl and the flask before sitting down on the mattress. Looking at the ceramic bowl made her desire her own space even more.

Silas grimaced and went out then.

By the time Silas came back, she had finished, washed and put everything away. He offered her a bottle of Fanta, and she thanked him. He picked the bottle up and was about to open it with his teeth, she stopped him on time. Jacinta watched him and shook her head: it was too little a payment.

She hadn't borrowed or bought anything on credit

since her first evening with Adetunji. He was initially against her going to evening school until he found out she wasn't asking him for money. All he cared about was that she cook and that she would be available to warm his bed.

She propped herself with two of the three new pillows - she had bought from one of their neighbours who was moving back home - and flipped the pages of the latest Buchi Emecheta's book. It wasn't one of the recommended books on the school's reading list but felt she needed to boost her vocabulary. Feeling sleepy, she folded the page she was on and dropped the book. A few minutes after she curled up to sleep, she felt something warm and wet on the back of her thighs, and she shook it off. When she felt it again, it dawned on her that it was Silas. She sniggered; he had never done anything like that before and shoved him away.

As soon as Silas removed his shirt and trousers, she quietly said, "Oga Silas, you can see Abuja, but you cannot enter Aso rock without a pass o."

He frowned, looking confused.

She needed the money more now and was willing to wait until Adetunji got back even if it killed her.

"Wetin?"

"You don try, you want fuck me as I dey sleep, *abi*? Before you go enter this toto again, you go pay." She retorted, not hiding her scorn.

"My house wen you dey stay you dey pay?"

"If I count how many times you don enter here, you go still dey owe me 'til you die. Oya na, make we begin count am?"

"Why you dey do like this sef? Only one round I no go

disturb you again, I swear! Make we do am quick-quick before them begin dey return from church.”

“Na today?” Jacinta hissed and sniggered. “Money for hand, back for ground. You can’t have your cake and eat it too.”

He got up, pulled up his trousers and started pacing and stopped. “So, you don dey do ashewo work? Na dia you dey get money buy all dis fine-fine things.”

Jacinta got up and advanced to the door.

He held her by the arm to stop her. “No vex, no vex, no vex. Na vex I take talk am. I no say you no fit do that kind thing. How much?”

“Because na you... one *thousand*.”

“Eh!?”

They haggled until she agreed to let him sleep with her for one-hundred naira.

“Oya comot cloth make me do.”

“Do wetin? Wey the money?” She asked glaring at him.

Silas chuckled, shaking his head. “Kai! Ajebó don spoil you finish,” He licked his lips. “No wahala, make we do first.”

Jacinta sniggered.

“Na me and you dey stay house nah. I go give you. Abi, you no trust me again?”

She scoffed and rolled her eyes.

“You sef....” He hovered around. “I swear I go add fifty naira. Make we do first.”

“Oga Silas,” she smiled wryly.

“Eh,” he retorted eagerly.

Jacinta looked at him pointedly and said. “Give me the money first.”

He muttered under his breath in a language she didn't understand, she retorted curses at him in her language too. As they didn't understand Senegalese and Igbo, they simultaneously fell silent. He picked up his trousers, and brought the money he had in his pocket and gingerly handed it to her.

"E no complete." Jacinta mumbled after counting the money.

"Manage nah," Silas pleaded and looked down.

Jacinta shook her head and hesitantly gave him the money which he rejected.

"Na only fifty naira remain. I go give you."

She clucked her tongue and started to undress. Silas tried to tickle her, and she glared at him. "Wait jó!"

Three weeks turned into two months, and Adetunji was not yet back. She was however, fortunate because she had paid up her fees. Being stringent with her income was okay if it didn't come in trickles as Silas's cash flow did not accrue with his demands.

There were times when he was in her, and she would be checking the time, flicking through radio channels, if the electricity was back on, she would listen to the quietness in the compound as everyone would be inside their rooms. It was times like that that made her long for Adetunji. It was times like that that also made her aware of the fact that she could sleep with any man for money.

CHAPTER THIRTY-ONE

1987

August

Jacinta

Jacinta woke up to the sound of the early morning risers – Eli and David, Jovita and Venus - from the house beside hers. They turned out to be everyone's alarm clock because they banged their doors so hard it shook the rest of the building which rattled their hanging aluminium buckets and tin drums and concluded in a song which sounded much like bleating goats before they left for school. They were the only children in the compound in an expensive private school that was also three miles away. Their mother usually came out with them, but she didn't hear the woman. Funny enough, she hadn't heard or seen the woman in almost a week.

She raised her brow surprised to find that Silas was already back from work. She reluctantly strode to the door and unlocked it. The kids rushed in, smacking her toes with the door.

"Aunty, I'm sorry o," Eli whispered in Yoruba language. He was already biting his finger while his brother looked away from her, fearing a reprimand while their sisters curtsied and excitedly waited.

Jacinta gritted her teeth as she hobbled to the wardrobe to get the trainers she'd bought for them, to

preserve their leather shoes.

"Listen," Jacinta started as she handed them their trainers. "When you get close to the school then you can wear your brown shoes. You hear me?"

They all nodded rapidly, eyeing the shoes that were already in their hands then hugged her. "Thank you!"

"Oya, start going before you are late."

She wouldn't have spent the last of her savings on them if they were like their agemates in the compound who had terrible manners and weren't willing to improve themselves. More so, they had an illiterate mother, who wanted the best for them. Seeing them, helping them gave her hope that she'll one day see her daughter.

On seeing the time, she hurriedly emptied the two flasks of hot water into an aluminium bucket. The queues started early on a working day, so when she heard footsteps, she quickly retrieved her towel and sanitary bag and ran towards the bathroom. As she struggled to close the bathroom, she saw the silhouette of the person stop at her neighbour's and knock.

The person moaned loudly and cussed in Yoruba. Realising it was Tunmise - Ajebó's half-sister, Jacinta winced, quickly took her bath, came out and greeted the woman beside Tunmise. In a bid to avoid the woman's gaze, she stamped her feet then entered the house, forgetting her flip-flops outside. She returned to shake the sand off them and saw a pair of legs on it. She looked up in search of its owner and bit the side of her cheek, raising a brow in question.

"I greet o!" Tunmise's younger sister muttered.

"Mmm morning."

"I wan ask you something."

“Let it wait ‘til proper morning, abeg,” Jacinta retorted groggily.

“My work go start six-thirty.”

“Wait,” Jacinta murmured and shut the door. She lathered cream on the exposed part of her body and returned to the girl.

The girl clasped and unclasped her hands as she spoke. “You go like serve drinks? I dey ask because one of my friend tell me say e get one woman wey dey do baiday party and she wan girls wey go serve food.”

Jacinta kissed her teeth. “She go pay?”

Tunmise shrugged. “I don’t know o but I wan food.”

Jacinta sighed. *Don’t we all?* “When?”

“This evening say five o’clock. *Shogbó*, we can’t be late o!”

“No *wahala*, I don’t have anything planned for today.”

“Wo-o, later.”

Soon after she closed the door, her stomach rumbled, and she quickly lathered the rest of her body. While she struggled to get into her denim, she heard the door creak forcefully. Hissing, she kicked the stool to the door to delay Silas’ entry and dove onto bed.

By the time Silas was done with nudging the stool out of the way, Jacinta was already in bed, blanket-cloaked. He eyed the bed. Annoyed, he opened the window, threw the curtain over the door and wedged it open before leaving the room with the aluminium bucket in hand. He hoped the brightness would force her out of bed before his return.

She chuckled, knowing his pattern. More so when she remembered that she’d used up the water. Fetching water would give her an extra ten minutes alone so she

jumped out of bed and withdrew the *garri* she'd hidden. It was just a handful. With no groundnut or sugar in the house, she used salt, quickly drank it, washed and dried the plate. With Tunmise's sister's visit, visiting her loathsome classmate would be unnecessary as she was sure of where to get food. She looked at the time while she changed into pyjamas, then crawled back into bed and slept off immediately.

Something cold woke her. In no mood to leave the bed, she stirred.

Silas waited until she raised her head before murmuring. "I get appointment."

Jacinta retorted. "I dey comot this evening o!"

Silas was almost out of the room, paused midstride and pivoted to re-enter the room. He stood over her and grimaced. "Where you dey go?"

"Tunmise and I are going for a birthday party."

"You no dey go anywhere. E no fit happen make I tell you." Silas refuted, his arms flailing.

Jacinta grimaced. "Why?"

"Because..." he lustfully eyed her. "That girl na bad girl, very bad girl."

"No worry, I go fit hold my side."

He gritted his teeth. "I don tell you –"

"I'll be back on time, okay?"

"I no go leave the key o!"

"No worry," she sighed, already tired of their banter.

"How you wan take enter house?" He asked, eyeing her suspiciously.

"I said don't worry."

He frowned as he watched her, twisting his mouth to one side of his face and shrugged. "Okay take am."

"I said, 'no worry'"

"Why I no go -"

She glared at him.

"Okay," Silas reluctantly agreed. He stumped to the door un-wedging it as he murmured under his breath.

Jacinta's stomach rumbled. "Ugh!" She picked up her wristwatch and checked the time. It was only ten o'clock in the morning. The party was hours away, but she didn't think she would survive the wait. Exhaling, she retrieved the container that had the remaining *puff-puff* from under the bed. The thought of another stale *puff-puff* entering her mouth made her nauseous. She closed her eyes, chewed them quickly and drank water to force it down. She felt even more nauseous and fetched a large bowl and immediately retched into it.

"Oh no!" She mumbled when the light in the room increased.

Silas pushed the door and frowned when he saw her sitting on the ground with her head bent over. He pinched his nose. "Mmm, your mess strong o!"

She ignored him and exited with the bowl. When she got back, he had congested the air in the room with his fake perfume. She lunged to the window and peered out for a few minutes and bumped into Silas when she turned around.

"Wetin?" She asked as she stepped back.

"I wan see wetin you dey look, na Tunji abi?"

She tilted her head as she appraised him and hissed.

He pushed a bag towards her. "I buy you something."

She made a knowing face. She was hungry, but unless he met her demands, she wouldn't budge and silently prayed her stomach wouldn't rumble until he'd

left. Only, he didn't go anywhere. He removed his clothes, wrapped his towel around his waist, and left the room with the aluminium bucket now filled with water.

She suspiciously frowned at him. He had been around more often now. Initially, she thought he was spying on her - not that there weren't times when he would be around often when his boss was out of the country - but this time he was around virtually all the time. She hoped he hadn't lost his job because that would mean she would have no other option but to take Augusta's husband's offer. She still wasn't sure how she was going to do it as she didn't feel confident being a mistress to a man whose wife was like a friend except when the woman tried to frisk her. She had since avoided the woman like the friendship between allergy and pollen, but that didn't boost her confidence at taking such a step.

Eager to put her mind to good use, she opened the wardrobe and tossed out a book and then scanned the hangers and caught a glimpse of herself in the mirror then turned abruptly to the sound of excited voices, laughter, and whistling. Someone shouted. "NEPA don bring light o!" The once languorous compound instantly burst with activity, various radio and TV stations could be heard.

Jacinta quickly tugged the suitcase out and took three dresses out - a blue tube dress, a sweetheart neckline lace cocktail dress and an Edwardian style green and gold dress, tossed them on the bed before replacing the suitcase. She hummed as she began to iron as many clothes as she could as there was no telling when the electricity would go off.

“I dey go watch match o!” Silas shouted through the window.

She raised her head but didn’t look up then slanted her head to the bag from Silas which was still on the ground and beside it, were two cans of fizzy drink and a two-litre bottle of cold water. She could tell that they were cold because they were sweating lightly. Her stomach belched violently so much so that she was bent over for a couple of seconds. She quickly finished ironing the clothes, replaced the iron and hung the dresses for the evening on a string line. The rest of the clothes she folded into a wooden box.

Tired of staring at what Silas had bought her, she picked the plate of food and was about to remove the lid when she heard Silas’ voice and quickly replaced them. Her stomach yearned to quench its hunger, but her pride would not let it. She quickly took an aluminium cup and scooped water, gulped it and solemnly stalked back to the bed. The room was much cooler, and she smiled glad that she had a fan and hoped it would be fully charged before NEPA’s love for darkness descended on them again.

She winced as the thought escaped because seconds later there were loud groanings from the neighbouring houses, and the discordant chorus of “Nepa” was an indication that they had once again regained control of electricity. The soft whooshing sound of the tall fan facing her slowly came to a halt. She quickly disconnected it to retrieve the rechargeable battery - she needed it more at night when mosquitoes will gate crash her sleep fest.

Silas raised the curtain and came in. He was fully

dressed, which meant he took his clothes to the bathroom, which was also unlike him. He'd been acting strange lately, but she was more concerned with getting her exams out of the way. She had never heard of Nora Roberts, and the book club she joined didn't have the book on the authors she usually read so she settled for *Irish Thoroughbred*, hoping that by the time she was done she would have gotten the last of C.S. Lewis' trilogy: *Out of the Silent Planet*.

Silas was unbuttoning his shirt and froze.

Frowning at his reaction, she paused to observe him. There was a silent hope that he hadn't gotten into any trouble, especially one that could get to her. She raised a brow suspecting he was seeing someone in the compound; for one, he left the room with only a towel and returned fully clothed. More so, he didn't return with the bucket.

If the rumour is true that he's sleeping with Mama Tosan, I will love to catch him red-handed. That shouldn't be hard as she lives right in front of us. I really hope he is, so I can openly visit Adetunji. I'm already tired of this hide and seek sef.

"kpam, kpam, kpam," a child's voice echoed.

Silas jumped.

"Who is it?" Jacinta asked.

The person just responded by repeating the same sound.

"You no dey talk?" Silas shouted as he opened the curtain and a little boy's stretched the hand that held the bathing bucket to Silas. Silas took the bucket quickly and shooed the boy away. He made a quick glance at Jacinta and placed the bucket in its place as

swiftly and as quietly as possible.

Jacinta saw Mama Tosan's son and smiled. *It just might be true. This will be good, really good.* "You don't have to keep the bucket down that quietly. It's not like I'm sleeping or something like that."

Silas straightened then slowly turned to face her smiling sheepishly. He wiggled his fingers, massaged his head then slanted a look at the food he'd bought, and his shoulders fell.

Suddenly thirsty, she got up and took a cup to the plastic bucket used for drinking water. She saw him look at the plate and felt pity for him though it wasn't enough to steer her.

Silas looked up and gulped.

From the mirror, she could see her silhouette through the pyjamas. She hadn't realised how translucent it was. It looked like Silas' eyes were going to drop any second as he watched. Hope soaring in her, she decided to seduce him into meeting her demands so she started dancing to the rhythm of the *Shina Peters* song playing on someone's transistor radio. She smiled when Silas fell to his knees, his eyes following her movement. She continued until the music ended and then looked at her watch as she stopped. He can go to Mama Tosan anytime he wanted but to touch her? He would have to pay her every dime he owed.

"Em... Oga Silas, I need the room."

"Eh?"

"I want to get changed."

"Oh okay," he mumbled and reluctantly left the room.

She watched him leave and peered at him as he walked towards the window then swiftly removed the

bolt from it. She proceeded to lock the door, all the while removing her clothes.

Silas briskly walked to the window. Seeing that it was closed, he peeped through a crack, and it creaked. Glad that it wasn't locked, he edged it a little hoping she wouldn't notice and watched her undress.

Jacinta started dancing to another song, wiggling her waist suggestively as she walked around the room naked. A little while after she picked up the fan and lay in bed, knees bent. She propped her head on one arm, parted her legs and began to fan herself.

Silas' throat caught. He stifled a groan when she got up and went out of view. He pondered as he walked away, defeated.

Jacinta had been able to study without a hiccup, almost without hiccup. Adetunji's long absence left her dastardly broke. And since seeing the dead body, she'd become overly guarded, and she found serving at parties demeaning and only managed to attend two functions. She never went to parties no matter how hungry she was, even if it was at the hall on the street across. Desperate and financially inept, she slept with the principal of a secondary school in exchange for her WAEC registration.

Silas was still the same: wanting and not giving and she hadn't saved anything. Only six months ago he asked her about ovulation. Innocuous of his intention, she explained it to him, and he began to observe her. For two months, he would give her the money she needed so long as it was when she was ovulating.

She didn't need to be more careful even though she

was suspicious of him since then. She had long taken care of it as she had no intention of conceiving until she'd found her daughter. However, the money stopped flowing. It seemed he was afraid that getting her WAEC would give her wings to fly.

Silas wasn't content with her non-growing belly. On one occasion, he went through her things, and when she caught him, he asked her for the contraceptive she was using. Unsatisfied, he searched the whole room.

Quite cross with him, she prevented him from leaving the mess he'd made. "Clean up this mess."

"Wetin I get you for?"

She picked up his keys, and before he could react, she locked him in and walked away. She returned an hour later, to discover that he'd broken the door. He hadn't tidied up the mess. She sniggered and took a few things to sleep at Adetunji's place.

"Where you dey go?" Silas asked.

She turned to scold Silas and saw their neighbour with his tools beside him and curtsied. "Oga Carpenter, I greet o!"

"My pikin, how go dey go?" The carpenter asked with a chuckle.

"We dey look God!"

"Na im we get." The carpenter retorted with a nod and dropped his tools by the broken door.

"Where you dey go?"

"I dey go piss." The carpenter said, walking away.

"Ajebó's place."

"Eh!?"

"If na the door, im go fix am nah!"

Jacinta looked around.

“You forget something?”

“Clean your mess!”

“But...”

Jacinta started walking away, and he held her hand. “Look nah!” Silas pleaded as he began to tidy up.

Frustrated, she stared at him. She’d been penny-kobo-pinching for months. Caution paused her displeasure; she hadn’t warmed his bed for months, and he still managed to feed her, sometimes. And besides, he was the one paying the rent for the ramshackle they lived in. She managed to smile – it was the first time he’d done any tiding since she moved in with him.

Silas went out soon after.

The carpenter’s move of striking the hinges had a rhythm that made her sleepy. She opened her eyes when she heard someone call her and frowned at the carpenter, wondering what he was doing inside the house.

“I don finish. Tell am say na forty naira.”

Jacinta nodded.

Silas returned just then and frowned at the carpenter. He quickly paid the carpenter who nodded his thanks and left.

“Im touch you?” Silas asked looking concerned.

Jacinta groggily rolled her eyes.

Silas showed her money. Curbing her excitement, she counted it and was so impressed that he’d given her a little more than usual that she let him undress her. He seemed to be on the path of vengeance because she was sore in the morning. That morning, as she winced, she decided she had to get in touch with Ajebó. If she could sleep with a leftover like Silas, surely she could sleep

with any man. But after three disappointments, Ajebó stopped helping her.

CHAPTER THIRTY-TWO

1987

November

Jacinta

She couldn't wait to hold her WAEC certificate. She had initially been worried about Adetunji because of the 'mber months superstitions. He was the one person who understood her, and she hoped he wasn't dead somewhere. She searched for jobs - non-demeaning job - to no avail. She'd wanted to wait until she'd seen her result but was also desperate as usual to be less reliant on of Silas.

Soon after her exams, she got a job as a sales girl. She took the job for a number of reasons: She ached for Adetunji; A lot of troublesome people were searching for Silas; Adetunji's sugar mummies started hassling her for Adetunji's whereabouts; Silas had become a lot more assertive and had made a statement about needing to start a family and most importantly, she was bored and frustrated with hunger.

As she sat on her spot at the kiosk, she remembered when she left the old woman's house and sighed heavily. There were times when she'd remember and cry herself to sleep. These days she just had a placid face and a rueful smile at the thought of Nkasiobi.

She did wonder anytime she saw children her daughter's age, what Nkasiobi would be up to, what she

would be allergic to, what her favourite food would be. 'Elóhò's husband had kicked her and the child out plus she'd moved to England'. Yemisi, who was now married with three children and also heavily pregnant, told her with excited emphasis.

Three days after she'd started working, the owner of the shop came back suddenly and asked her to lock up. As soon as she handed the keys over, she was paid two months' salary. To her questioning brows, the woman said, 'don't come back'. She watched the woman leave in a cab and relieved that she didn't have to work all day, she went to check her WAEC results.

It was the first good thing that had happened to her in forever, and she was eager to celebrate it. Thrilled, she visited Leventis, Kingsway Rendezvous, decided to take a gamble and pay for JAMB, and finally took a long bus trip back to Mushin. Her new challenge wasn't getting into university as much as staying in it. She needed to make money to pay her fees; part-time studies were too expensive, and full-time meant she couldn't earn anything. At the moment it didn't matter, she had scaled over one bridge.

Soon after she alighted the bus, she knew something was wrong. There were a few too many policemen littered outside the compound; she couldn't tell if it was their compound they were watching. For a hot afternoon, no one was outside their room, and most of the doors were locked from inside – there were no padlocks on their doors. She frowned upon reaching the room she shared with Silas; the window was closed. She didn't see anyone and didn't know who to ask questions.

“Psst.” Mama Tosan beckoned her, through a crack in her window.

She was surprised to see the woman who was never in at that time of the day.

“Silas sey make I tell you...”

Jacinta moved closer. “You say?”

“Silas talk say e get place wen im dey go, na friday e go return.” The woman said and coughed into Jacinta’s face.

“Okay. Thank you, Ma.” Jacinta mumbled holding her breath, curtsied and left bemused. Silas’ hate for the woman was indeed a façade. *Silas had somewhere to go? Perhaps that’s a good thing.* She unlocked the door and yelped except a hand had covered her mouth.

“It’s me o!” someone whispered.

“Tunji!” she exclaimed.

“Shhh,” he sighed as he shook his head then collapsed on her mattress.

“Wetin hapun?”

“Na me police find come.”

Alarmed, she squeaked. “You say?” She spun to look the door then asked. “Why?”

“It’s one of the Mamas o!”

She raised a brow at him as she knocked his shoed feet of the bed.

“Silas?” Tunji curiously asked.

“He’ll not be back until Friday. Na wetin Mama Tosan tell me be dat.”

He smiled and pulled her into a crushing hug. “I miss you die.”

She hugged him back. She missed him as well but was not going to admit it.

Adetunji sat on the bed while she produced the items she bought. They ate quickly and quietly. As she put the dishes away, the fan came on, an indication that NEPA had lost its control over the electricity once more. With the light on, they didn't need to whisper anymore, and they talked into the night, giggling and laughing.

Adetunji caressed her face then kissed her. At first, she froze because she'd never been kissed. Adetunji didn't stop and not wanting him to stop and not knowing what to do, she opened her mouth. Strangely, she liked it, and he didn't stop until they were almost breathless.

"I really did miss you." He said, kissing her head.

She wrapped her arms around him.

"This is for you," he said and opened her palm to place it. It was the key to his room. As he closed her palm around the key, she knew this was going to be the last time they would see each other. She had feared this day would come, but she was glad that he got to trust her. They were quiet for a while listening to the transistor radio. He sat up abruptly, then pulled down her panties. She wanted to remove the rest of her clothes, but he stopped her and pushed her back to the bed. He looked into her eyes as he parted her legs.

"Kiss me," she demanded before she could stop herself.

He kissed her, and she whimpered his name. She wanted to shout his name to the rooftops and clamped her lower lip with her teeth, but she couldn't stop herself from moaning until she convulsed beneath him. She didn't notice him watching her until she opened her eyes. Embarrassed she slanted her head away from him

with her back to him.

“How long have you got?”

Adetunji shrugged. “Forever.”

“I meant, how long have you got to stay?”

“Oh, well until Silas’ return.”

Jacinta was worried: she cared about him. With him, she felt alive.

Monday had arrived. It was four-thirty in the morning. The cock didn’t crow neither did the frogs croak. The crickets did chirp, and that made her shiver. She didn’t know what to expect when she got to her new place of work. She had never gone anywhere so early. It was raining. Thankfully, there was an old musty raincoat and wellingtons she had on, even though they were two sizes too big – they used to be Adetunji’s. She had to stuff the wellingtons with old newspaper so she wouldn’t trip.

She had been sneezing through the late hours of Sunday and hoped it wasn’t a cold. Monday was never a good day to be ill. As a matter of fact, it was a bad omen, that spelt doom for the rest of the week. The sun was already up by the time she arrived at the fuel station, and at mid-morning, it was already hot. Her turtleneck sweater absorbed the sweat and not having a handkerchief she had to swipe sweat from her face with her hands.

She adapted quickly to her job description and was quite efficient and became one of the top five candidates picked to stand at the pump on rotation. She got four days and the manager’s girlfriend, Daju also did. Daju didn’t like her that much and made sure she knew.

Jacinta was used to women seeing her as competition and thrived on it.

She'd come to prefer working on Sundays. There was less traffic. Also, she could cat-nap at intervals without worrying about getting caught. She sometimes read a novel. This Sunday was different, there was fuel scarcity, and theirs was the only fuel station for miles. The carpool extended to the main road. She was beginning to feel like a robot, her feet were swollen, and sweating had left her dehydrated. It was the first time since she started working there that she didn't care about the tips. She could feel the pores on her skin opening, lusting after a cool breeze or perhaps rain.

The manager dropped by around 3p.m. and couldn't get to his parking space. Worried that there might be a problem he ran over to where she stood. As soon as Jacinta saw him, she pushed the pump to his chest, forcing him to hold it, then ran as fast as she could through the car wash section to the back of the building.

The manager shrugged when Daju contemptuously glared at him.

Jacinta dreaded going back to her post but went back all the same. Her manager was already arguing with someone, and his girlfriend had locked the pump she was attending to. She gave Jacinta a condescending gaze and crossed her arms.

Jacinta smirked then relieved the manager. The man continued to argue over her head, so she took the fuel pump out of his car and put it in the next car in the queue. The people in the line applauded her. Two hours later, the crowd had not reduced so the manager called

other employees promising to pay overtime, but none were willing to come since he hadn't paid anyone their overtime in months.

There was another scuffle, but Jacinta stayed out of it. It was a man in a red Cherokee and a woman in a silver Peugeot 505. The woman told the man not to lean on her car, and when the man ignored her, she poured her fizzy drink on him. The yellow liquid quickly spread across his white shirt, soaking through to his skin. He slapped her across her face, and she screamed.

Some men on their motorcycles came down on him but were hampered by a soldier who slapped the man across the face. The man staggered and fell awkwardly. A few seconds passed, and he didn't get up. Fearing that he was dead people began to flee. Those that remained behind quickly assisted each other in towing cars out of the way so they could buy fuel and leave the place. It was already 7p.m. yet the heat was unforgiving. Jacinta tidied up so that when the group left, she could make a quick exit before the others returned. As soon as the last customer went through, she left.

The following day, soldiers were littered around the station with brand new *kobokos*. The owner of the fuelling station had hired them to prevent people from vandalism making it a relatively peaceful day. At the end of work, she hurried to the locker to get her things and bumped into someone. She apologized and tried to walk around him and realised he was intentionally blocking her path. Rolling her eyes, she stepped back, crossed her arms, and waited for him to explain himself.

He grinned.

She raised an irritated brow, hissed and brushed past

him. He pulled her by the arm, and she swung her handbag at him just as the manager entered the room.

The manager rushed to the man and started apologizing on her behalf and told her to join them. She scowled and hurried to the bus stop. A bus stopped just in time; the conductor pushed the door open. She stretched out her hand to hold the conductor for support when someone pulled her out. She almost fell and twirled with her bag swinging.

The manager ducked saying, “No vex, no vex, oga wan see you.”

“See eh, time don go. If I miss this bus how I wan take reach house?”

“I go give you cab money, abeg nah. You no say you make am vex.”

“Say wetin? No just start that one here, if im bin dey look road –”

“E don do. Na wa o, you too dey vex.”

“Make im no tay o! Ehen, make I kuku tell you, I no go come work tomorrow o!”

“Eh... no *wahala*.”

Jacinta walked back to the manager’s office. The man she’d bumped into waved at the manager who nodded and left. She frowned and smiled inwardly, *you think say I no get sense abi? Just try anything eh, I’ll kill you here.*

“Sit down.”

“Thank you. I’m fine.” She mumbled, crossed her arms and waited.

The man leaned back on his chair. “Well, if you don’t want to sit down you can close the door.”

“It’s hot in here, Sir.”

“The AC is on.”

Jacinta cleared her throat and turned to face the door.

He gestured. “Please close the door.”

Jacinta rubbed her cheek and held the doorknob but didn’t budge.

“I said –”

“I heard you, sir. You can tell me what you have to say, people are waiting for me at home.”

“I just want to express my feelings for you. By the way, my name is Gbenga. You’re beautiful.”

“Hmm, thank you.”

“Would you like to be my girlfriend?”

No! “I’ll think about it.”

“That’s fine by me.” He put his hand in his *agbada*. She inched closer to the door and even more when he stretched his hand towards her. “It’s just my business card.”

She collected it with her free hand. She flicked it like she was glancing at it and pursed her lips before interlocking her fingers impatiently.

“Amos went to get you a cab, get in touch okay?”

“Okay,” she murmured.

“Your cab is here,” The manager wheezed as he rushed into the room, panting.

“I –”

“Here’s your cab fare.” The man stretched out his hand and gave her wads of twenty-naira notes. She nodded her thanks and shoved the money into her bag walking away briskly, not looking back.

The ensuing weeks the same man would come and give

her money, she would foot-drag and accept it. She also noticed that anytime he came the manager would excuse himself and leave them together. Gbenga would talk to her for an hour or two waiting for her to respond then he would leave, but she never did.

All this time she was sure it would affect her salary. It never did. Soon, once a week became three times and four times a week and finally every day. She liked talking to him because it propelled her to read more often even old newspapers. However, he slurped when he ate. He liked to lean in when they talked, forcing her to hold her breath and reposition herself, which only worked for a few minutes. The good thing was that she was being paid for doing practically nothing; she still received her salary for all the time he took her away from her post.

One day he came in without saying a word and closed the door. He watched to see her reaction before sitting down. There was silence in the room for some minutes before he went to sit beside her and swivelled her chair to face him. "I've been meaning to ask you something."

She crossed her arms and looked up.

"I want you to marry me," he said quietly, looking intently at her. "You don't have to give me an answer now."

"But you're expecting one?"

He nodded.

She couldn't date him, but she couldn't tell him outright because he was her boss. She twisted her mouth, "let me think about it."

"Okay," he got up and pushed his hands into his pocket. "I wouldn't wait too long."

She feigned a cough. "Why?"

"I have to get an answer from you before I travel..."

"So? Wait until you get back then."

"If I go to London next weekend I'll not be coming back anytime soon."

Nkasiobi! I want to find my daughter, even if it's just to get a glimpse of her. He may just be pranking me. Let him go and come back. "I'll wait for you."

"In that case, I'll have to get you a place to stay in the city, somewhere like –"

"No, thank you. I can manage." She almost agreed but remembered her neighbour who had been made such an offer, and when the relationship went sour, she was thrown out.

"Why are you being so difficult?"

"Eh?"

He shook his head. "So, what do I do for you or get for you?"

"Nothing." She spoke quickly and added slowly, "Anything you deem fit."

"It will be a surprise then," he nodded and adjusted in his seat. He frowned and stretched his neck; she was the first woman to resist him for this long. He made a mental note to visit the native doctor as he suspected the charm had begun to fade.

Jacinta smiled dreamily.

"Are you thinking of me?" he asked as he came to stand by her, almost knocking down the table fan.

"Probably," she sighed.

"Why don't you let me take you home."

"I can find my way."

"Okay," he raised his hand in surrender then brought

out a wallet that looked much like a large organiser and opened it. He pulled out some wads of naira and handed it over to her.

She smiled her thank you and put it in the back pocket of her denim jeans. "I have to go now before I miss the bus."

"Why don't you take a cab? Don't forget there's a curfew in these parts."

"True. I forgot, it just means I have to hurry," she slung her bag over her shoulder and briskly walked out of the office.

Gbenga observed her as the manager detained her and lingered by the door. "Any problem?"

The manager belched and cleared his throat. "No sir, just telling her that her cab is here."

"Good night Jacinta and think about what we discussed."

"Okay, sir." She nodded and practically ran to the cab.

By the cab, she paused and looked back and saw a car drive out of the private car park. She didn't know most of Gbenga's cars, so she couldn't tell if it was his. She noticed the car again. When she caught sight of the vehicle a third time, she assumed the person was heading in the same direction as hers, but she couldn't help looking back. Of what use was that? In the dark, you couldn't even see the driver. She shrugged it off. As she got out of the cab, someone tapped her shoulder. Frightened, she yelped, quickly turned around, and sighed with relief.

"Ajebó, you startled me!" She exclaimed angrily.

"I'm sorry, I wanted to see if it was you before I

mentioned your name. How you dey?”

“I’m fine o!”

Ajebó caught sight of someone in blue agbada walking back to a red Cherokee. The person walking away wasn’t a thing of interest, but the car was. She could never forget that plate number: *GSGbenga*.

“I came to see you but was told you now work.”

“Yes, my sister. I got a job at a filling station.”

Ajebó lingered.

“Aren’t you coming in with me?”

“No o, I no wan quarrel with your landlord o!”

Jacinta laughed knowing she was referring to Silas. “He should be at work.”

“Should be? So, you want me to walk all the way, you know your place is at the extreme-end.”

“Oh, come on. He is not in today.”

“Okay o, if you say so.”

“I say so, you’re not going back this night o!”

“*Shebi*, you get work?”

“I dey off tomorrow.”

“As you talk am. Make we stop for Óróbó place buy food, *abeg*.”

“No *wahala*!”

After they had taken their bath and eaten. Ajebó lowered her voice. “You know any person wen dem dey call Gbenga?”

“For this area?” Jacinta stopped pulling out a bed sheet halfway and shook her head. “No o, why you dey ask?”

“I see motor wen make me ask, *GSGbenga*”

“Na my Oga name be dat.” Jacinta retorted hesitantly and shrugged.

Ajebó clapped her hand and beckoned her friend closer. "Run o, before I talk am finish take off, you dey hear me so?"

"Wetin dey do you sef?"

"That guy is trouble, otumokpo gum am o."

Jacinta giggled. "Wow, this is serious o!"

"This is not a laughing matter o!"

"Just relax, it's not like I'm dating him. He is my boss. You sure say na the same person we dey talk so?"

"Wait, I go nak you toreya. First, do you remember that very fair Ogoni girl, that Mama Nike said missed albino by an inch."

"Naatie, I remember her. Na true o, e don tey wen I last see that girl o."

"You know sey she no dey Eko again?"

"Talk true?"

"True talk, my sister! Na run she run o. For her life na im she run o!"

"You don't say," Jacinta exclaimed in mock disbelief.

"It was because of that guy."

Jacinta chuckled, a little disconcerted. "How can? How do you mean?"

"I'm getting there, you know how she dey sabi carry us go club..."

"This GSGbenga guy had picked interest in Leebari, the Ogoni girl. She saw that he was wealthy and left with him. She didn't come back until three months later; wearing the same dress, she'd worn to the club with them and was practically thin in the now tattered dress that it was almost falling off her. Her head was cleanly shaven; she looked distraught and confided in Ajebó that GSGbenga's native doctor rejected her

because she already had a child, therefore, was not a worthy sacrifice for his rituals.”

Jacinta couldn't sleep. The man Ajebó described seemed to be her boss; the cheap perfume which all the Hausa stall owners in Yaba market wore, the only one he ever wore, the saliva that trip out of his mouth endlessly when he spoke down to the twitching of the left side of his cheek from time to time. Was it his car that closely followed her cab? If so, why did he need to know her house? If it was his car that Ajebó had seen, then he already knew where she stayed, and it was only a matter of time before he knew the exact house. Ajebó had been inviting her to spend the weekend with her on campus, so she thought that she might just take her up on that offer this weekend.

The following day, Ajebó got up early and prepared to leave.

“Aren't you going to take your bath first?”

“I completely forgot about my appointment for this morning. I can't afford to be late, you know *nawh*. Besides this particular customer is leaving Lagos with the 9a.m. flight to Abuja plus your landlord will be back soon.”

“Ey-ya and I wanted to come with you o!” She complained, hoping Ajebó would welcome the idea.

“Why not?”

“I never baf nah.” Jacinta mumbled and tossed on the bed.

“No worry, after all na hotel, you can take your bath there.”

“Okay, make I carry something wen I go wear.”

“No o, when we reach there I go tell the man say you

be my sister wen I go bring from the bus terminal.”

“Okay nawh, na follow I dey follow.”

The man had left for the airport with an earlier flight before they arrived. He'd also left a parcel and an envelope for Ajebó. In the parcel were two pairs of sandals which she was going to pawn, and the envelope had a cheque she was going to cash.

Jacinta couldn't be bothered. She was more concerned with how she was going to get another job in the short space of time she had. She hadn't had the time to put the money the man had been giving her in the bank. And she didn't know how much she had in her account as her salary had been paid into it. She looked into her wallet, her assess card was in it as well as her identity card. She gasped as it dawned on her that GSGbenga might be an influential person. He could influence one of his powerful friends to close her account. She had to open a new one in a different bank as soon as possible.

She was going to take her sick leave as soon as she could get to a phone box to call her manager then find the closest Union Bank to make the withdrawal. Hopefully, she would get a job closer to where she lived even if the pay around there would be significantly lower. Ajebó had another client to meet, and Jacinta relayed her hopes. Ajebó felt sure the person would be able to help and asked Jacinta to join her. Jacinta wanted Ajebó to show her around, particularly as it was her first time of being in Falómó.

On getting to the hotel, just as they were about to enter the hotel lobby the heel of Jacinta's sandals broke, twisting her ankle simultaneously. The man that was

expecting Ajebó was waiting in the lobby for them with another man. Ajebó dissed Jacinta. Jacinta was surprised at Ajebó's sudden change in attitude but remained seated while Ajebó went to the lift with her customer. The man who was speaking with the one Ajebó left with went to join Jacinta.

Jacinta was already reading something that caught her interest. She suddenly didn't feel comfortable sitting down in the lobby with other girls even though she wasn't skimpily dressed or chewing gum wildly as they did. She sat down there in their midst, feeling dirty, a man was sitting very close to her trying to make a conversation. She looked down at her ankle and winced. Feeling self-conscious, she decided to endure the pain.

He had a piece of paper in his hand, which he placed on the page she was reading, making her look up. She glared at him, and he nodded to the paper.

She looked at the paper and raised a brow.

He went ahead to seat beside her. A few minutes later, he cleared his throat and inclined his head toward her. "I'll pay you five thousand naira to sit in the restaurant with me while we wait for your friends. Maybe, you could discuss what you've just read with me."

Jacinta's eyes nearly popped out of its sockets. All she had to do was listen to him. She was only too relieved to be out of the lobby. As she got up the other girls hissed and murmured and eyed her; she had 'stolen' a potential client from them. They talked for a while only realising they had spent hours waiting for their friends when Ajebó strolled in and handed Jacinta a bag.

Jacinta opened it to find a pair of sandals and nodded her thanks. She didn't bother to leave her table, not caring how offended Ajebó would be. On the other hand, Ajebó felt she deserved it after her customer had given her a good talking to, then her customer introduced the man to her as his 'chairman'.

Jacinta was shocked to find out that the man she had been talking to, the man who introduced himself as Taiwo, was the former minister of works, he barely knew Ajebó's customer. They had only just met in the hotel lobby. The man was practically savouring Taiwo's every word. Ajebó wore a vile look and Jacinta felt elated.

Taiwo looked at the man, then at Ajebó. "So, what are you up to?"

"She is homeless," Ajebó in a patronising tone and made a show of brushing her hair off her face.

Jacinta wanted the ground to swallow her as she became overwhelmed with embarrassment.

"I see," Taiwo murmured and signalled the waiter. He looked up and gestured at Ajebó and her companion who in turn joined them at the table.

After eating, he got up, shook hands with the man and nodded at Ajebó then smiled at Jacinta, "Come with me?"

Jacinta nodded, hugged her friend and scampered away. She remembered she didn't have Ajebó's address and ran back inside, but Ajebó had already left.

A few hours into the night, Jacinta appraised the rooms in the semi-detached flat. Her first house and it had a place for everything; two toilets, one in the room she'd chosen and the other close to the dining room. She dove onto the bed and smiled dreamily.

Although she brooded over what he would expect of her, she nodded when he spoke. She was supposed to find out if he rented the place in her name in case she was no longer interested in him or what he had to offer. Fortunately, she had saved enough money to pay her tuition in LASU. She stared at the ceiling, dreaming of what her first day at the university would be

CHAPTER THIRTY-THREE

1993

April

Jacinta

Taiwo gave Jacinta anything she wanted. She had a few months until graduation from the Lagos State University where she was getting a degree in Accountancy and Finance. She didn't like the course, but that was the only option she'd been given. Now, she hoped she excelled in her project as she'd done in most of her courses. As she scampered into the kitchen to prepare dinner for Taiwo's visit, she heard children playing and sighed ruefully.

She heard footsteps and knew Taiwo was back from work. He didn't need to be invited, and he had a key. Taiwo was handsome, he listened and always had something intelligent to say. All he ever did was talk about work, what annoyed him and even his insecurities. She had grown to miss his presence.

In some ways, he reminded her of Adetunji who always made sure she had a smile on her lips. He never asked her to sleep with him, he didn't even go into her bedroom except on the day he got her the house.

She knew he was married and secretly hoped he wouldn't ask her to be his second wife because she wasn't sure she would say no.

Something was different about today; not because it

was the first of April or the fact that it was his birthday. Her concern was why he didn't spend it with his wife; it was a special day after all. She shrugged it off until she saw his demure and grimaced. He talked about two funny incidents that took place at work, and she relaxed.

"Would you consider being my wife?"

Jacinta choked and quickly drank water. She kept her hand tightly on the dining table and looked intently at her plate.

"God knows I've tried. I've tried everything in my power to make my wife happy, but it hasn't worked. Why does she think I do all this? What do I get in return?"

Jacinta filled the glass a second time, but this time she drank the water slowly.

"I work my butt off just to make sure she and the kids have food on the table."

Except for the ticking clock, the room was quiet for a while.

"What else does she need?"

"She wants you," Jacinta muttered, admittedly.

"She has practically anything she needs."

"She needs you," Jacinta emphasised.

"She-"

"She needs you," Jacinta reiterated.

Taiwo frowned, set his cutleries down, and leaned back. "How do you mean?"

"You've been married for how long?"

"Twenty years." He grumbled.

"Are you sure?"

He stared at her.

"I'm sorry... it's just that you look very young," she trailed off and filled her mouth with food.

He laughed somewhat ruefully.

Jacinta opened her mouth and shut it.

"I'm forty-nine. My parents ruled that their sons must be married by the time they were twenty-six years old."

"What was it like when you met your wife?"

Taiwo sighed as he reminisced.

"It was in 1954. I broke my slate and was sent home a second time on the same day. It was raining, and she was new in school. She didn't know the way back home, but I knew her compound. I led her home because her family was the talk of the village, being that they were new-in-town. She was unruly, but I didn't mind. I just loved seeing her talk. She coggled when she walked just because she didn't want the water on the ground to touch her shoes as if that was possible. While we walked, she used the tip of her fingers to push the tall grasses that leaned into the narrow path. I didn't know she was extremely allergic at the time, you see..."

Taiwo laughed lightly and was making circles on the table distractedly, so Jacinta cleared her throat the third time before he heard her.

"One day, a popular man came into the village to visit her father while she was playing with my cousin in our backyard. My cousin had brought her to my house, they were playing *oga*, and I had just come back from my grandmother's house two miles away. My grandmother had given me roasted fish and yam. Since it wasn't common to find those in my house, my cousin yanked them off me. She wasn't pleased with my cousin and yanked it off her. Well, in the scuffle, a boy who

happened to be the former governor's son came to get her."

"His tone was so condescending she ordered him to leave. She will abuse you but will not permit anyone else to do the same." He trailed off again and smiled dreamily. "I miss her snoring beside me or kicking me while she was asleep. I miss the shrill sound of her voice when she loses an argument." He cackled. "She-"

Jacinta accidentally knocked her glass of water down.

"Are you alright?" Taiwo asked, looking concerned.

She nodded and looked down at the shards on the grey floor. "Not that I don't have apathy for your plight, but I'm not the person you should be telling this."

He was quiet, deep in thought, a frown in his brow and then nodded.

About thirty minutes after Jacinta had cleared the table, while she massaged his feet, he asked, "Tell me the best way to win my wife back?"

She tilted her head and exhaled slowly, "Well, you know her well, but first you have to tell her you will be in the house as soon as possible. You need to make a few calls too."

He nodded while she laid out plans, and anytime he dozed off, she would prick him with the nail file.

Jacinta woke up and tried to sit up, all her body ached; sleeping in the chair seemed to be more painful than sleeping on the floor. She sighed as she realised that it was 4a.m. She had only slept for an hour. She wondered what she would do, to pass the time since she had completed all of her assignments then remembered that her neighbour Bernice would be retouching her

hair in a few hours.

She now had mixed feelings about Taiwo getting close to his wife. She was going to find out how much a bed in the hostel cost as all the rooms would have been bought by now. Ajobó knew the students who sold accommodation, but she hadn't set her eyes on Ajobó since the day she left the hotel with Taiwo. She had a feeling Ajobó was avoiding her, and she couldn't figure out why. She even discovered where Ajobó was staying and decided to pay her a visit on her birthday, but Ajobó had told her friends not to let her in. She suspected Ajobó was worried that she would be slighted for lying about being an undergraduate.

By the time she finished loosening her hair, it was 6:30a.m. She sighed and laid down on the chair but fell asleep. She heard the rattling of the burglary proof a few times but waved her hand around her ear like she was swatting a fly.

Bernice slapped Jacinta hard on her leg.

Jacinta bolted upright.

Bernice stood akimbo and rolled her eyes playfully at Jacinta. "Did you forget about retouching your hair?"

"*Mtchew*, I slept off, didn't I? I'll go and buy the relaxer now."

"Ew, you knew I had somewhere to go this morning. Your man friend no gree make you comot? Anyway, please, I beg you, hurry. I don't want to be late to get my project started. *Abeg*."

Jacinta chuckled and dragged her feet to her room to get a scarf to cover her hair and money to buy the relaxer. She then brought Bernice a bottle of Fanta and

headed out of the house. She considered locking the burglary proof but seeing that it required her having to go back inside the house to get her key she closed it and clicked the latch.

A few yards away from the house, she heard tyres screech and slanted her head to see a man leap out of the driver's side of a saloon car to open the back door of the same car. She had a strange feeling on seeing them but shrugged it off. Curious, she looked again. A woman came out, reset a headgear then loosened her *iro* and rewrapped it around her stomach.

Shrugging, Jacinta pursed her lips then hurried down the road to the kiosk to get the relaxer. She rushed back to her wing of the house and stopped just outside the door to catch her breath. It was only then that she realised that her burglary-proof gate had been left open. She groaned, believing that Bernice had run out of patience.

She entered her house and stopped when she heard groaning. Following the sound to the kitchen, she found Bernice on the ground writhing in pain; half of her face was pink with red and brown blotches, same as her forearms. Her right ear was gone, and so was part of her lips. At first, Jacinta thought that Bernice had been stabbed or cut. But then she saw that her skin was bubbling. She doused her friend's face in water then ran out to get a cab to take her friend to the hospital before going to inform Bernice's brother.

That evening, Taiwo went home with boxes of chocolate and perfumes and other things he knew his wife loved.

He arrived to find police officers carting his wife away. She had poured sulphuric acid on a young woman they said. Bernice's elder brother was a district police officer, and Ajebó had been Taiwo's wife's informant all along and was taken out in handcuffs too.

Jacinta felt sick; her stomach couldn't hold any food because the smell caused her to remember that the burn on Bernice's face, which smelt like a combination of roasted meat and *akamu*. She wanted to pack her things out of the house, but the landlord insisted on refunding the payee even though it was her name on the receipt. She changed her mind quickly because she didn't have anywhere else to go.

She was unable to sleep; every sound cleared her drowsiness; she decided to burn her energy by working on her project until she dozed off. She reluctantly rose from the bed to open the window, thinking that she forgot to open it earlier in the day.

An unusual bird was squawking, and her surroundings were covered with whirring grey smoke that carried the smell of cowhide towards her, the squawking seemed to increase with the wind blowing the smoke towards her. She shot the window and coughed simultaneously. It was the first time she noticed the compound behind hers. They must be celebrating something because of the loud music playing and the number of people.

Singing, she made a list of things to do. She couldn't renege on clearing Bernice's flat as she'd promised the brother. More so, the girl's attack was her fault. She also couldn't leave her term paper unattended, or the typist would sell it to a classmate. Any office providing

the same services within the radius of her house charged an exorbitant price. She didn't have much time to finish all she had to do for the day, but she had an hour until the shops on campus were open.

As she scrambled for the keys to Bernice's flat to appraise the work that needed doing, she wondered why guilt tripped her into making that promise. She rushed back to her house, pulled on a pair of jeans and plimsolls and was almost out of her house before she realised she was still wearing her nightshirt.

Tired of hearing the clicking and swishing of the typewriters, she inhaled sharply. It took almost all day, to finish both term papers and Bernice's project. In haste she shopped, pushing the shopping cart like a hungry thief. As soon as she got home, she went to her friend's place and began tidying up.

Taiwo sent her two cheques and a letter informing her of his dissolution of their relationship. She thought she saw a hint of hesitance in his writing.

One of the cheques was for two years rent in arrears, and the other as compensation for the emotional distress his wife had put her through. The rent Taiwo paid still had eight months to it. Deciding she wasn't going to renew her tenancy, she opened another account to save the money. She didn't have business sense and wasn't going to fool herself. Also, a much smaller accommodation would make the money go further.

But first, she wanted to go to Port Harcourt to visit Gretchen and Violet her friends before Youth Service. She already had two sets of flight tickets, and she was

already exhausted from studying anyway. She just had to submit her project before anything else.

CHAPTER THIRTY-FOUR

1996

March

Jacinta

With the help of one of Rogers' aide, she got in contact with a private investigator in England. It was expensive, but the aide had assured her of her expertise. She had been waiting for a letter, information but nothing had happened. She hoped the delay was a good thing because the investigator didn't ask her for more money. The doorbell rang just as Andrew started taking his plate to the kitchen. She stopped him and took him to the door instead. After exchanging pleasantries with the driver assigned to Andrew, she went inside to clean up the rest of the house.

Somehow, she needed to keep busy. Ever since she succeeded in winning Rogers' affection, his house has turned out to be her second home. It was easy because she got along with Andrew, and Rogers insisted. She looked around proudly and smiled. She was already dreaming of wedding bells, reuniting with her daughter and having more kids for Rogers. Someone knocked on the door, and she went to answer it.

A courier?

She frowned and signed the letter. The return address piqued her interest.

Miss J.,

Following the details, you sent me, my search has led me to a Jamaican woman a.k.a. Bootlegger, who took in Mrs. E and a little girl of approximately seven years. Mrs. E is now in Italy. Bootlegger, popularly known for taking in strays is unaware of this development.

If you want to meet this woman, she is known to sell off the children in her care to willing men for a fair price. The little girl, in this case, is five years too young.

As agreed, when you come to town, you'll have the details you need.

NB: she'll be moving soon. Confirming the new address will be a different contract.

Done,

C. J. Silverfox

Jacinta folded the letter and tucked it in her armpit just as Rogers walked into the kitchen with his suitcase.

“Ómó tóó shān (delectable lady),” Rogers said as he set his suitcase down then stretched out his arms. He chuckled and wrapped his arms around her.

She giggled and poked him and wiggled out of his embrace. “Okuri ti won jisoro (a man that stirs jealousy amongst his peers).”

He pulled her back into his arms roughly. “Ómó tóó wumi (my desire)”

She smiled lazily.

He might like it rough, but she most importantly, loved his money.

She squirmed out of his arms again and waltzed towards the stairs. Her buttocks had a mind of its own

for as she waltzed, it danced Makossa which caused the man below Rogers' belly to opt for the rhythm and blues. At the foot of the stairs, she wiggled her buttocks and quickly climbed it, and retrieved the letter just as she entered his room looking for a place to hide it.

Rogers groaned when he realised she was wearing nothing underneath the long t-shirt and quickly followed her up the stairs tugging at his tie.

On hearing his footsteps, she quickly tucked the letter into the small pocket on the inside of her bag and tossed the bag to the edge of the bed then sat languorously on the bed, waiting.

Rogers opened the door and stared at her. She pouted her mouth and winked at him before opening and closing her legs. He grinned and rapidly shrugged off the rest of his clothes before diving onto the bed.

Jacinta grinned mischievously and closed her eyes. *Silverfox, it won't be long.*

PART 3

(PRESENT DAY)

CHAPTER THIRTY-FIVE

Aleruchi

Aleruchi had finally made up her mind to meet the lawyer to start divorce proceedings after missing two appointments. She stared at the family portraits her son had copied and realised she wasn't in any. All those years there wasn't a picture of her, just her husband and son. Like her late children, she was non-existent except for the lucky wedding picture in which she featured with her grumpy-looking in-laws. These pictures made her desire her freedom from Princewill even more and was sure that divorcing Princewill would gladden her father-in-law and set her mother-in-law onto the warpath she had been trying to avoid for so many years. She would also be serving Princewill on a platter to Elfreda.

It's been a long time since she had gone out on dates, or walks. With Eduardo, walks were somewhat irritating as his eyes was on every thin woman making her self-conscious. Eduardo was a fine distraction, although he loved public displays. She had to caution him with her eyes with each attempt, but he was always oblivious of them. Whatever her feelings were for him had since died. She wasn't in love with Eduardo. For some reason, he wasn't adequate. Every date reminded her of the times that she shared with Princewill.

Victor was now twenty-seven years old, and she wished he would take a girlfriend just so that she can

announce to the world that he wasn't gay. She wished she had let him go to a private school instead of the seminary. At least then the worst thing that she would have been afraid of was the number of girls that would get pregnant. It was an unavoidable fact because he was as handsome as his father.

Ever since she saw Princewill at the doorway of their son's house yesterday, the idea of going through with the divorce plan had been jarred out of her mind. She couldn't think clearly. If she thought, it was about him. The alcohol she'd started taking didn't numb her desire to be with Princewill nor the need to torture him.

She sighed and roused herself just as Anita entered the sitting room. She wished the girl would walk gently; Anita slouched, walked sluggishly and even dragged her feet when she walked. It's no wonder Victor hadn't picked interest in her but then maybe he respected his relationship with Andrew too much.

"Good afternoon, Ma," Anita murmured.

Aleruchi belched and gestured.

She entered the kitchen and exhaled forcefully. A few seconds later, Victor and his father came in.

"Hi Victor, good afternoon, sir!" Anita chirped from where she was still washing her hands.

Aleruchi overheard Anita and winced because Princewill was supposed to be in Glasgow. She quickly exited the dining room leaving the pictures on the table.

Princewill gave Anita a curt nod, and Victor smiled then Princewill sat at the island in the middle of the kitchen while Victor rummaged through the fridge. Victor was trying to pull a high stool out while holding up plates, bread, butter, and cutlery, and his father

rescued some of the items that fell before they reached the ground.

Anita slanted a look over her shoulder at Victor and let out a slow sigh. It had become more agonising, seeing Victor more often and not being able to talk to him about her feelings because there was always someone beside him. She wondered what would happen if she blurted out her feelings in the presence of everyone. Shaking her head as she bit her lip, she stopped washing and left the kitchen.

Since Aleruchi became a pain, everyone left the sitting room for her as they didn't want to get on her wrong foot. The kitchen didn't have a TV so Victor brought his thirteen-inch notebook to watch the premiership games with his father.

Anita rushed down the stairs when she heard the door. She lost her grip and almost fell, but Victor deftly caught her.

"Hi!" she stammered, her temperature rising.

"Good thing, you're here."

She looked at him eagerly.

"Can you do me a favour?" He asked.

She wanted to say something, but words weren't coming out, so she nodded.

"I'm going to drop my dad at the airport. Could you please let my mother know?"

Anita nodded again, clearing her throat simultaneously. She watched him leave and groaned. She was mute anytime he spoke. Just then she heard

Aleruchi shout her son's name and rolled her eyes.

In the morning of the following day, Anita was in the kitchen when Aleruchi and Victor returned from church. After they exchanged pleasantries, Anita kicked her foot in frustration, and it struck the cabinet.

"The gym wouldn't have run away if you had gone to church," Aleruchi mumbled nonchalantly.

Anita was close to tears, her lips quivering: her plans had gone bust again. She figured she could make her exit before they settled in and came out of the kitchen.

"Ehen, before we digress, have you given a thought to what I told you?" Aleruchi blocked her son's path as she asked.

Victor raised a questioning brow at his mother.

"Settling down," she retorted pointedly.

"Oh, for goodness sake," Victor muttered under his breath.

Killjoy! Why didn't you just remain in church like your mates do on Sundays? "Good afternoon, Ma!"

"How are you, my dear?"

"Fine, Ma. How was the church?" Anita asked seething.

"Okay o!" Aleruchi said looking grim as she plopped on the sofa closest to her, then slid her feet off her shoes and began to nurse them.

"Hey, what's up?" Victor asked Anita as he peered in the fridge.

Anita was still standing by the door, finally finding her voice. "Oh sorry, how you dey?"

Victor frowned and shrugged. "I'm cool!" then straightened after retrieving a bottle of water. He quickly gulped some of it and sigh.

Anita watched him, and grimaced as he was about to leave the kitchen and quickly asked, "What would you like for lunch?"

"Nothing but thanks for offering."

Aleruchi looked up at her son then at Anita, feeling sympathetic she eagerly asked. "What did you cook?"

Anita still leaning on the kitchen door, replied. "Rice with palm oil stew, Ma."

"Ah-ah Victor, it's your favourite," Aleruchi called out to her son who had already reached the landing.

Anita was taken aback and didn't realise she was staring at Aleruchi until she heard. "I'll have some."

"Of course, coming right up." Feeling a little irritated, she smiled all the same and walked back into the kitchen. *The witch!*

When Aleruchi saw only one place setting of food, she raised a brow at Anita.

"I'm not yet hungry, Ma."

Aleruchi shrugged and pulled a chair. "Anita, there is something I've been meaning to discuss with you." She said slowly and gestured as she sat down.

Anita held her breath. It was too late to withdraw. She pulled a chair out and sat down slowly, cleared her throat, and nodded looking down at her fingers as she clenched and spread them on her lap.

"It's obvious that Victor is single."

Anita squinted wondering what the woman was going to dish out.

Aleruchi coughed lightly.

Anita looked up nodding, her tongue tucked between her teeth.

"I know you are a good girl." Aleruchi paused to sip

water.

Anita's eyes lit up, and she smiled inwardly.

"I want you to invite your friends. As the saying goes, birds of the same feather flock together. I need a girl that is as good as you for him. What do you think?"

What do I think? You devil that has come to take away my joy, I bind and cast you out in the name of Jesus. Imagine. Aha! Now, I know. I know now, this woman does not wish me well.

Aleruchi dapped the sides of her mouth with a napkin and curiously looked at Anita. "You haven't said anything."

Anita thinned her lips then cleared her throat, she remembered the lemon water in her hand - which was half-filled with vodka - and exhaled before taking a large gulp. Smiling sweetly, she said. "It's a good idea."

"I thought so." Aleruchi nodded in agreement and resumed eating.

Kai! I resemble your aboki abi? She stared at Aleruchi, wishing her eyes were enough to wipe the woman out of the surface of the earth.

"I'll let it sink for a bit then we can talk about it further. This is a well-cooked meal." Aleruchi nodded, got up carrying the plate with her.

Anita, curious and eager asked. "Are you going out?"

Aleruchi raised her head and scanned Anita's face. "No."

"It's just that -"

I can't let the sun go to waste. I'll be in the garden with a novel."

"Oh," Anita made no attempt to hide her contempt, but Aleruchi had long exited the room. She clucked her

tongue. Letting out an exasperated sigh, she leaned back, tugged the hairband off and started braiding her hair as she thought of the next line of action. She had a few friends, but she wasn't going to risk losing Victor to any of them. The best thing was to get her former flatmates, Hadiza aka Silicon Valley, Abigail who was in the middle of a divorce and Emilia the runaway bride. If Emilia brought Terry, her best mate along she would have to keep an eye on her because that girl couldn't resist anything that walked around in trousers. But what would her future mother-in-law think of her?

Aleruchi spread out the clothes she had bought on her shopping trip with Catherine.

She was going out with Eduardo against her best judgment even though she'd made up her mind to end things with him. Now that Princewill was in town, she had another reason to spite him and changed her mind again.

Seeing her reflection, she gasped; the rollers were still in her hair. She was beginning to get used to wearing dresses that clung to her frame again. She had just put on the cobalt blue dress with sky blue sequins that were splayed like a wave when she moved. She heard Princewill's voice from downstairs.

Dammit.

Infuriated, she pulled the dress back over her head then kicked off her shoes. She placed her hands on her stomach for a moment and rushed to the toilet to puke her guts out. Feeling queasy for being unable to stand Eduardo or Princewill, though for different reasons. She

was Aleruchi, the Aleruchi who had bent backwards to please everyone but herself. She may need self-help, whatever that was, but she wasn't going down with flailing arms.

Still feeling queasy, she sat down quickly. Grasped her phone to call Catherine for advice but pressed the red button when the call went through. Her cellphone rang but with a different ringtone. She picked it up, looked at the back, and grimaced. It was Victor's phone. She must have exchanged it while she was doing the laundry. She gasped at a sudden realisation.

Victor had her phone, and she was expecting a call from Eduardo. She tried to remember her texts to Eduardo and hoped there was no profanity. Uncomfortable with her son reading her messages. She decided to call her phone. Unfortunately, she didn't know the number.

Looking at the time, she sighed. *Any moment now. Eduardo is supposed to call me as soon as he arrives. What if Victor tries to sabotage my plans. No, Victor isn't like that. But with the kind of father he had, anything is possible.*

Aleruchi bit her finger as she thought of her son. All this time, she hadn't considered her son's reaction to her seeing someone else. It didn't matter. He was an adult. She had hoped she would be married or be with a significant other. She fell back on the bed and huffed, pulled the clothes off from underneath her and grazed something soft. Curious, she picked it up and eyed it - Jacinta had chosen the dress, saying; 'for once in your life, be daring'.

'Daring' may as well be now, she thought as she

picked up the dress. She appraised herself one more time, dabbed her pulse points with Princewill's favourite scent then calmed her nerve just as the door clicked shut, and checked her purse as she made her way down the stairs.

Victor was playing chess with his father while Andrew was gaming with Anita. Andrew was the only one facing the stairs and deliberately exclaimed to get everyone's attention. He even produced his wallet and made beckoning signals at Victor. Just then Catherine and Jacinta entered closely followed by Eduardo who looked flustered. He looked up at her and beamed.

Victor squinted and then leaned back to watch the proceedings. His father had to woo his wife. Only a fool would let a woman like his mother slip off his fingers.

Princewill looked at his wife and gulped. The red wraparound dress with plunging neckline did things to his body he couldn't describe. Apart from the dark circles around his wife's eyes, she looked like she did the first day they met. Glad that she had such great gene and proud that she was his.

"You look radiant *mi felicidad, meine liebe, ma richesse, m'anam* (my happiness, my love, my wealth, my soul)," Eduardo said as she made his way towards Aleruchi with an outstretched hand while casting a sideways glance of triumph at his rival.

Aleruchi giggled and threw her head back for effect. It felt good to be the centre of attention.

Princewill gritted his teeth and never been in a confrontation before didn't know how to proceed. He wasn't going to share his wife or let any man take his place. He got up abruptly and walked towards the

interloper.

Victor glared at Eduardo and suddenly got up. He started marching towards his parents when Andrew stuck his feet out, causing his friend to stumble.

Catherine didn't know who irritated her more; her friend who was casting leering looks at Eduardo or the fact that he didn't realise it was a taboo to woo a married woman. Why weren't people more like her who knew that there were lines you don't cross? She slanted a look at Jacinta who smiled with triumph and shook her head. Now, she was sure that Jacinta was behind Eduardo reuniting with Aleruchi. Catherine was feeling sure she had had enough drama; worrying about Amanda and decided to leave the scene.

Jacinta looked at Princewill and quickly handed the parcel she came with to Anita near the kitchen door and slipped away humming. Although she had stopped bothering about dealing with Catherine and Aleruchi, she was grateful for little victories. She waved at them and left to meet her distraction, Adetunji.

Outside, she sighed with relief when she noticed Catherine drive off. She giggled and waved at Adetunji. He opened the door for her. She slid in and covered his face with kisses. In response, he stepped on the throttle of his latest trophy and placed his hand between the thighs of his essential trophy as they sped away.

Meanwhile, Rogers watched them and shook his head mournfully. Seeing another man possess his wife and put a smile on her face shattered his heart. Just

realising how much he loved her, he wept. She was his most prized possession, his life. What could he do? He'd practically given his wife to the vagabond who was blatantly cavorting with his wife. He wept some more, wiped his eyes, and drove back to his friend's house.

CHAPTER THIRTY-SIX

Aleruchi

Back in the house; Princewill blocked Eduardo's path. Eduardo's contemptuous glare went unnoticed. Anita and Andrew were on either side of Victor tugging him out of the sitting room. He finally gave in when Andrew volunteered to remain.

Princewill craned his neck and cracked his knuckles. He pulled Eduardo away from his wife by the collar. Eduardo pranced from left to right, his hands fisted close to his face. Princewill threw a punch, but Eduardo ducked and swayed before the second one was released. Princewill got enraged and lunged at him, and Eduardo swayed. Eduardo didn't see him lurch forward, but Eduardo recovered quickly and landed three successive punches on Princewill's face and neck. Princewill staggered into a chair and fell.

Princewill spurt blood and decided to forget about being a gentleman and land three consecutive punches on Eduardo's crotch just as Eduardo came unto him. Eduardo groaned, quite annoyed he charged like a maniac at Princewill.

Aleruchi blocked Eduardo's path, and he stayed his hand, staring at her in confusion. Her shoulders fell. She gestured to the door, and he walked with her towards it. Sighing deeply, she turned to face him just as he raised her chin with his thumb looking at her with concern.

"I'm sorry," he mumbled, embarrassed.

“Don’t be.” She said in a small voice.

Eduardo nodded in understanding. “I’ll call you.”

Aleruchi shook her head.

Eduardo frowned.

“This is the end, I’m afraid.”

“I was afraid you’d say that,” he retorted with a small smile.

Aleruchi lowered her head and mumbled, “I’m sorry.”

“Don’t be.”

They shared a laugh. Eduardo looked at her for a while and cupped her cheek. She didn’t turn away this time, so he kissed her lightly on the lips, cheek and forehead then stepped back and watched her.

After a long while, Eduardo stretched his arms to her, but she stepped away from him and turned her head away. Eduardo whose shoulders had slumped quickly straightened his back, raised his head and left.

Victor and Andrew came when they heard something fall to see Eduardo leaving, Princewill splayed on the chair.

Anita felt crushed as she saw Aleruchi climb the stairs like the weight of the world was stuck to her shoulders. She touched Victor. He raised his brow, and she said. “I think it’s best we leave them to sort themselves out.”

Andrew nodded. “Get your card make we go lodge somewhere, abeg. Sleep don bilala me.”

Victor frowned and vehemently shook his head, but the words he wanted to say didn’t come out when he saw Anita’s large eyes glaring at him.

He reluctantly agreed but looked back at his father who was now hunched over nursing his jaw. He paused

at the door, hesitant to shut it behind him.

“How far nawh?” Andrew asked quickly.

Victor angrily muttered. “Wetin?”

“Your card nah,” Andrew asked impatiently.

Resigned, he shut the door and muttered, “It’s here.”

Aleruchi cried herself to sleep.

She woke up an hour later, took a bottle of one of the wines that were meant for the Christmas hampers and started drinking it. It was delicious. She didn’t stop until it was almost empty. She started seeing vertical lines dancing in her eyes. She opened the room door thinking it was the bathroom and forgot to close it. When she realised that it didn’t have a toilet bowl, she changed direction, feeling sure that her son had removed the toilet seat then proceeded to open all four wardrobe doors. At the fifth door, she smiled. She had found the toilet, but it was unusually shaped, like a V. She walked to it and sat down. She scoffed at the unusual size of the toilet bowl when she fell in.

It was the bathtub.

Princewill thought he saw disgust in his wife’s eyes. *Maybe it was contempt for taking a swing at her boyfriend. She was probably glad that he had been knocked down and only came to his rescue because Victor was still in the house. If he wasn’t self-assured, he would have believed there was something sinister going on between her and their son. There were times when his insecurities made him consider that idea. He’d remember that she had always been possessive and doting from when he was born and even worse after the death of the*

twins.

He smirked ruefully.

He hadn't stopped blaming himself, primarily because it was the first and last time she had vehemently refused to do something. At the time, there was so much he wanted to prove, to his family and to his friends. He needed them to know that he was his own man. He'd spent so many years trying to prove them wrong after his parents disowned him for not marrying their choice for a wife. Soon after Victor was born, he and his family reunited, but he still didn't stop trying. What was the point of all the wealth they now had if she wasn't with him? She was the brain and finance behind his success, and she would leave all that for another man?

He sniggered and groaned.

What would they say when they discovered that he wasn't with her. His mother may not have supported his choice, but she would rather die than accept another woman, being Catholic and all. Besides, he knew no woman able to take her place. And more so, he loved her too much to consider another woman.

He picked the bottle of Hennessy that was left behind by Andrew and tipped its contents into his mouth then shuddered and sniggered again, this time at himself for wallowing in self-pity. He took another gulp and set the bottle down. He stared at his palm for a moment then started rotating his wedding band as he tried to remember why he had changed the vows the night before their wedding.

He hadn't been able to live up to expectation.

His friends made fun of him right after that. Thank God there were no social media at the time or there would

have been no place to hide. He had made a public proclamation that there would be no other woman other than her and he'd protect her, always.

He couldn't even get out of the car, and she would have bled to death but for the good Samaritans who were on their way from vigil. His shoulders hunched as he became overwhelmed with the guilt, same guilt he felt that made it impossible for him to ask the sex of the baby. He only acted on instructions given because he was blank. Now, he was put down before his family by a man who wanted to take his place. Put down in front of his only son.

He gulped the remaining liquid and wiped his mouth.

I love her. I can't lose her, and even if I do, it certainly isn't going to be to that mixed-race scum! Why couldn't she see past his lies? She took him away and resisted hugging him so that I don't know how far she had gone with him? Her actions are no different from mine. What did I do that was so wrong? Why was it so hard to forgive? Didn't our friends' do the same thing, like it was a fading trend and their wives welcomed them home with open arms?

Princewill grimaced and stretched his hand to the bottle of Smirnoff Ice. He nodded his approval as he likened the taste to palm wine although he wouldn't naturally drink soured palm wine. He absentmindedly drank it like he was drinking water, allowing his mind to drift to memories.

A few years after they'd lost their babies and Victor was in boarding school he was at home, bored. It was their wedding anniversary. They still shared the same room, but he could no longer touch her. She shied away

from any approach he used in an attempt to seduce her. It was like trying to get blood out of stone. He had resorted to wanking himself. All he had to do was think of them making love while he was masturbating.

On that fateful day, Elfreda caught him unawares. His hand was sore, and he was already tired of wanking himself so when her mouth replaced his hand, he just couldn't resist the soft, wet, and very warm blanket around his member. He didn't dare open his eyes for fear that he was dreaming. 'He'd rather drown in it', he thought as he threw his head back in wanton luxuriation. He hadn't grasped the fact that Elfreda had undressed and was on him until it was too late to resist the comfort of a more intimate canal. So carried away was he, that when he opened his eyes after his release, his hands fell from the breasts he'd been kneading and he shoved its owner off him at the sight of a woman who stood by the bathroom door, frozen like a statue: his wife.

Forced into the present, he couldn't help smiling, remembering just an hour ago, her coming down the stairs. She looked lovelier than any goddess the world has ever known in that red dress. He was pretty sure she did it to spite him. She was good at that.

He exhaled sorrowfully. The look in her eyes that fateful day still haunted him to this day.

She was indeed an epitome of beauty and Aphrodite couldn't grace that, Artemis' light nor Hestia's fire could behold such grace without flickering. Thinking of how he made love to her under the umbrella tree cloaked by the night sky in the dead of Harmattan made him hunger for her. He sighed. He knew he had to talk to her

about their future.

Tired of self-loathing, he got up, but. His whirling vision caused him to fall back into the chair. He blinked, surprised that he was more susceptible to alcohol than Aleruchi was. He started laughing, burped, and fell silent. He lifted himself up again and staggered. Blinking as he stared, wondering why everything he saw was disjointed. He rubbed his eyes as he made his way to the stairs, and it made no difference. He held his head in his hands as it suddenly felt and looked more significant and heavier. He rested on the bannister, but it seemed to make the feeling worse, so he sat on one of the steps. Suddenly overcome with the fear of dying, he scrambled up the stairs to get help from the one person in the house he needed the most. His wife.

He reached the landing and sat down. As soon as he sat down, her perfume wafted into his nostrils, his member drummed its excitement with unabashed longing. He dismissed it assuring himself that he needed the toilet to pass out urine and diverted to the room to the right beside his son's room and used the bathroom.

Feeling nauseous, he quickly turned to the toilet seat and emptied his stomach contents, then washed his face. As he washed his hands, he poured water over his head. He felt much better, but his legs grew numb and the fear increased. He laughed at himself as tears dripped down his face. He swatted it and continued his journey to the room by the left side of the bathroom.

He used the wall to prop himself until he got to his wife's bedroom. Her bedroom door was open, so he hesitated for a second as he paused just outside of the

door. However, the headache he felt had a better idea which didn't concur with his conformity with courtesy. When the headache increased exponentially, he tapped on the door lightly then grew in tempo and vigour. He turned the knob to discover that the door had not been locked. Decidedly, he walked in before he had the advantage of changing his mind. He looked in the direction of the footsteps before seeing her stagger into the room from the bathroom.

He gulped. His sight was no longer fuzzy.

CHAPTER THIRTY-SEVEN

Aleruchi

Aleruchi was dripping water onto the carpet and shook violently from the cold. She had mistaken the bathtub for the loo - It had been filled earlier when she wanted a soak but forgot about it when she couldn't find any bath oil.

Princewill saw her shivering. Thinking she was having a seizure, he forgot about his headache and went to her. He held her steadily and shuddered – from her wet body and from being so close to her. He seized the blanket from the bed and quickly went back to her. He was so overwhelmed that he didn't know what to do. His heart raced as he slipped the dress off her shoulders.

The pain in his chest increased with the attention he paid to her glistening skin. Her skin was still supple and was silky to the touch. Utterly smitten after removing her undergarments, he froze. He hadn't seen her naked in over seventeen years, after the death of their babies because she'd stopped dressing up in front of him and even went as far as locking the bathroom when he was in the house.

He saw her breast jiggle and groaned in despair. Shaking his head, he turned to the bathroom and stopped. His *member* summoned, his head cautioned; his *member* had an objective that was resolute because it had become painfully erect and refused to comply with his resistance. He couldn't see himself go back to

masturbating not after coming off it for years. He got up and quickly wrapped her in the blanket. Then he went into the bathroom to pour cold water over his head.

He smirked as he watched her, she looked so peaceful. He remained where he was, undecided and unsure of the outcome of his fight with Eduardo. She was the best thing that happened to him and why couldn't he see that. Having been married to her all these years, it took an intruder to remind him that he had what he was looking for. Suddenly overawed with fear of her not wanting to see him again. He sat on the edge of the bed, watching her and feeling helpless. He had waited too long. He was a good guy. How was he going to remind her of that? For Aleruchi, flowers and chocolate didn't entice her.

He didn't realise he was weeping until his tears touched the hand he rested on as he watched her. He was now lying down next to her, separated by a blanket as he lamented for second-guessing himself over the years. The memories of second-guessing her love for him flooded his thoughts, infuriating him so much he tore his shirt, causing the buttons to fly all over the room, and one landed close to her face.

He stretched his hand to pick it up, and she stirred. It slipped down to her hand. He gasped in surprise to see the gold glint of her wedding band. She hadn't removed it.

Perhaps there was still hope. He prayed silently.

Feeling hot and dizzy, he unzipped his trousers and climbed the bed. It was torture lying beside her and be unable to touch her, but it was even worse not being this close to her. He stretched his hand towards her face

hesitantly then shook his head and inhaled deeply. He touched her face and moaned. As he decided to pull her close to him, she opened her eyes and frowned.

Glaring, she shoved him off. When he didn't move, she quickly turned defensive for a few seconds then backed down hesitantly. She squinted as the familiar perfume grazed her nostrils. She was too weak to fight him, or any intruder, and her mouth was too dry to shout. Her shoulders relaxed when she remembered that she had introduced it to him before it became his signature scent. She squinted and sighed mournfully, it was the first gift she had given him.

A draught came in, just as she moved closer to take in more of his scent. Princewill didn't wait for her to complete her act as he reciprocated by massaging the length of her body. He deftly escaped her limply flailing hands and turned her to face him.

Aleruchi had been on edge and had had to keep all her feral desires bottled in for so long that her nerve betrayed her leaving her torn between letting him please her and remaining angry with him until he began to kiss her. Her eyes widened with surprise at the rush which travelled to her core. Sighing, she sought his face with her hands.

Princewill smirked coyly. He was a patient man, but he wasn't sure it was a good time to be long-suffering because to him heaven had finally come to earth. He kissed every part of her body he came in contact with, sucked her hands as he raised himself to her height. He didn't know the scent of lemon could taste so sweet until he'd kissed her. His touch was gentle, searching, slow.

Aleruchi's patience had worn thin, so thin she urged him on with a yelp through clenched teeth then fervently kissed him.

Princewill reciprocated in ardent resolve and was startled when he found out he was the person growling though he wondered if he had at that moment died and gone to heaven...

Both spent, he looked at her lovingly. She was now half-asleep, smiling. He raised a brow in determination: he was absolutely taking Eduardo out of the picture. Only, he had to find a way. She wiggled against him distracting his thoughts. He smiled and nodded smugly at his member then pulled his wife close.

Aleruchi opened her eyes groggily and shielded it from the sunlight before realising that it wasn't sunlight. Her head throbbed, and she tried to get off the bed when she felt something tightened its grip on her breast.

She raised the covers and gasped into her free hand. Quickly, she threw the covers off her body, huffed quietly and shook her hands vigorously to stop them from trembling then picked the lamp. It was too light so replaced the lamp, then carried the flower vase she had set aside to be donated. With half-closed eyes, she tiptoed quickly to the other side of the bed to hit the head of the man who dared take advantage of her. Her eyes widened with fear. She raised the vase just as he tilted his head and snuggled the pillow.

"Oh no!"

She yelped in a shallow voice when the vase she'd set free met her feet. Angry that Princewill slept so peacefully, she bit her finger. But the embarrassment of

facing him when he woke up made her opt for escape. She put a foot forward towards the wardrobe and stopped remembering that the wardrobe doors were so loud they could wake a tranquilized horse. She meandered to the laundry basket and fetched herself something to wear then searched for her wallet.

She took the items to the hallway to dress up, when one of her sandals fell, echoing on the wooden floor she cursed, quickly bounded down the stairs and was out of the house bumping into things until she got to the door. The cab she called seemed to have been around the corner because it was already waiting when she stepped out of the house.

At her destination, she stepped out of the cab and slapped her head. She had forgotten the phone that had Catherine's number. She bit her lower lip and pressed the bell, hoping Catherine was home because it felt like winter had come early.

"Are you alright?" Catherine asked, concerned.

"Hhm?"

"Ruchi, you didn't." Catherine gasped in horror.

"Didn't what?" Aleruchi asked, confused.

"You didn't sleep with Eduardo, did you?"

"No, Agh! Why would I sleep with him?"

"I don't know. With the way you've been –"

"I'm still married." She answered stiffly, showing off her ring finger and shoving her friend out of the way simultaneously.

Catherine raised a brow and tilted her head.

"What now?"

Catherine pursed her lips and looked knowingly at Aleruchi's hand.

Aleruchi frowned and looked at her finger. “Oh,” she hissed. She frowned, wondering where she could have forgotten her wedding band or when she removed it.

“I’m making breakfast. Do you want some?” Catherine asked, tinkering with the stove.

Aleruchi absentmindedly rubbed her ring finger as she tried to retrace the day before. Her heart raced, and she subconsciously closed her legs to control the desire now enveloping her. She clenched her jaw as her legs turned to jelly. She could still feel the burn of Princewill’s touch, and the imprint suffocated her mind. She covered her ears to stop hearing his primitive growl.

Catherine holding wet eggshells looked at Aleruchi with distaste and snarled. “I don’t have all day, you know.”

Aleruchi decided it wasn’t a good thing to go back to her son’s house while her husband was still there. She leaned back on the high stool and closed her eyes trying to shift her focus. She exhaled deeply and clanked her nails on the island, but the rhythm reminded her of how fast her heart was beating when she was whimpering feverishly to Princewill’s touch.

She turned Catherine’s laptop around, so she could use it for some shopping therapy then remembered she had left her bank cards in the sitting room back at Victor’s. She slid off the highchair and headed for the sitting room when she heard a knock followed by the ping of the doorbell. Catherine was upstairs. Consequently, she went to open the door and froze when she heard her husband’s voice. Wanting to be sure she peered through the hole in the door.

It was her Princewill. Seeing him sent electric jolts

through to her core. She bit her finger as she contemplated opening the door.

She peered again when she heard faint voices and saw her son and Catherine's cleaner, walking towards her husband. Knowing that the cleaner had a key, she quickly ran to the stairs. Then returned to the kitchen to get her items and run up to Catherine's room to hide.

The cleaner opened the door and led them into the sitting room and went to get her mother. A few minutes later, she was back downstairs with her mother in tow.

"Princewill, good morning. You're here early is there a problem?" Catherine asked, a little alarmed.

"Oh no, not at all!" Princewill sat up. "Good morning, I just wanted to speak to Ruchi."

"Oh, she's in the kitchen." Catherine gestured.

The cleaner shook her head, mouthing, "Nobody is there."

Aleruchi jumped when she heard a voice that sounded much like her husband's own. She was about to make her way to the stairs when the person cleared his throat. She spun to see her son peeking through the kitchen door and sniggered.

"Mummy, are you actually dodging dad?" Victor asked, laughing.

"Is that why you were imitating him?" She asked, making a swipe at him with the kitchen towel.

Victor chuckled as he dodged kitchen towel.

"I often wonder who had more pride," he muttered under his breath.

"Did you say something?" she asked without looking away from what she was stirring.

“Oh, nothing important.”

She thinned her lips. Victor was right. They were both proud people. Mainly, why she couldn't bring herself to see him. She couldn't possibly claim that she was under the influence when they made love because she wasn't. Shuddering, she squinted. It felt like he was actually beside her, caressing her. She grimaced, resting a hand on the counter beside the stove and shook her head in an attempt to focus on reality.

Victor scrambled off the high stool. “Oh, I forgot to close the door, sorry about that.”

She piled a plate and set it in front of him. He already had a set of cutlery in hand. He was hungry, and it was his and Catherine's favourite, water-yam porridge.

She chewed her lip and sighed before asking, “How is your father?”

Victor shrugged. “He's okay.”

“Mmm...”

“He was supposed to come with me but...”

“Is he still coming?” she asked quickly and cleared her throat.

Victor lowered his head to hide the smirk on his face and shrugged again.

She heard footsteps at the door and went to the hallway but stopped when she saw the letters drop through the letterbox. She heard Victor harrumph and smiled. Just like his father, you'd have to warn them about the pepper. She ruefully sighed as she made her way upstairs and paused.

“Victor, are you staying for a while?”

“Mh-huh.” He nodded, seeing that she wasn't there, he quickly swallowed the food in his mouth and

answered. "Yes."

"Catherine is expecting someone from work in an hour.

"Okay, no problem. I'll watch the match here, then."

"I see," she eyed him suspiciously. "Well, I'm going to take my bath and a nap."

The doorbell chimed as Victor made his way to the living room. On answering the door, his phone rang. He opened the door not waiting to see who it was and ran in to pick his phone. It was from his latest client. Remembering that he had not yet told his mother what he now did for a living, he frowned. There never seemed to be a right time. Not with the number of clients he'd had in the past two months and her incessant request for him to marry.

He nodded to whatever the person said on the other line and scribbled simultaneously. He pumped the air in excitement. He started humming then remembered the guests at the door and turned around to see two ladies staring at him. One of them was the neighbour he'd been crushing on.

He gulped saliva and almost choked.

"Hi, Joanna," the girl touched her chest and waved at the girl who came to a halt behind her. "Misha."

So that is her name. He cleared his throat and stretched a hand to them. "Victor, welcome. I'm sorry I forgot my manners. I've been expecting this call. Please join me."

"Oh, it's cool," Joanna purred ogling him. "We'll wait for Catherine, if that's okay?"

“Of course,” Victor retorted in a low voice.

Joanna helped herself to the fridge.

“Hi,” Misha whispered, surprised that words finally came out.

“Hi, you’re familiar.”

“Mh-huh, we live on the same street.”

Victor acknowledged, but for some reason words abandoned him.

Misha slowly walked forward. “So...”

“So...” he repeated and coughed lightly. He grimaced as he reckoned the number of times, he had cleared his throat in such a short time. “I didn’t know you knew Catherine.”

“Small world yeah?”

Misha nodded.

“She’s my mum’s best friend. They’ve known each other since high school.”

“Really? Back in?”

“Nigeria.”

Misha nodded.

“You’re Nigerian?” Joanna asked.

Misha thinned her lips. Her father would definitely not approve. Too bad she was going to find a way around that.

Joanna watched him stare lovingly at Misha and gritted her teeth.

Aleruchi groaned.

It’s been a week since she left her son’s house, but the last night there was stuck on replay in her head. She was going to get through the night come what may.

She tossed and turned trying and failing to stop reminiscing about that night. To worsen it, she was now dreaming of the happy times. The way he laughed when he was told that she wasn't around made her know he didn't believe them. Although she was glad he didn't press on. There was a lot she hated but now longed for.

Eduardo was a good distraction, and she hoped she could brace herself and face the consequence of leading him on. When they kissed on the porch, it caused her to tingle. But it could have been because she hadn't felt the touch of a man in a long time. She couldn't be in a relationship where she would be fantasizing about her soon-to-be-ex-husband more so now.

She took a swig of the vodka from the chest of drawers beside her and then wiggled her body to shake off the cold. It was the season to be merry after all with Christmas just over a month away. She looked at the time then at her reflection and distractedly blew herself a kiss and froze. Princewill always blew her a kiss whenever she was looking at her reflection.

She groaned.

What has confidence got to do with one protecting one's self from harm? She thought when Lady Grouch's words - '*confidence takes you places*' - echoed through. She hissed, sighed and shrugged. There was no shame in hiding if only to protect one's heart.

Hearing him chuckle downstairs heightened her desire. She groaned again and preened herself into taking a cold bath. It seemed all her husband wanted to do was haunt her into submitting to him. She was already tired of hiding.

She decided, if he persisted, she would go and hide in

a hotel.

CHAPTER THIRTY-EIGHT

Jacinta

Andrew bounded down the stairs with his new jacket then emptied the contents of the former jacket into it then picked up the newspaper and started untangling his earpiece. He twisted his wrist to check the time and hissed. It was the second time he was going to arrive at work late this week. On his way out, he checked his reflection in the mirror and rubbed his stubbly chin then opened the door quickly and was startled to find a tall woman standing there with an outstretched arm. He frowned a question at the woman.

The woman leaned back, holding her breath in a bid to comport herself. “Elfreda Ajao. I’m here to see Mrs Rogers Durosinmi.”

“Good morning,” he muttered as he stepped aside to let her in and continue to untangle his earpiece.

She looked at her outstretched hand and rubbed her thigh with it. “I didn’t get a name.”

Andrew was oblivious to what she had said as he already had his earpiece on. Elfreda watched him walk away before going into the house. He looked so like... She shook her head in disagreement with the thought. When she got inside, she peered through the window, but he was already gone.

She turned around looking for a place to sit down as all the chairs were covered in tattered throws and had a musty smell. Uncomfortable, she lingered but finally

succumbed to sitting down as her legs were still under the influence of jetlag. A few minutes later, the doorbell rang. She quickly sat down and tried to ignore the smell.

Elfreda scanned the house with disgust when she found nothing of value except pictures which would have been worth it if she was the sentimental sort; She straightened her back and rubbed her neck. She had been unable to rest since she noticed how distracted Adetunji had been for the past months. It was so like Adetunji to have difficulty separating business from pleasure but what business would he be having with Durosini's wife? The man was old news, and his wife was a nobody. She was still irritated that he had cost her two deals which would have gotten her out of the business. She sighed and rubbed the nape of her neck again before massaging her temples. She needed to sort this out, or the next deal may go south.

Elfreda slanted a look up when she heard light footsteps descend from the stairs. The red stained toes of fair feet announced Jacinta's presence. She watched Jacinta slip into a room. Hearing a click, she instinctively slid her hand into her bag and left it in there then relaxed when the humming sound of a kettle came through. A few minutes, she heard another click and Jacinta strolled into the sitting room with a cup in hand.

Jacinta rubbed her eyes, yawned, and stretched simultaneously.

Elfreda glared at her with disgust and asked. "How much will it cost?"

Jacinta sat up and turned to see a woman on the sofa

next to the door as she morosely set the cup down. And it spilled on her waning her grogginess. Sitting up, she set the cup correctly on the coffee table beside her and then raised a brow at the unfamiliar woman, twisting her mouth, she asked. "Who are you? How did you get into my house?"

Elfreda followed her every movement.

She turned to Elfreda. "Who are you? And what am I being paid for?"

Elfreda smacked her crimson red lips and gently patted her blonde wavy wig as she appraised Jacinta and frowned. There was no doubt that Jacinta Durosini was a beautiful, fair, and curvy woman. She chewed the inside of her lip as she continued to appraise Jacinta. *But she isn't me. I'm crowned with an hourglass figure, tamed with a fairer skin tone, an erectile bosom, feline eyes, all tucked in this six-foot dark-haired magnet, and he goes after this thing, who's obviously a gold digger. I wonder what she has on him because this is undoubtedly below his standard.*

Irritated and angered Elfreda asked again. "How much will it cost? How much will it cost to take your grimy hands off my man?"

Rogers had a towel around his waist and was already on the landing when he heard what the woman said. He moved closer to hear more.

Jacinta was taken aback by the question and frowned. "Your man?"

"Adetunji Diyemi. He is mine. And I don't share. However," she pulled a chequebook and pen out of her bag and started scribbling. "I know the effect he has on women, so I'll leave you with a parting gift." She tore a

leaf from the chequebook and extended it to Jacinta.

Jacinta gave her a condescending look and crossed her arm. Enraged, she tried to keep her cool. "Take the door."

"Well," Elfreda set the cheque on the table and patted it. "Think about it."

"Hey, you... whoever you are, I don't want to know nor am I interested in how you came to find me, or how you got into my house. But I'll advise you to stay away from this house."

With a thin smile on her lips, Elfreda said. "Just stay away from Tunji."

Jacinta laughed scornfully. "If he were yours you wouldn't be here."

Elfreda gave her a wry smile.

Jacinta eyed her, hissed and plopped on the settee.

Elfreda walked to the hallway and came back. "I have warned you. I'll not repeat myself. Stay away from him."

"GET OUT!" Jacinta cried as she got up.

Rogers was already at the foot of the stairs and froze when he saw who his wife was arguing with. Jacinta's voice was too low for him to make out what she had said in response to Elfreda. This guest had burned quite a number of his friends, but he'd done worse.

"Ugh, you fool! I hate these pointless arguments." Elfreda slipped her hand into her purse and produced a gun.

Jacinta heard something click and raised her head and was staring at the barrel of a gun. It looked exactly like the gun she had seen in the *Taken* movie. She was stunned but shook her head. Living under a flyover with hoodlums as neighbours, an area where she had to

leave the house with pen knives and a vial of dieffenbachia or submit to being gang-raped had toughened her. More so, she was once under the spell of an abusive husband. She flipped the newspaper she had just picked up and began to peruse it while her eyes were on Elfreda's reflection on the TV.

Elfreda flinched. "I'm not afraid to use this. It wouldn't be my first time."

Jacinta thinned her lips and lifted her coffee. "If you could you would have."

Elfreda blanched.

"Don't leave my door open, ciao."

Rogers rushed to her side, looking concerned. "Are you okay?"

She eyed him as he stood behind the settee she lay on as she tried to erase his tall frame from existence with her eyes.

"Jacinta." He called softly.

She let out a long hiss.

He lowered his head and walked towards the stairs.

As he climbed the stairs, she shouted after him. "You thought she would kill me *abi*? Well, it didn't work. It will not work. You were supposed to leave this house. so, please go!"

Rogers stopped and walked back to her with such speed she scrambled off the chair picking up the vase. He frowned and softened. "I wasn't going to hurt you."

Jacinta swayed and held the neck of the vase firmly.

Rogers shrugged and said coolly. "I'm going nowhere." He knew he would get her to listen somehow.

She grimaced.

“You still look beautiful.” He mumbled as he bent over the settee to pick the newspaper and laughed lightly as he walked away.

She slapped her thighs, forgetting she still had the vase in the hand then moaned and set it down. While she massaged the thigh she’d just assaulted, Rogers returned fully dressed, but instead of going out, he picked up the remote control and flicked the TV on.

Jacinta frowned at him, let out another long hiss and briskly walked away. She wanted to be anywhere else but the house.

Jacinta’s phone rang while she was in the cab heading to Adetunji’s house. She picked it but didn’t say anything.

“Hello, beautiful.” She heard Adetunji say in a cheerful tone.

“Hey,” she smiled, unable to stay angry at him. “I’m on my way.”

“Yes, about that, I’m heading out to London. It’s business, but I promise, I’ll be back in just over three hours.”

“Are you sure?”

“I’m heading to the helipad at NG12.”

“NG12?”

“Yes, it’s just fifteen minutes away.”

“Really? Which area is that?”

“Widmerpool. I’m going to Fosse Way. Bakare’s helicopter will be leaving in... twenty-five minutes.”

“And you’re still at home?” she asked with a frown.

“No o! I’m about five minutes away.”

There was a long pause then she smiled. “I’ll be ready

and waiting.”

He groaned comically.

Snickering, she opened the door paying the cab driver at the same time.

Soon after she let herself into Adetunji’s house, the four doors of a metallic green SUV swung open, and four women dressed as boys bounded out and shut the doors almost simultaneously. They rested on the front bonnet except one wearing a green striped shirt who walked to the brown Toyota three cars behind theirs and knocked on the windscreen.

Elfreda came out dressed in a red blouse, chocolate brown leather skirt, and knee-length suede boots. She scanned her environment – a habit she had formed over the years – then tucked her hair behind her ears. Her car keys got tangled in it. Irritated, she tugged it out of her hair and briskly walked ahead of the girls then produced a key from her pocket and inserted it in the door, inhaled deeply and turned the key.

Jacinta had just finished turning on the TV and was still struggling to get out of her jacket when she heard several footsteps on the porch. Suspicious, she rushed to the kitchen and pulled out two knives from the rack and tucked them in the back pocket of her jeans. A few seconds later, she returned them and searched for anything else she could use as a weapon knowing she didn’t have the courage to wield a knife. She was coming out of the kitchen with the container that she stored pepper in when she heard jangling keys. She exhaled several times to steady her breath as she waited.

Elfreda, who was the first of the four ladies to walk in, wore a wicked grin. “Comfortable eh? Good, by the time

these Jamaican girls finish designing your face. My Tunji will have nothing to do with you.” She laughed and sauntered out of the room.

One of the girls glided over the chair with the fluidity of a cat. She covered the remaining gap between them in one step. Jacinta backed away to the corner on the left side of the room, not wanting to be boxed in. In doing so, the girls were all in front of her. While they were busy wearing their leather gloves, she quickly picked up the pepper. With her hands behind her, she unscrewed the cover and waited. When they were close enough, she tossed a handful of pepper in successions and missed the big girl who was much taller.

The big girl caught Jacinta by the neck and slammed her into the chair while the other three groped the air whimpering with eyes shut. The big girl punched Jacinta on her cheek. Jacinta was sure she was going to die of pain but decided she was going to take the big girl with her. She tried to grab the big girl by the neck, but the big girl swayed smoothly, so Jacinta settled for flailing her arms to scratch any part of the big girl’s face. The big girl sat on Jacinta’s chest then clasped her hand around Jacinta’s neck again. Not wanting to die without a fight Jacinta wiggled closer to the big girl and raised her legs to the big girl’s back then crossed it in front of the big girl.

Uncomfortable the big girl tried to separate Jacinta’s feet by hitting them with her chin, then bit Jacinta on one of her feet. Jacinta refused to untangle her feet and started drumming her fists into the big girl’s stomach in rapid succession. The big girl bowled-over slightly. Jacinta used that opportunity to reach out above her

head, picking the crystal vase with both hands smacked it on the big girl's head. One of the girls seemed to have recovered from the pepper strike and was tugging the vase off her hands.

She let it go, and the girl fell backwards, tripping over her friend. Jacinta quickly picked up a stool to shield herself when the girl returned with the vase and then swung the stool at one of the other girls who had not fully recovered from the pepper she'd thrown earlier. It hit the girl on her forehead; the girl staggered and fell on her friend. Before the big girl fully recovered, Jacinta's hands were already around her neck. The big girl reciprocated. Jacinta's hands grew weak as breathing became a painful struggle. Feeling lightheaded, she played dead.

The big girl got off her, startled she shook one of her counterparts. They all clamoured towards the door.

As soon as the door opened Jacinta exhaled, then she heard footsteps and held her breath again. She opened her eyes slightly and watched the big girl search methodically and then frantically then stopped briefly to pack her hair into a ponytail and lingered around Jacinta. She hesitantly searched Jacinta dug into the edges of the chairs under Jacinta.

Jacinta was finding it difficult to hold her breath. It was also challenging to stay still as the fringe of the big girl's clothes caressed her nose with each movement the girl made. She lifted an eyelid and bit her tongue to prevent a sound from coming out of her mouth when she saw a scar on the girl's ear. She blinked several times to ensure she wasn't dreaming. She needed to think fast then she saw a card spilling out of the big

girl's pocket and quickly took it out and shoved it under the settee. Just then the girl got away from her with a phone in hand.

Jacinta waited until she heard the door click shut before getting up. She watched the girl walked down to the road then a metallic green SUV stopped in front of the house, and the big girl slid in before it sped off.

Jacinta shuddered. *Could it be? After all these years?*

She rubbed her chin, yelped and strode off into the kitchen and returned with a pack of peas. Then ambled to the bar, poured herself a shot of whisky and winced at the coldness of the leather sofa. Lost for words, she replayed the incident that had just occurred and tried not to relive the day her daughter was snatched from her.

The doorbell chimed, but she didn't budge. She suspected it was Adetunji when her phone started ringing but remained seated. He wasn't supposed to be back for another two hours. Finally, she opened the door to let him in and marched back to where she'd been seating.

"The executive secretary made a mistake." He said as he shut the door. "I wasn't needed." he frowned a little after hanging his jacket, and not seeing her when he turned around. "I'm sorry, my love!" Adetunji said as he made his way into the living room. Aghast, he rushed to her side and frowned.

"What happened? Who did this?" He asked, regarding the mess in the living room with suspicion.

She lowered the pack of frozen peas and eyed him. "Why does it have to be someone?"

Sensing that she was in a bad mood, he decided to tidy up. He reset everything, excluding the red blotch sprinkled on the cream-coloured rug. The area of the red stain was damp. He left it and went to her.

“Was Rogers here?” he asked angrily. “Did he do this to you?”

“He wouldn’t dare, not anymore at least.” She muttered admittedly.

He looked at her with a frown then pulled her hand away from her face. He saw a big bruise and gulped. “Jacinta, tell me how you got this?” he asked as he turned her to face him squarely.

She stared at him, but her eyes were distant.

“Did he do this to you?” he asked, his hands closed into a fist with rage.

He shook her when she didn’t answer him.

She raised a brow as if she had heard something and slipped back into the remotest part of her mind with a mirthless cackle.

Adetunji was worried but decided to treat her jaw. He nursed her jaw with warm water, and she winced only once when he tried to pry her from her position. Adetunji held back tears. *He has damaged my love.* He looked at her face and didn’t know whether sympathy or pity was appropriate as her face was flawlessly calm almost as if she was immune. *Something terrible must have happened? Is he dead? Oh-oh, did she finally kill him?*

He knew she was happy with him, but something had been missing since their reunion; the enthusiasm she always dressed her every movement with when they first met, down to her beguiling reluctance. He should have

married her when he had the chance and not push her into the arms of a coward like Rogers Kayode Durosinmi.

He couldn't resist smiling. He was here now. He would make her the happiest woman on earth as soon as this deal went through.

He was concerned. But much more than his concern was the desire to see her naked. He looked leeringly at Jacinta when he saw her nipples through the satin mini dress she had on. Knowing how to change her mood, he shrugged off his shirt. Tossing it on one of the sofas as he strode to her side and knelt in front of her. He smooched her then leaned in to kiss her, but she didn't as much as twitch.

He pulled back. He had never seen her angry enough to ignore him, so he decided to give her some space. He didn't have time to take his bath before he received the call to go to London. He rushed upstairs to run the Jacuzzi and dashed down to carry her. He settled her gently in the tub and hurried back downstairs to refill the ice bucket and get another bottle of champagne from the bar. He kissed her and drew her close to him when he finally joined her and massaged her hands, still feeling perplexed by the *new* Jacinta.

He must have slept off for a while because when he woke up, they were both shivering. He got out so quickly that he slid off the floor, but he had enclosed his hand on his head before he reached the ground. He smiled and nursed his hands for a few seconds. *Ghetto life has taught me a few lessons*, he snickered.

He lifted her out, made her stand on the mat before wrapping her in a towel then whisked her off to bed. She

was still away-off because the only time she reacted to their lovemaking was when she felt discomfort.

Anita finished her fourth cup of coffee and was still gnawing on the pen, wondering what she was going to do. A knock jarred her into spilling her fifth cup of coffee. It contained the last crumbs of coffee left in the house. Fortunately, her work wasn't close enough to be damaged. So infuriated that she watched it drip to the floor, unconcerned with answering the door, unconcerned with cleaning the brown liquid mapping the floor, unconcerned with racking her brain in an attempt to write a thesis statement, she stretched her length on the settee and using her feet to raise the throw she tucked her feet underneath it and sighed.

It's not like she needed an MSc urgently.

She just needed something to keep her busy as her brain seemed to be deteriorating with every passing day of not getting a job. She had been advised by several people to use their documents to work, and they will have enough money in their national insurance as compensation. She was scared that she would get caught.

If she was ever caught, then she'd have to kiss her chances of becoming an accountant goodbye. She wouldn't let her degree in accountancy go to tethers because of an ominous growling of discontent.

The knocking quickly turned to banging. Anita harrumphed and dumped the papers that were on her lap onto the dry part of the coffee table. She stretched her length on the settee, pillowing her head with her

arms. Andrew was in Amsterdam with Victor on a photo shoot. Lately, his mother was never around, plus she had a key. It was also a good thing that Jacinta wasn't around. She found Jacinta intimidating. Ever since that Yoruba guy came into Jacinta's she had become a deserter; the man looked every bit like a conman but who was she to judge when she couldn't boast of a guy who sincerely liked her.

She hissed.

If only I could be lucky enough to meet someone who could have that same effect on me. Someone other than the mummy's boy that I'm pining over. Maybe a cat nap will do, as soon as the person stops knocking.

A few minutes later, she felt something cold and wet drop on her, and she jumped up. After blinking a few times, she scowled. Glancing up at the woman in front of her despairingly, *Bootlegger!*

"How did you get in here?" Anita asked as she rose to a defensive stance.

Bootlegger grimaced and scanned the sitting room then glowered at Anita waving her hand. "Is this the dump you left my side for?"

Anita crossed her arms.

Bootlegger ignored her and cautiously sat down as if her legs were weak and the chair was made of spikes. She set her tote down then smoothed her hands on her corduroy trousers slowly.

Anita cleared her throat and tried to steady her breath in tandem. Shaking her legs, she glared at the woman and waited for an explanation.

Bootlegger glanced up at Anita. "That's not a way to treat your sponsor?"

Anita smacked her lips, rolled her eyes with legs apart and arms akimbo she asked again.

Bootlegger rubbed her neck. "By the way, aren't you going to get me something to drink. Be a good girl and fetch me something to drink. God knows I'm thirsty."

Anita gritted her teeth, and her left leg shook involuntarily.

Bootlegger blinked, waiting.

Anita shuddered as she felt a gentle breeze which made the wet part of her clothes really cold. She grunted and picked up the throw then returned to glaring at the woman after wrapping herself with the half damp throw.

Bootlegger followed Anita's gaze and beamed brightly.

Anita raised her brow when she noticed that her encroacher had bleached-white teeth, all the amber ones were gone. She didn't hear the soft clang of several little metals until the woman smiled as if in a trance.

"From my juvenile days." Bootlegger sighed and crossed her arms with a serious face. "Enough about me. I want Ivié!"

Anita sniggered, peered at the woman for a few seconds and burst out laughing.

Bootlegger twisted her mouth to one side. "Funny huh? You've got a minute to give directions."

"Really!" Anita said wide-eyed. She quickly pulled down her trousers and her panties and pointed at her pubic area then grinned cheekily. "There, there she is."

Bootlegger thinned her lips, tapping her cheek. "That wouldn't be a bad place for Mr Abdiel, were he still alive."

Anita shivered and quickly pulled up her clothes. She

didn't shiver from the cold. "I didn't kill him."

"That's what you keep saying."

Anita gritted her teeth. With shaky hands she pointed at the door, her voice rising she added stiffly. "Leave now."

"I can't. Mr Wolfenden is desperate to meet Ivié. You know you don't want to displease a man like that." Bootlegger blinked, several times kissing her teeth.

Anita wore a small smile then sniggered again.

Bootlegger grimaced looking around as she gestured. "You get a chance to come with me or remain here and still earn a hundred thousand pounds, in small bills of course. It will take you only six months off your mundane life."

Anita was sure she heard the desperation in the woman's voice and knew it couldn't be good. She needed to warn her friend, but a hundred thousand was too little to pull her friend out of hiding, not that she was hiding anyway.

"Well?"

Anita harrumphed.

Bootlegger shifted uncomfortably, and her brows furrowed. "You need to have that checked out."

"Psst," Anita clicked her fingers, directing the woman to the door.

Bootlegger looked her up and down then roused herself slowly checking her wrist simultaneously. Anita watched her leave then plopped on the settee, huffing with her eyes closed. She jumped when she felt someone tap her on the lap. She opened her eyes and saw a brown envelope.

Bootlegger stood with her weight on one leg. "You

might want to check that out. Think it over. I'll be in touch."

This time, Anita listened to hear the door click shut. She locked it and went to peer out of the window. Relieved, she returned to the settee and cautiously opened the brown envelope and gasped. A few hours later, her hands were still under her chin. Her phone had been ringing for a while. She only realised it when she felt something tickle her arm.

"Finally, please open the door."

She frowned, unable to make out the owner of the gruff voice. "Who is it?"

"For my house again? Girl, open this door."

She tiptoed towards the door and looked through the keyhole in case someone was peering through the peephole. She saw the wrist and knew it was Andrew because of his medical wristband. She exhaled slowly and pulled the deadbolt.

Andrew frowned at her as he stumbled in.

"What happened to your voice?" Anita asked him, hiding her hands behind her.

Andrew looked at her funny and continued munching on the pastry he had in his hand.

She took some of the bags off him, peered out before shutting the door. She didn't bother to ask him why he was back early in case he got suspicious.

Anita came into the room, cupping a bowl of dessert. As she adjusted the pillow so she could lean on it she tried small talk with Andrew "I noticed that your friend does not partake in alcohol..." she paused and slanted him a look.

Andrew shrugged and continued typing into his phone, so she nudged him. He might not be the man she really wanted, but she hated it when he brought his phone into bed. He raised a brow but didn't stop typing. She gestured theatrically, sighed loudly, and flicked the remote control then pouted. "I asked a question."

"No, you didn't," he said slowly and slanted a look at her. "Hhm, that looks appetising, what is it?"

She blinked.

"Come on, out with it."

"Vegetarian cheesecake."

"Can I have –"

"No!"

"You don't even know what I wanted to say *sef*."

She eyed him.

He tickled her until she couldn't bear it any longer.

"Okay," she said giggling. "Don't make me pour it on the bed o! Here, em... no, go and get your own spoon."

"Ha, have I given you kissing disease before?"

She scooped the dessert and tucked the spoon into his open mouth.

"Hhm, nice." He savoured it and craned his neck for another spoonful.

"Stay away, if you want more go get it yourself."

He winked and laughed lightly. "You're not supposed to be eating in here anyway."

Anita hissed, briskly leaped off the bed and went to the bathroom.

Andrew watched her leave, wondering what he had said that was so bad.

Anita exhaled heavily. She pulled down the toilet seat and brought her phone from the back pocket of her

trousers and sat down. She was about to start pinging when Andrew poked his head through the door she had left ajar. Startled, she covered her phone with her hands closing her legs simultaneously.

"You *dey shait*?" he asked curiously.

She looked up eagerly when she heard a soft sound on the door. Only two others had a key to the house, and neither were in the house. She whispered. "Someone is knocking."

"I know."

"On your bedroom door," she emphasized.

"I know. Who else would it be?"

She glared at him, and he reluctantly went to check.

"Guy, thank goodness you're around e get one job wen I wan do. I go need your help abeg." Victor babbled.

"When?" Andrew asked as he let his friend in.

"Now."

"Say wetin? Guy, you check time so?" Andrew asked pointing to the clock.

Victor nodded.

"Abeg explain," Andrew moaned.

"My client has a friend whose photoshoot pics are a flop. So, he told her he has a friend who can help her get new photos set for tomorrow. She has a briefing by 9a.m. today. I have to finish it on time... I go settle you." Victor pleaded.

"Bros, dat one no be the issue. You sef know, nawh." Andrew looked at him pleading.

"Guy, if I get this job, I don enter the market on a large scale. Help a brother out nawh."

Anita tried to walk casually to hide her nervousness. Her smile was giddy, and her heart raced as she climbed

into the bed awkwardly. She looked at Victor as she tried to keep a straight face. She opened her mouth, but her throat was dry. She feigned a cough and said, "Hello, Victor."

"Hey Anita, what's up?" he asked a little hastily. "I'm sorry I have to steal your man for a few hours."

Anita winced; 'your man' in Victor's statement felt like he'd stabbed her.

Andrew raised a brow as he slanted an amused look at Anita, who was now fiddling with the hem of the duvet and at Victor who was acting impatient. Andrew cleared his throat noisily and signalled Victor to join him as he walked out of the room.

Andrew peeped. "You don't see am nah."

She gave him a small smile.

"Thanks. I will make it up to you," Victor said and walked ahead of his friend out of the room.

If only he knew how she would want him to make it up to her. Glad to be handed an excuse to speak to her friend. As soon as she heard the door shut, she picked up her laptop and sent an email. A few minutes after sending the email, her phone started buzzing. It was an unknown number since she was expecting Ivié and suspect Bootlegger could be the caller. She held her breath, exhaled slowly with hands held tightly around the phone and answered.

"Shudder and stammer." She heard from the other end.

"A grim approach," she retorted.

"Angel is disguised."

She recanted what had happened and the contents of the envelope. She made sure that Ivié understood how

to come into the house from the house directly behind theirs – the owner was deaf and only wore his earpiece when he was going out, and his partner was on holiday. Their fence had fallen a few weeks back. Holding onto a torchlight, she turned off the lights, did the same downstairs but left the hazard lights.

As soon as she saw the small ball of light flashing, she turned off the hazard light at the back. Then it flashed again, and she unlocked the door to let her friend in. They hugged tightly for a moment, assessed each other, and hugged again. Anita wanted to turn on the light, but Ivié wouldn't let her so she turned on the light in the hallway so it could stream into the sitting room. They talked for a while and fell silent. Anita got up and went to the kitchen.

"What do we do?" Anita asked as she handed her friend a cup of tea. She never understood why Ivié preferred tea, but she never questioned it.

"Nothing."

"Why not?"

"Girl," she drawled. "I'm tired of running. Last week I had to spy on a woman to get paid, then beat her up to get paid more."

Anita watched her rub the upper half of her ear. She only did that when she was in serious distress. She walked over to sit beside her friend then asked in a concerned voice, "What is it?"

Ivié shrugged and shook her head simultaneously. After a moment, she said. "The woman we're paid to spy on is so familiar. I swear, I've never met her before."

"Are you sure? The pictures –"

"I've looked through them over and over again,

Nothing.”

Anita bit her lip and slanted her friend a look and exhaled slowly then as quietly as possible she said, “Don’t worry. If you’ve met her before, you will remember.”

There was a jingle at the door. They looked at each other for a second. Anita scrambled to the kitchen and Ivié scrambled for the back door. Anita tossed the cups in the sink and escorted her friend out gave her a quick hug and ran up the stairs deftly dodging the noisy ones threw herself on the bed and pulled the covers up just as Andrew opened the door and turned on the light. She tightened her eyes in frustration when she realised that she had climbed the bed with her slippers.

Fortunately, Andrew diverted to the bathroom and turned on the shower. She pulled her legs to herself and removed the slippers gently and placed the slippers beside her facing out. He came back out and planted a kiss on her forehead and frowned. He touched her forehead, and it was wet; he assumed she was having one of those her nightmares again. He shrugged, tucked his feet into her slippers, and stalked off to the bathroom humming.

CHAPTER THIRTY-NINE

Jacinta

Jacinta's eyes lit up. "I think, I've found my daughter." she murmured slowly and smiled.

Seeing her eyes bright and the enthusiasm reborn, he swore under his breath that he would make sure she doesn't lose it. She had told him of her baby ripped out of her hands. He'd suspected it was Silas's baby too. Right now, he didn't care if Silas was the father. "Where is she?"

"I don't know!"

"What do you mean? How will -"

"She works for Elfreda." She said matter-of-factly and climbed out of bed, dressing gown swiftly worn.

Adetunji froze. How was he going to explain his relationship with Elfreda without exposing what he now did for a living?

She refilled a flute and didn't bother to fill his own up.

"Elfreda?" He gasped and averted his face briefly.

She wryly observed him.

"What? I know a lot of Elfredas." He laughed nervously and climbed off the bed, tried and failed to draw her into his arms.

"Surely, you're not dating all the *Elfredas* you know. Or are you?" Jacinta asked. wrapping the robe tightly around her.

"Jacinta stop this *nawh*. It's okay to be jealous, but I

haven't cheated on you, I promise."

"But you've cheated on her."

"Ómó tóó shān (delectable girl)-"

"Don't 'Ómó tóó shān' me *jó!*"

"I wasn't dating anyone not to talk of cheat on them. Ha! my love, you know me *nawh.*"

"Exactly, I wonder why I ever believed that you had changed. I guess the leopard indeed doesn't change its spots."

"What do you mean by that?" he asked angrily.

She glared at him. "Exactly what I said. Ha! Is it not you? You that was in every rich woman's apron, married women for that matter. Now you want to convince me that you've changed. Ha, you are all the same-"

"Oh, stop this Jacinta."

"Stop what? I said you're all the same, am I lying?"

"Because Rogers doesn't treat you right doesn't mean we're in the same boat." He bit his lower lip regretting what he said.

"But you are. It's the same woman both of you are sharing, me." she brushed the tears that started streaming down her face and carried her jacket.

He quickly ran to the door to block her path.

"You want to finish what your girlfriend started?" she asked scornfully.

His eyes widened with surprise. "Elfreda did this to you? For the love of Christ, doesn't that bitch know her place?"

"And you didn't know her or what was it you said again..."

He pulled her to him as he went on his knees. "Please wait let me explain."

She ignored him and shoved his hands away to gain access to the remote control.

The only thing that had kept her going all these years was the girl that nearly strangled her today. She shuddered at the fact that she would have killed the girl had the girl not been stronger. Nkasiobi - the reason she had put up with Silas and made an extra effort to get a better life and married Rogers because he'd promised to take her to London. Plus, Andrew was a consolation and one day would look for his mother, that is if he already hasn't started with his constant visits to Nigeria. Nkasiobi would have had brothers and sisters now if her womb wasn't so scarred from the constant beating Rogers belted on her stomach.

She had to find her flesh and blood come what may, and nothing, not even Elfreda would be able to stand in her way. Speaking of Elfreda, she might be useful in her reuniting with Nkasiobi.

Why is Nkasiobi a thug? Is that what Bootlegger has turned her into? Probably youthful exuberance. God knows I had my days too. Elóhó, mmm Elóhó, my God will punish you wherever you are. I don't even know the name she gave my daughter. I had hoped she would look like me. I still don't understand how I forgot about the rape until that fateful day on the farm with... what was his name?

Kai! I've got to find him. But how? I can't possibly tell her that her father had his way with me, and I ran off accepting his money. I'm not a prostitute; only prostitutes are paid for sex. What I've been living for? Will she ever forgive me?

Polka-dotted shoes! Oh, my goodness. Elfreda! Yes, I

knew she was familiar. Catherine's husband, Chief Osuji and Elfreda. The brothel in Badagry.

Jacinta had been oblivious to Adetunji who was still on his knees pleading until he touched her again.

"Don't touch me." She snapped feeling uneasy then slanted a look at him as he buried his head in his hands. She might be angry with him but to get to Elfreda, she'll need him.

"Please!"

Perfect.

"Tell me, anything you want I'll do it."

"I want my daughter."

He paused. "Okay."

Jacinta got dressed up quickly.

"What is it? I promise I'll look for your daughter."

"I need to get back."

"Look, I get it okay? You don't have to go. I'll start my search now." He got up quickly and started fetching his clothes.

"I have to see Andrew, it's important." She didn't want to tell him it was her birthday. "Don't come back without that bitch and my daughter o!" she hissed.

"How do I find them?"

She described her daughter to him. Nkasiobi was hard to miss, especially with a six feet frame and as dark as dark can be. She stopped talking and stared into the distance for a few minutes. "Do you know how to find Elfreda?"

He exhaled. "I have a few friends. I'll start with them." He looked into her eyes as he pleaded. "Wait for me?"

"Not for long, I still have to get to Andrew."

Adetunji nodded, gave her a peck, and bounded down

the stairs.

As soon as the door clicked shut, Jacinta sank on the bed. Her heart raced, worried about acceptance but hopeful. She was never lucky at anything. She would give her daughter the world she could afford if only to make sure her daughter forgave her.

The LCD screen of her phone lit up, she flipped it to open it. It was Andrew.

“Andrew my dear, I’m on my way.”

At last, an opportunity surfaced. Rogers propped the car seat back into position after replacing his listening device in the bag it had come in. He had seen Elfreda on the day of the threat. He had seen the girls go after his wife but only after they had left, then followed them to where they hung out but had to leave for work. He flipped his wrist to check the time. He hadn’t realised how much he hated being someone else’s puppet until he got hired six months ago.

As he drove back to work, he smiled to himself. Funny how Jacinta cheating on him has gotten him on his feet. Fifteen years in this country, he had never gone job hunting. He didn’t even know how difficult it was to get a job. How Jacinta managed to take care of him, and his son baffled him. Seeing Tosan in handcuffs tamed the beast in him, or he would have continued to hit her.

He sighed ruefully. *Andrew, how can I do right by you? I haven’t been a good father. The poor boy won a scholarship, and all I did was complain about my food having no meat.*

He was going to bring his wife back and reconcile

with Andrew. He nodded as ideas pelted his small mind and brought the car to a halt at the car dealership.

The past months since Adetunji came into his wife's life humbled him: he had gone earlier to put in an application for the extension of the house and had agreed with the mortgage company, but he had no idea of how to get Jacinta to do the signatures since everything was done in her name. It's over six months since Jacinta and Adetunji's relationship started and it hasn't waned. Rogers still hadn't thought of a way to extricate his wife from Adetunji, until now. Maybe he should take the rest of the day off to get a head start.

Since he gave his life to Jesus Christ, he had a better understanding of himself and the changes he needed to make. He still hated the idea of visiting a psychiatrist. A little infidelity on her part was not enough retribution for what she has had to endure over the years, but that didn't prevent his desire to strangle the usurper. He just needed to protect her from the likes of Adetunji. They all came to reap where they didn't sow. A man who didn't respect the sanctity of marriage would do anything. He believed this because he'd led that lifestyle once.

He wiped his eyes and turned off the ignition before stepping out of the car.

His heart broke again at the thought of a strange man touching his wife. He'd tried not to think of what the interloper did to make her giggle or laugh endlessly or moan like she never did with him. Lately, she had a smile on her face all the time, that dreamy look she used to give him when they first met.

Rogers groaned. Adetunji may not be a good person, but he was a gentleman, in public at least. Rogers had

read several books on relationship, but none talked about a reformed-abusive reuniting with his wife. He made a mental note to get books on how to make love. He had this opportunity to get his wife back and prayed he didn't mess it up.

Sighing, he knocked on the door of his manager's office and was beckoned. The rotund man with receding grey hair behind the large desk looked up and smiled cheerfully. "Just the man I wanted to speak to."

Rogers became uncomfortable and adjusted his tie. "Is there a problem Sir?"

"Oh, I've told you not to call me 'Sir'." The manager chuckled and looked at him frowning and slanted to his right several times before it registered in Rogers' mind that he was referring to the man beside him sitting opposite the manager.

"Good day Sir."

The man looked up nodding. He got up as he perused Rogers' face and raised his brow in surprise. "Rogers?"

"Yes."

"It is I, Òmós."

"Alhaji Daniel Òmòtòshó, is this you? Is this really you?" Rogers asked, holding out two hands to hug him.

"It's me o!" Daniel rumbled as he pulled Rogers into a hug and patted his back. "How are you? What are you doing here?"

"Good. There is something different about you," Rogers said frowning.

"Ah, you mean my nose. It's surgery o. Those hooligans cut off my nose. You could say they did it to spite my face." Daniel continued talking, and Rogers kept nodding for a while.

The manager adjusted himself in his seat. Failing, he stood up and crossed his arms, waiting for an explanation for the hullabaloo which had startled him out of his chair.

"I'm here to get two cars for my children. They said they wanted Lexus. So... you know how it is." He jovially slapped Rogers on the back. "So? Same reason?"

"No."

"You own this place? Bad boy, na here you stash your own foreign exchange *abi*?"

Rogers shook his head, smiling. "I work here."

Daniel laughed hysterically. "You are joking." He opened his mouth to say something else, but the look on Rogers' face confirmed it. His face became serious. "Then, we must talk. Let's leave this place."

"And the cars?" The manager and Rogers chorused the question eagerly.

Daniel cleared his throat and frowned. "I'll think about it."

As they were about to leave the office, the manager dramatically coughed. Rogers squinted at him.

"Get your friend to buy the car. Give him fifteen percent discount if you have to, and you'll have the rest of the day off." The manager was still muttering, but Rogers couldn't hear what he said. The manager looked up and glared at him. "What are you waiting for?"

Rogers glad that he didn't need to request for the day off sought for a way to ditch his friend to start his search.

CHAPTER FORTY

Catherine

Catherine didn't know people went through this much pain. First, it took them months to complete a diagnosis, more months to discover the kind of cancer she had. But now, she feared not knowing what to do would kill her faster than the cancer itself. She blinked as her alarm clock beeped. She smiled, it used to be Alfred's; it always reminded her of *Cogsworth* in *Beauty and the Beast*. It was already morning, and she hadn't slept a wink.

As she pulled the curtain open, she spotted Mrs Canne quickly climb into her vehicle parked a few yards away - she always hated it when someone parked in front of her house. The plumber's truck had just driven off. Catherine didn't see it leave but heard it. It belched and groaned, which made her wonder how it managed to pass its MOT. She gasped when she realised that her car wasn't in the driveway. She hadn't given it to the mechanic, or had she? She looked at the bureau; the car keys lay there with her phones. If she had she wouldn't still have her keys, would she?

The past weeks had been jumbled up in her thoughts; she remembered things she ought to have done in flashbacks. She hadn't gone to Aleruchi's place, and she hadn't driven the car in a while.

Wednesday?

Ah yes! She was at Amanda's University on

Wednesday.

That was where she had met the Indiana Jones' lookalike in the mall. He told her that Amanda had missed two of his tutorials and she'd fail if she missed a third.

Her throat caught like a berry had clogged her airway. Amanda was a stickler for rules. It still didn't make sense that she would abandon her studies, and she loved music. Her pride and joy weren't with friends. Where could my Amanda be? Even people she didn't know but Amanda knew she'd gone to see to inquire of her daughter.

She dragged herself to her bed and dialled Amanda's phone as she had been doing for the past six months. She listened to the voicemail prompt and tears rolled down her eyes. They had fought the day she left. She still had one of Catherine's bank card. Her shoulders slumped. Catherine wiped her eyes, she may not know where Amanda was, but she had to credit Amanda's account in case she was stranded.

What if it was true that she had started taking drugs?

She shook her head in disapproval.

Amanda was dogged about drug use and never even took a sip of alcohol when she had a chance to.

Sunday. Aleruchi was to take her to church, but she wasn't in the mood. Now that she was in the mood, the Mass would have ended. She googled for the nearest church and saw one with an unusual name, shook her head and read the bio of the second one. It was reasonable enough, and she could walk down there.

She stared at her wardrobe for a long time and slumped to the ground crying. Amanda oversaw her choice of outfits, a habit that registered since Amanda was three. She leaned back as she waited for her cab and dozed off.

An hour later, she was ready and waiting for the cab she ordered. She closed the windows while she waited then fiddled with the remote control but reluctantly ignored the lull to turn on the TV. She stared at her reflection as she rested on the window. Sighing, she straightened and appraised herself cupping her breast then smiled ruefully. She wasn't keen on retaining her large breasts anyway. She was keen on the series of test with no real answer.

She heard a blaring sound which seemed to startle the animals in the calm, serene environment. She remembered that she'd been expecting a cab when she heard the sound again. She scampered into her room before her fascinator would fall. She rushed to the cab. She came out of her cab just as her father-in-law went out of his. She wouldn't have noticed him if he didn't pull down his cap and make a U-turn.

Though suspicious and curious, she didn't go after him because she was running late. She got inside just in time for the service proper to start. The pastor was already at the makeshift altar in the old cinema. She decided to sit at the back away from prying eyes. As she was sat down, she raised her head to see someone wink at her. She looked at the women beside her, but they seemed oblivious to what had happened. She looked back in the same direction, and he repeated it. She shrugged inwardly and waved to the unknown man.

In the blink of an eye, he was standing next to her smiling. Just then the congregation stood up for offertory hymn. He seemed familiar. Not him, but his brilliant white gap-tooth. It looked like he was standing close even though there was a considerable gap between them. She was trying to figure out who he was. She turned her attention to the loud bang at the altar just as she remembered who he was and looked back. He was no longer standing there.

She searched for him. No one knew where he was or who he was. Tired of their asking her what she was doing there. She hailed a cab and rushed home to wait for him.

She opened her eyes and found she was drenched with sweat; she assumed she slept in the heat because she'd been exhausted. She groaned, it was the third time in the same week that she had forgotten to turn off the heating. She tossed off the duvet and stretched. She blinked a few times until her eyes adjusted to the light streaming in through the window. She heard the door slammed shut and dragged herself off her bed, pulling her robe from the chair and left the room.

She sighed ruefully and hissed when she saw Aleruchi.

Aleruchi sniggered playfully and brushed past her to enter the house with two bags of groceries. "Who were you expecting?"

Catherine feigned a smile. "Amanda."

"Oh," Aleruchi retorted softly. "She'll be home soon. Don't worry."

"I hope she'll be on time," Catherine mumbled.

Aleruchi raised her brow. "What did you say?"

Catherine shook her head and waved her away as she shut the door.

Aleruchi shrugged then went back to ransacking the cabinet.

Catherine stalked into the kitchen and pulled out a high stool from under the breakfast bar. "If you need something then ask me. All that clanking is getting to me."

"Where are the takeaway plates?" Aleruchi finally asked.

"I threw them away." Catherine hissed.

"You what?" *What is wrong with you? Na wa o!*

Catherine pursed her lips and nodded.

Aleruchi opened another drawer and squealed.

Catherine glared at Aleruchi as she nursed her ears. "Why can't you do something quietly?"

"You kept our pictures from school."

"Those are keepsakes."

Aleruchi gave her friend a sceptical look. "You keep your keepsakes in the kitchen?"

"Just put them back when you're done."

"Yes Ma," Aleruchi mumbled. She squealed again. "I remember this shoe. It was stolen."

"What shoe?"

"These red polka-dotted ones," she said and handed the picture to Catherine. "I loved those shoes."

"Oh," Catherine smiled. "Did you ever get to take care of that tear?"

"Of course. I made a ribbon into a bowtie and attached it. It was so lovely. I think it was stolen at the Christmas party the year before my aunt's wedding. Because everyone was in the house."

Aleruchi shook her head. "Do you want ice-cream?"

"Ice cream?" she asked, somewhat irritated.

"Yes, ice cream. This house is hot." She stammered impatiently and turned the kettle on.

Catherine ignored her and peered into the grocery bag. "What did you come with?"

"Foodstuff, I want to cook you something to eat."

"You cooked last week. Ruchi, what's going on?"

"What do you mean?" Aleruchi asked with feigned innocence.

"For three weeks now, you've been cooking food we don't need. I had to call your friend to take them, even Mrs Canne."

"My friend? Oh, Jacinta. Mrs Canne eats Naija food?" Aleruchi asked, surprised.

"She is Jamaican, and that's beside the point."

Aleruchi continued. "Why did she change her name to Jacinta?"

Catherine frowned at her. "Why didn't you ask her?"

"We were friends, but she tried to cause a fight between Princewill and Eduardo, in my son's house."

"I wonder," Catherine mumbled as she rubbed her eyes.

Aleruchi clucked her tongue.

Catherine twisted her mouth; *I see we're both in a mood*. The kettle cried, and she slipped off the stool to get a cup. When she got to the sink, she picked up two cups and sighed before replacing Amanda's mug.

Aleruchi watched her friend with concern. She didn't understand her friend. For one, she didn't want to involve the police in the disappearance of Amanda especially as the daughter's bank account has been

drained. Ever since she *moved* in she has noticed that Catherine was withdrawn and absentminded and also had a very short temper. She sighed, *I am here whenever you need a friend*. Whistling, Aleruchi unhooked an apron, took one last look at her friend as she wore it and then emptied the meat and fish into the sink.

Catherine peered gloomily at her nails almost spilling her coffee. She didn't like going to the salon alone. It was times like this that she missed Nigeria, where all she had to do was call a nail technician or hair stylists to come to the house to beautify her. She watched Aleruchi for a while and started biting her nail. She had seen Eduardo, but whether Eduardo and her friend were involved... Besides, she couldn't forget the leering look Aleruchi gave Eduardo. *Was it to spite her Princewill? But why?*

Catherine sniggered. *Look at me prying into another person's affair when I have mine to deal with. Is it too late to reel her in about my diagnosis? I wish I knew where Amanda is if only to tell her that I am not angry with her. Perhaps it was true that she had started taking drugs. Or why else would she abandon her studies? If she was wouldn't she have emptied the account, she had just replenished? This is so unlike Amanda.*

She sniggered again. *So, we had our fights. It's not so different in other families.*

She groaned when she heard Misha's voice just before the doorbell chimed. She most definitely didn't want any distractions from her thoughts. She reluctantly opened the door. Misha wasn't alone, the other two ladies, both were giggling at something which she seemed to have

interrupted. They murmured their greetings without waiting for her to welcome them in. Misha looked amused as she hauled the girls in with her. She watched them walk into the house and shook her head as she closed the door.

The girls looked around in awe. Gawking at how significant it was on the inside. They continued moping around until Misha pinched them and pointed to the living room when they glared at her.

“Misha, what is this about?” Catherine asked, annoyed at their intrusion.

“Nothing. Just wanted to see how you were faring?” Misha said loftily. “Doctor Bernice insisted.”

“You’ve seen. So...”

Misha turned her attention to the girls she came with. “Girls, Meet Catherine. Catherine, Adi, and Dali.

Catherine crossed her arm, waiting for an explanation for the intrusion.

“Girl, what would you like to drink?” Misha asked her friends as she shrugged out of her coat.

Catherine was taken aback by her audacity.

They debated for a few minutes while Misha left for the kitchen.

Catherine shook her head and went to the kitchen. Misha followed. She offered Catherine a cup of Indian dessert that she brought with her. Catherine reluctantly took a few marshmallows and returned to staring into the distance. Aleruchi nodded her thanks and continued washing the meat.

Catherine remembered her medication and rushed into the sitting room. After taking her pills, she decided to hide in the solace of the quiet sitting room and stare

into the distance. While she faced the window, she realised that it wasn't as serene as looking into the garden from the kitchen window. Her nosiest neighbour had just returned from a school-run and was stopped by a formally dressed woman.

Catherine squinted and peered into the misty window when she saw someone that looked much like Eduardo. She swiped the window for a more unobstructed view. It was Eduardo she'd seen; he walked into one of the semi-detached houses opposite hers. She raised a brow in surprise and then frowned when a lingerie-clad lady opened the door, her frown deepened when the woman kissed him, not on the cheek but quite passionately. To stop herself from saying anything, she quickly gulped her coffee which in turn went the wrong way.

Aleruchi quickly rushed to her friend's side and soothed her. "Ah-ah, what is wrong with you?" She looked out in the same direction as Catherine not seeing anything, she shrugged.

A few minutes later, Catherine belched.

Aleruchi scowled. "That's better but disgusting."

Catherine smiled. "Thanks. I best visit the bathroom."

The doorbell chimed again. Aleruchi willingly ignored it. She called Catherine and heard the shower come on upstairs. Sighing ruefully, she dusted her hands on the apron and opened the door. "Hello son," she looked at him concerned but said nothing because he wasn't alone.

"Mum... hi!" Victor hugged her and stepped aside.

"Good morning Ma," Andrew curtsied as was his culture.

Aleruchi smiled shaking her head. She had grown

tired of telling him not to greet her in that manner.

With Aleruchi ahead of them, Victor and Andrew went into the living room.

On entering the sitting room, Victor froze causing Andrew to bump into him.

“Guy, look road nah!” Andrew mumbled.

Victor didn’t react. He looked ahead of his friend and saw two girls and smiled. He said a quick prayer and searched for Misha. When he finally got to the kitchen, he saw her bent over biscuits and gulped. He rubbed his chin pondering what to say. Just then she looked up and smiled.

“Hi, Victor!”

“Hi Misha,” he stammered. Still rubbing his chin, he frowned and sighed. “May I help you with those?”

“Erm... of course. Thank you.” She handed Victor a tray.

Victor let her go ahead of him to the sitting room to give him enough time to catch his breath. Aleruchi and Andrew looked up simultaneously. As the girl offered treats so did her son. Andrew gave Victor a thumbs-up.

As soon as Victor sat down, Andrew asked, “Have you asked her on a date yet?”

Victor shook his head.

“You spent ten minutes staring at her *abi*?” Andrew asked, a little annoyed.

A little flustered, Victor mumbled, “Something like that.”

“You dey frustrate my efforts bad,” Andrew grumbled.

Victor gave him an embarrassed shrug.

Dali seemed to be having the same argument with Misha, but in her case, she brought out a memo pad and pen and handed it to Misha insisting that she write on it. Misha scribbled frowning, after a jab from her friend and a hushed argument, she handed the pen and writing pad back. Dali gave it back. Misha scribbled again and gave it to her friend with a question on her face. Dali nodded, got up, sauntered toward Victor and handed him the paper. It read:

Dinner for two

7p.m. on Friday

Are you game? (If you are, please nod)

And I'll come to yours.

Victor choked on the hors d'oeuvre he was eating.

Andrew slapped Victor's back and impatiently whispered, "Look at her and nod *abeg*."

Aleruchi blinked not believing her eyes. *All this time, Victor had his sights set on his neighbour?* She placed a hand on her chest as tears started to stream down her eyes and made a quick exit.

Unable to contain her excitement, Misha took the trays and left the sitting room.

Victor started scrolling through his phone to browse topics on etiquettes of going on first dates. Andrew looked into his friend's phone, laughed and then pulled his friend up so they could talk privately elsewhere.

Meanwhile one of Misha's friends, the one with purple and black hair tapped Misha's other friend with red-tinted hair intently. "Adi, this is the girl I was telling you about."

Misha bent over her friends to see. "What girl?"

"Dali, remove your hand so Misha can see her."

"Hey, wait! She looks like that girl." Misha pointed at the display of pictures along one side of Catherine's sitting room. "the one in that..." she trailed off as she walked to the wall of displayed pictures to retrieve the one she was talking about. When she got close, the strap of her sandal got stuck on the magazine rack, and she stumbled knocking most of the pictures down. She sat up holding the picture she was pointing at.

Catherine yanked the picture out of Misha's hand and glared at her.

"I'm sorry," Misha made a face. "She looks like..."

Catherine grunted.

"Looks like what?" Aleruchi asked curiously.

"This girl." Adi and Dali chorused. Dali was brushing her red-tinted hair off her face as Adi held up their university's magazine.

Aleruchi walked over and slowly perused the picture. "Cathy? This is Amanda!"

Catherine yanked it from their hands and perused it then her face softened. It was indeed her daughter. She closed the magazine and frowned. "This isn't her university." She said more to herself.

"We had a debate in that university –" Adi started.

"We won. Can you believe it?" Dali cut in, giggling.

Catherine felt like shaking the girls into seriousness, but Aleruchi patted her gently. "Girls, I have something to ask you..."

"Yes –" Catherine pursed her mouth after Aleruchi glared at her.

"As I was saying, how well do you know her, the girl

in the picture?"

Adi shrugged.

Dali tucked her hair behind her ears. "I met her a few times before the debate. It was a group thing introduced by a substitute lecturer. You know the one -"

"We *know* what a substitute teacher is!" Catherine snapped startling the other three in the room.

Aleruchi nodded her encouragement at the girl.

"Well, she was the best in her group and the best of us, which was ten of us. We went to the substitute lecturer's university for the debate. She was the one who got us the most points..."

Catherine couldn't help smiling with pride ignoring the girl's emphasis on the lecturer.

"What has that got to do with her looking tipsy in this picture?" Misha asked before she could stop herself.

"I don't know," Dali said shrugging.

"I heard that her boyfriend drugged her," Adi said matter-of-factly and slapped off Dali's hands simultaneously.

When she wouldn't stop talking Dali shoved her harder and murmured loudly. "Shut up!"

"What?" Adi asked feigning innocence.

Catherine felt lightheaded and staggered, but Misha caught her just before she fell and guided her to a sofa with Aleruchi's help. While she used the same magazine to fan Catherine, Aleruchi ran to the kitchen to get water.

An hour after, while Misha and her friends and Aleruchi were wrapped up in Catherine's red blanket sleeping, Catherine was lost in thought. Her mind flashed back to

two weeks after Amanda turned four.

She was in the kitchen and had just finished chopping onions when she felt something tug her. She ignored it. Thinking it was the neighbour's puppy again.

"Mummy, mummy, mummy."

"Yes, my pearl." She said pushing the chopping board out of reach.

"My poopoo is still floating."

"It will keep floating until you flushed it."

"But I did. I did mummy." Amanda murmured pouting and continued tugging her skirt.

Catherine felt something cold and looked down to see the toilet brush. Startled, she looked at Amanda's hand and almost cried. The smell was so pungent, she had

to give Amanda a long soak in the bathtub. Then hired cleaners to clean the kitchen and she still didn't use the kitchen for another week.

She hugged herself; Amanda was so innocent in her teenage years she became a recluse, and that's how they ended up best friends. Which was why she couldn't understand how Amanda could have a boyfriend and she didn't know about it. She was even oblivious to the fact that Amanda had extracurricular activities, and she began to wonder if there was something else she didn't know about her daughter.

Another two months had passed and no Amanda. With her hair falling off in clumps, Aleruchi opted to shave her head without her permission. She was too weak to give any. She could only cry and was glad that Aleruchi didn't reprimand her for keeping the state of her health a secret. She has just gone through her second chemo,

and her shaky teeth have fallen, all the upper palate. She had to book her appointment with the dentist again, seeing that she had just missed another.

She screamed into her palm and slapped her cheeks for all she knew it could be a dream, and she needed to wake up from it. Everything seemed to be moving too fast too soon. Her imaginative daughter couldn't be on drugs. The school must have made a mistake and a terrible one for which she would sue them for. The boy in question was the son to one of the members of the board of trustees of the university.

How she wished Alfred were still alive no one would be able to hurt her child in that way.

Her legs shook violently. She tucked her hands under her armpit then hugged herself. She interlocked her fingers and held her head then scratched her head. She bit her fingers. Infuriated, she screamed into her palms again. She needed to wake up from this dream. Suddenly fearing the worst her stomach lurched. She pursed her trembling lips as she cried. All she felt like doing was screaming but even that she couldn't do.

What was the use of information if you couldn't use it? If Amanda didn't have friends, what would have been her fate if the ones she had didn't have any information to give her?

CHAPTER FORTY-ONE

Catherine

Aleruchi raised her head loftily while Catherine pursed her lips and crossed her hands. Seeing a therapist was the worst idea conceivable, and she would be in her best behaviour, and that'll be, to remain quiet for the one-hour session. *It can't be that hard, can it?* It was. The only way she could get through was to focus on her concerns which weren't hard to do seeing that she'd been doing it for the past months. The elevator dung, and Catherine smiled as she remembered Amanda's red peacoat and how she had lost Amanda on the lift of a twelve-floor office complex.

It was during the winter months, and Amanda was wearing her red peacoat, a gift from Aleruchi on her fifth birthday and was already too small for her. She was still living in Northern London. It was her first time in central London. She didn't have childcare and could no longer survive on being dependent on friends' charity. The outfit that she wore for the interview always a size bigger, but luckily concealed in the jacket that sat well on her broad shoulders.

She had left her with the receptionist who had promised to keep an eye on Amanda.

When Catherine finished and got back fifteen minutes later, she found her daughter's peacoat. Amanda and the receptionist were missing. To worsen it she didn't remember what she had put on Amanda except for the

peacoat.

An hour later, she found Amanda. She was startled and almost shouted Jesus when she saw her daughter on the lap of a woman as pale as Morticia of the Addams Family with afro-kinky hair. The woman was so engrossed with Amanda that Catherine had to tap on her shoulder and smile her sweetest.

The woman looked at Catherine and frowned.

Catherine stared at the woman; she had the most profound set of blue eyes Catherine had ever seen.

"Is there a problem?" the woman asked, her eyes were on another woman, much younger. The younger woman was ogling the middle-aged man in the room. He looked like it was the only chance he'd had in ages. Irritated, the blue-eyed woman glared at him, and he quickly picked up his files and left the conference room. The woman turned her attention to Catherine, who seemed to have forgotten why she was there and repeated. "Is there a problem?"

The younger woman scrambled to the woman's side and started, "Maam, I -"

The woman raised a hand, and the younger woman fell silent.

"Em... my daughter," Catherine said, pointing at Amanda who looked up with wide, curious eyes.

Amanda scrambled to her feet on the table with outstretched arms. "Mummy!"

The blue-eyed woman crossed her arms. "To whom do we owe this honour?"

"Oh, I'm so sorry." Catherine paused and retracted Amanda's hand from her mouth. "I came for an interview with my daughter."

"I'm Nancy Bradshaw." The blue-eyed woman

stretched a hand towards Catherine.

Catherine took it, trying to hide her surprise and succeeded. "Have we met?"

"I don't see how." Nancy Bradshaw chuckled shrugged and rounded back to the chair with a laptop facing it. She typed for a few seconds and looked up. "You mentioned an interview?"

"Yes, on the twelfth floor."

The woman frowned briefly. "What are your qualifications?"

The younger woman lingered.

"I don't understand the question." Catherine stuttered.

"What is your most recent qualification?" Nancy Bradshaw asked coolly.

The younger woman froze and turned to eye Catherine, twisted her mouth, and began to fidget.

Nancy Bradshaw caught the younger woman hovering and asked her to leave.

"BA Public Administration. The University of Calabar in Nigeria." Catherine retorted.

"How would you like to start working as my assistant. As soon as you get rid of the baby, of course."

"Wh-what?" Catherine asked, looking at the woman in horror.

"You can't bring her to work. Not in this office. There should be a crèche in the area where she can be while you're working."

Catherine hesitated for a second, but the woman noticed.

"She is such a cute child she would fit right in." Nancy Bradshaw added quickly.

Catherine smiled wryly.

The woman scribbled on a pad and handed it to

Catherine. "Call me when you're ready. What's your name?"

"Catherine –"

"Catherine is good. You've got to the end of the business day to get back to me."

Why would her pride and joy opt to take drugs? The doctors told her that there was a tendency for babies who survived withdrawals to go back to drugs. She sighed and shook her head. It was almost December, and she wasn't ready to celebrate Amanda as memories.

"Cathy, you can't go on like this you know," Aleruchi said, placing her hand on Catherine's shoulder just as the elevator dinged again.

"Ruchi, where can she be? She doesn't know anyone and her birthday is almost... is almost –"

"Please don't break down on me. What do you want me to do when you do. Please don't do this. She'll need you –"

"When?" Catherine almost shouted.

"Soon. Now pull yourself together let's get today's session out of the way, okay?"

"You're right on time Mrs Osuji." The nurse said as soon as they reached the receptionist and beckoned them to follow her.

For days, Catherine neither ate nor drank.

Aleruchi was concerned that Amanda was the reason and needed her to be stronger as her daughter would return when she was ready.

Catherine didn't want Aleruchi to know that everything tasted like lead in her mouth.

The following day, soon after they'd returned from

church Aleruchi was watching one of the DVDs that Misha had bought for them, and someone rang the doorbell. She looked at Catherine sleeping, and reluctantly went to answer the door.

“Amanda!” Aleruchi gasped excitedly.

Amanda looked up at her and squinted. “Is my mum alright?”

Aleruchi was taken aback but stepped out of the way. “Of course. Why?”

Amanda shrugged and hesitantly entered the house.

Aleruchi stood akimbo waiting for an explanation.

Amanda shrugged again. “It’s just that you are never here during the day.”

Aleruchi sniggered cheerfully.

“I’m sorry. Good afternoon Aunty.” Amanda hugged Aleruchi.

Aleruchi didn’t reciprocate, but her face softened. “How are you?”

“Okay, I guess. Where is Mum?”

Aleruchi gestured.

Amanda raised her brows in surprise. “On the couch! No kidding!” She rushed to the couch and stopped and smiled. “I’m sorry.” She whispered and covered her with a throw after setting her head properly then planted a kiss on her mother’s head.

Aleruchi observed her; she looked gaunt with dark circles around her sad eyes. There seemed to be fear too. To ease the path to inquiries, she quickly asked, “So, what would you like to eat? Let me rustle something up before I leave you two.”

“Oh,” Amanda murmured and stepped back. “Aunty, you don’t have to go anywhere. I can’t stay.”

“Why can’t you?”

“I-” then she realised the question had come from her mother.

Catherine tried to sit up, but Amanda pushed her back gently.

“Mum I...”

Catherine patted the settee she was on. As soon as Amanda sat down, she took Amanda’s hands in hers. “Whatever it is. I’ve already forgiven you. You can tell me if you want to, at your own pace.”

Amanda broke down.

Aleruchi had already carried her bags and shoes, signalled her friend and quietly made her way up the stairs suddenly longing to be in bed.

Catherine nodded with a slight smile and waited until she heard the door click shut before sitting up. Looking curiously at Amanda and trying not to sound annoyed at the same time, she asked, “Where have you been?”

“Rehab.”

“Rehab? What for?”

“Mum, I’m sorry I just got carried away.”

“Carried away?”

“Mum please!”

Catherine nodded and held her lips with her thumb and index finger.

Amanda couldn’t help smiling as she removed her mother’s hand and held it in her own. “I blamed myself for letting you go on all these years on your own and not having a man in your life. Then I discovered I wasn’t your daughter and that you could have cancer. I couldn’t get past the guilt of being the reason why you never remarried. I just felt you were living in denial because of me.” She stopped suddenly to catch her breath.

Catherine shook her head. "I didn't know what you were going through and you didn't –"

"I can't come to you with everything I'm going through."

"But we're best friends."

"And my mother." Amanda looked knowingly at her mother.

Catherine nodded and thinned her lips. "Friends?"
How on earth did you find out I had cancer?

"Always." Amanda smiled brightly and pulled her mother into a hug. "Thanks Mum!"

Two weeks later, Aleruchi and Jacinta huddled around the island in Catherine's kitchen along with Misha and Amanda. While Jacinta cut onion, Aleruchi cut the cabbage because everything else seemed to make her want to hurl her stomach content, Misha and Amanda kneaded the dough. The kitchen soon became too hot, so Catherine went out to sit on the stairs, and the others had to come out of the kitchen, and they ended up forming a semi-circle around her.

"Excuse me," Jacinta said as she got up to receive a phone call.

Amanda brought the oranges and a knife in a tray as her mother requested before leaving the house.

Aleruchi wrinkled her nose at the citrus scent and began to feel nauseous. She took a sip from the coffee she'd just made and nearly threw up. She had added double cream. Then she spread butter and jam on two slices of bread and then sandwiched them together. Victor, Andrew, Catherine, and Jacinta watched Aleruchi munch her sandwich in horror. When she finished, she yanked Jacinta's pack of marshmallow off

her and started munching it greedily.

Jacinta's brows furrowed. "Are you okay?"

Aleruchi craned her neck as she searched for anything other than finger foods. "I'm just so hungry I don't understand."

"We still haven't concluded our plans for the fundraising you know," Catherine said as she headed towards the kitchen to check on what she was cooking.

"What fundraising?" Jacinta asked nonchallantly.

Irritated, Aleruchi grimaced. "For cancer research, we've been discussing it since morning."

Jacinta yawned and stretched languorously. "Really?"

"You've asked for the umpteenth time." Aleruchi exhaled exasperatedly.

"Wow, easy *nawh*! You don't have to get worked up."

"So, you that's been on my case, what's with you? What's on your mind?" Aleruchi asked as she got up to stand well away from the oranges.

"I've seen my daughter." Jacinta murmured softly.

Aleruchi raised a brow and pursed her lips but didn't say anything.

Jacinta smiled dreamily. "After all these years, I found her."

Catherine came out of the kitchen carrying a lemon meringue pie in a large platter. "Found who?"

Jacinta smiled absentmindedly.

"She said something about her daughter," Aleruchi whined and shrugged when Catherine gave her a look.

"Whose daughter?" Catherine asked suspiciously then zigzagged between them as she made her way towards the sitting room, leaving Aleruchi to lust after the food. She came back and sat down on the steps again waiting for an explanation from Jacinta. When Jacinta didn't

respond, she dipped her hand in her water and sprinkled it on Jacinta.

“Mum, we’re going out!” Amanda called out.

“Get me more butter please,” Catherine said and sighed when she heard the door.

Just then, Aleruchi’s phone began to ring. She looked at the screen and grimaced. Catherine raised a worried brow at her but turned her attention to Jacinta, who was fondling her necklace absentmindedly.

“Jacinta!” Catherine called.

Jacinta answered nonchalantly, sighed and withdrew from her thoughts. She made an excuse and left them.

“Pick his call or turn off the phone!” Catherine snapped at Aleruchi.

“You’re angry,” Aleruchi murmured.

“I’m not,” Catherine griped and breathed slowly. “I had a good thing once, remember?”

Aleruchi nodded and squinted, unsure of where the discussion was heading.

Catherine glared at Aleruchi. “You’re about to lose a good thing.”

“What? This little sermon is about Princewill?” Aleruchi sniggered. “Please concentrate on the fundraiser, abeg.” Aleruchi finished with a warning scowl.

Catherine scowled back at her and pushed the writing pad to her. “Do it yourself!”

“It’s your plan. Unless you want it to flop.”

Catherine quickly retrieved it and accidentally spilled hot tea on it. “See! it’s your wickedness that caused this.”

“What did I miss?” Jacinta asked as she made her way back to them.

"That karma is a bitch!" Aleruchi said, pouting at Catherine.

"Okay," Jacinta murmured with a bit of hesitance. "Why?"

Catherine shrugged. "It's just something that happened recently... at work."

Jacinta didn't believe her, but her stomach growled violently, and she rushed to the toilet.

"Open the window o!" Catherine called out and turned to face Aleruchi squarely. "What are you afraid of? Why don't you want him back? Is it because of that Casanova?"

Aleruchi sighed and shook her head. *Am I afraid? I don't want to get pregnant and have another set of stillbirth children.* She gasped. Catherine was right. She been afraid and didn't realise it until that moment. She needed to breathe, really breath, but first, she had to visit the toilet. She got up and rushed to the bathroom but froze when she heard...

Boom!

Jacinta and Catherine heard it too. Thinking something had happened to the throng in the sitting room, the women rushed inside, but those in the sitting room were on the same mission, and they collided.

Catherine recovered first and asked. "What happened?"

"Are you alright?" Victor and Andrew asked their mothers simultaneously.

"Me, I'm fine if anyone cares to know." Catherine murmured. The boys smiled and hugged her, in turn, asking her the same question.

A loud bang on the door startled everyone. The tempo increased in succession. It was followed by rapid

footsteps and jangling of keys. Everyone froze then huddled together. Catherine rushed to the door, thinking her daughter was in danger just as the door opened. She staggered from the impact of the door on her face and turned to lean on the wall to prevent her reeling head from falling off.

Misha, Adi, Dali, Anita's friend Ayesha aka *Sillicon Valley* and two neighbours Mrs Reignard and Mr Ankormah rushed in and Mr Ankormah locked the door after them.

Everyone mumbled to each other, and Aleruchi could suddenly feel a headache coming on. Aleruchi made a screeching sound, and everyone instinctively covered their ears falling silent. She placed her hands on her waist and tapped one foot. "Now someone, start talking, about what is really going on."

Misha, Dali and Mrs Reignard started talking and then fell silent.

Misha nudged Dali. Dali swayed a little, scoffed and began to gesture. "I don't know what transpired, but a man was chasing this man," she pointed at Mr Ankormah, "with a gun. As it turns out the one with the gun is this woman's husband. At the same time, a vagrant was trying to beat up an older woman, and a man came to her rescue and was shot. As we speak, no one knows whose gun went off," Dali paused and scoffed again, "her husband's gun or the vagrant's. The vagrant happens to be the older woman's son."

"Who was shot?" Aleruchi asked.

"Oh no, I hope he is all right o!" Catherine said from the kitchen.

"Alright *ke*? He was shot, with a gun." Jacinta emphasized gesturing.

“Still, it would be unfair for his good intention to cost him his life.” Catherine reiterated.

Jacinta shrugged and looked at her phone for the umpteenth time.

“No one knows him. He just came out of his car to rescue the old woman and the next thing he was lying on the floor.” Adi said, looking worried.

“The police seemed to have been hanging around because they’re out there,” Victor said from behind the curtain. Adi rushed to his side to see.

Andrew walked towards the door and tapped on Mr Ankormah and nodded at the woman.

“Ah no, em...” he giggled nervously. “Anything you want just say, but I can’t go out like that. The man was my boss o! She forced me!”

“What?” Mrs Reignard exclaimed, her face turning red.

Jacinta laughed. “She raped you?” looking from the man who had buttoned his clothes wrong and had on only one pair of socks to the red-haired, freckled-faced woman with a pretty little dollop for a nose. A woman whose hair was never out of place even when she opened the door to receive her post.

“No, it was all a big misunderstanding.” Mrs Reignard said in a small voice.

Adi was nodding to the person on the screen of her phone. Then she turned around, whispered to Misha and rushed out of the house.

Meanwhile, everyone eagerly waited for an explanation for their dishevelled appearance. It was evident that they were already at it when the man caught them.

Victor turned his attention to Misha, who had already left the crowd and headed into the sitting room.

“Wow, who did this?” she asked, staring at the half-completed jigsaw puzzle, and then sat down in front of it and began to rummage the puzzle bag.

It’s now, or never, Victor thought but remained rooted to the spot.

Andrew pushed Victor forward. He needed to keep Victor busy while Dali was around at least until Anita showed up. As soon as Victor made a few voluntary steps towards Misha, Andrew pushed Dali up the stairs. She giggled, and he hushed her simultaneously. To be on the safe side, he took her to the loft where guests usually lodged.

Victor exhaled and walked towards the coffee table and sat down across from Misha. He swallowed. “Hi!” his voice faltered. “Would you like to join me?”

Misha’s brows furrowed. “To do this?” She asked, pointing at the puzzle.

“Mh-huh.”

“I was already doing it. Would you like to join me in this?”

Taken aback for a few seconds. Johnson’s heart was running riot, his head unable to process his next course of action, so he nodded.

Misha stared at him. “Yes?”

“Yes,” he murmured and rubbed his sweaty hands on his denim. He clenched and released his hands a few more times before joining her. They talked about everything that popped out of her head.

Aleruchi, who was nauseous and desperately waiting to

use the door as the two in the house were occupied turned to go to the garden when she saw her son. Amused, she stared at them he looked like he was going to kiss Misha, so she didn't dare sneeze. She could tell that they were both nervous; he was only responding to anything she said, and she was talking really fast like something trying to catch up with a fast treadmill.

She sighed with satisfaction and closed the door to keep intruders away then sat on the staircase on the spot Catherine had just left. She heard footsteps on the porch and not wanting them to distract her son. She yanked it open before they'd knock and at the same time shoved Catherine's neighbours out.

Everyone else dispersed themselves.

She looked up and almost peed on herself when she saw Princewill standing on the porch.

"Hello Sweetheart, hiding from me?" Princewill asked.

"I'm not hiding from you." Aleruchi snapped and walked into the toilet Jacinta had just exited. She yelped and covered her nose. "What did you eat?"

Jacinta laughed. "Hello, hello."

As soon as she closed the latch, she retched then quickly opened the window and leaned on the opened window soaking in the winter-announcing-breeze. Unable to resist the call of nature, she completed her mission then felt a pang of pain immediately after emptying her bowels, but that didn't bother her as much as the dread of stepping out of the little room to see her husband. After a while, feeling calmer, she arched her back and came out.

As soon as she came out Princewill smiled at her, the crinkles around his eyes, the dimple on his cheek and the glint in his eyes rocked her confidence, and her

stomach fluttered drenching her in embarrassment. *Oh, this is not good, not good at all!* “What are you doing here?”

“Oh, I almost forgot why I came. You see you are a sight to behold. And well, I came to see Jacinta.”

“Me?” Jacinta asked gleefully.

Aleruchi stood akimbo and eyed her friend suspiciously.

“I didn’t come with good news. Your husband is in the hospital. I received a call on behalf of you,” Princewill waved at his wife. “Your husband is in the hospital. He was shot while rescuing a lady.”

Jacinta threw her head back and laughed then looked morosely at Princewill.

“Let’s go see your husband.” Aleruchi tapped on Jacinta’s arm. Jacinta and Aleruchi looked at each other then fell in line after Princewill almost shoving him out of the way.

Princewill paused to finish catching his breath and watched them leave in Jacinta’s new Escalade.

Catherine’s plate fell on the ground. With a hand clutching her chest, she fell. They called an ambulance while she struggled within herself. Princewill knelt beside her checking her pulse as he dialled 999. Amanda came into to find out what the crashing sound was and saw her mother on the floor.

“What have you done to her?” Amanda shrieked as she shoved Princewill out of the way and threw herself on her mother and dialled 999 simultaneously.

Andrew and Victor headbutted each other when they bumped into one another. Misha had to wiggle herself between the two boys to get the pillows to the kitchen. Princewill comforted her assuring her that they’ve called

the hospital.

Anita held her breath and shut her eyes, trying to erase what she had just seen just as Mr. Abdiel's image superimposed itself on Catherine's body.

Misha tapped comforting arms on Amanda, and Amanda nodded, but she shrugged off Princewill's hand and sniggered at him.

CHAPTER FORTY-TWO

Jacinta

Jacinta frowned at how enthralled she'd been when she was with Adetunji, but deep down she knew the only thing he could offer her was sex and money. She hoped she could see past the vanity. Although a criminal, he was gentle and kind to her. He even listened to her complaint.

Who could blame me? He was generous in all counts. I haven't felt special for far too long. But then what?

Jacinta moaned. She couldn't pretend she didn't know what he did for a living. Even though she no longer regretted spending the money.

What if I'm sitting down calmly in Tunji's house feeling cosy and the police badged in or, still on top of him when they break down his door. What will I tell my son and my daughters? What will be their impression of me?

No one really understands what it's like to be beaten every single day, years on end. Now that I've got my confidence back, he had to go and save someone he doesn't know. If this is an attempt to win me back, it's working. Not because he succeeded in winning my heart, but because I have been conceding to the fact that I don't want to continue these flatulent escapades with Tunji.

Rogers! A pittance for a husband! Why does my own have to be this much trouble? People save others, it becomes a celebration. But mine? Tales of woe! As if luck has chosen to pick a fight with me for no just cause.

Jacinta watched a few giggling nurses pass by and sighed ruefully. She wanted stability above all else. Only realising how much she needed it when Catherine and Aleruchi were thrown back into her life. More so, finally finding her daughter when she'd just about given up. Her lifestyle has always put her on the edge. She had children who loved her and that she'll give her life for. She had a daughter she needed to find and hopefully would forgive her for not being a mother for as long as she lived.

"Mrs Durosinmi, you can see him now."

She held her breath and sat up. Then roused herself slowly. When she got to the door, she propped on it and closed her eyes.

"Hey," Rogers murmured, and Princewill excused himself.

The look in his eyes revealed no pain or sadness. She frowned. He seemed happy, then pain flashed in his eyes, and she couldn't hate him anymore. What would be the point? The doctor had just told her he would be paralysed from the waist down. He could recover in a week, or in years. She had told the doctor to tell him before she saw him. She walked to him and wrapped her arms around him.

"Omo too wumi (my desire), I'm sorry for everything," he sighed and started weeping. After apologizing profusely and even confessing to raping Victor's mother and denying it, her sympathy had increased but the urge to punish him for the rape, albeit it was a woman she didn't know.

Victor's mother was living with his best friend's family. He'd gone to spend the holiday there because his parents had a conference, they were desperate to attend. Her

name was Elfreda and was best friends with his friend's twin sister.

She was the only woman who had resisted him, and it infuriated him. When she was kicked out, she came to his house. His ex-wife took her in until she had the baby. When I broached the topic of marrying her, my ex-wife filed for divorce. Soon after the divorce proceedings was completed, Elfreda eloped with Benson Ajao. So he took it out on his ex-wife. He had told Victor a few things but hadn't been able to come out with the truth about how he came to be born.

Her name was Elfreda Ajao. No matter how many men she married, she never changed the name from her first husband's.

Jacinta gasped. The woman who wanted her dead. The woman who almost succeeded had luck not been on her side. The woman who tried to turn her daughter into a murderer. The one who killed a man who turned out to be Catherine's husband. Was that woman the mother of her son? Her only son?

She had questions, but Rogers had fallen asleep. It took all her will to resist waking him up. She grimaced. She had no intention of sharing her son with any other woman, except his wife of course. The only way to get rid of her was to tell Catherine about the girl's involvement in her husband's death. She just had to come up with a good idea of how she found out. Perhaps the red polka-dotted shoes in Aleruchi's picture. No one was going to take anything from her as long as she lived. Not anymore.

She looked at her husband sleeping peacefully and knew she had to convince him to keep this information between herself and him. She sighed. Victor was loyal,

and he was also ardent in his curiosity. She had set out for revenge, but the world had come with its own long before she conceived her own.

Andrew was about to enter the room when he heard the name of his mother and remembered the woman, he nearly bumped into on their porch a few weeks ago. His father's ex-wife had told him that she was his birth mother. Why would she tell such a lie? What did she stand to gain?

An hour later, Jacinta fell asleep then was woken by footsteps beside her. Three men had come in. One was a known former Minister. She greeted them cordially. She looked up and smiled when she recognised one of them as Alhaji Daniel Òmòtòshó.

“Long time no see. How are you, sir?”

“We're fine. We came to see your husband as soon as we heard.”

She smiled, not bothering to correct them. Her separation from Rogers was her business, hers alone. “That's so kind of you.”

Rogers winced and opened his eyes.

“Hey,” he chuckled on seeing them and shook hands with them then winced again.

“My brother, when did you become Superman?” Daniel Òmòtòshó asked, laughing.

Rogers shrugged gently. “Na so I see o!”

The former Minister looked eagerly. “How bad was it?”

“Hot, cold initially, but the pain is mad. Straight through my waist but didn't touch any vital organ.”

“Good, good, good. So, let's talk business.”

“Excuse me,” Jacinta said, getting up.

The former minister was standing really close, so when she turned, they were at eye level. Rogers squeezed her hand, she turned to look at him; he shook his head not wanting her to go anywhere.

“Nkiru?” the former minister exclaimed.

She stepped back from him because no one had called her that in a very long time. Rogers gladly pulled her even closer to himself.

The minister shook his head bewildered. “As I live and breathe! Do you know how long I have been looking for you? Ever since your mother said you eloped, I –”

“Eloped?” Jacinta and Rogers chorused.

“Yes. I...” he faltered.

Daniel Òmòtòshó pushed the man into the chair Jacinta had just vacated.

The former minister was close to tears as he started speaking again. “When your mother stopped sending me your birthday pictures like we had agreed I knew something was wrong. I went to St. Francis High School to look for you, but you left after your first year.” He paused and was now holding his head in his hands. “My dalliance with your mother wasn’t planned, it just happened. I really am so sorry for putting you in a precarious situation all those... these years. It was your mother’s ideas, and I respected her decision to...” he finally broke down.

Jacinta’s legs couldn’t carry her anymore. She didn’t even realise that her husband’s arms were around her.

She remembered one occasion when she was little that she saw the former prime minister on TV and her mother almost flipped and took out her anger on the TV. That was the last time a TV was in the house. On the

eve of her birthday, she would be forced to braid her hair. It took the whole day because her mother had better things to do. She was required to polish her teeth which made her teeth so sensitive she couldn't eat the entire day and then forced to brush three times a day.

Then on her birthday, their neighbour would give her mother her daughter's dress which she would wear for a photoshoot, and then itch for at least three more days because of the camphor in the girl's clothes. She always got books every month; her mother must have had difficulty selling them. People rarely bought books outside the school curriculum for their children. It was seen as wasteful when there was a library to take care of any *unnecessary* books.

The former minister was still talking, but she was no longer hearing him. Her world, which she was struggling to figure out was crashing around her. And no, she didn't know what to do.

For the first time, she didn't have a defence mechanism for what had just happened. She just stared at the man and didn't realise when a young girl came in. When she finally looked at the girl who was dressed in a navy-blue pencil skirt with cream coloured military style shirt with a red tote draping in front of her, her balance faltered.

Rogers nudged her closer to himself, pinched her, and smiled proudly. "She is real. My surprise..."

Jacinta's brows furrowed at Rogers.

Rogers nodded and gestured.

Her daughter. She'd found her Nkasiobi. She promised herself that it wasn't a dream as she slowly made her way to the girl. Nkasiobi moved in that evening, and Jackie returned from school to get a

glimpse of the sister Andrew had told her of.

Since Adetunji came back into her life, she hadn't noticed anything else. And, in the running away from Rogers she was always away from her house. She sank into the chair as she realised that it had been almost a year. Rogers had paid off the mortgage and extended the house using the designs she had been saving for when she would have the money. She knew she never did love him, but she was attracted to him from the day that they met and hoped that was close enough to be love.

She wiped her eyes and sighed. He wasn't a helpless person; he just had a very high standard for everything. He was quite fortunate to get a job after he had shelved his CV all these years. When she learned that he had even built a house in her name in Nigeria, she started to cry and felt even worse when she realised it was completed two days before she sent him the divorce letters.

Maybe all she felt was guilt for using him, after all, she had paid for that with his constant beating and raping more so she deserved compensation. She looked at him and sighed again.

We probably are getting our second chance.

She hoped because she was tired of too many things. She just wanted to rest. She needed it. She desired it.

And perhaps, Catherine would be satisfied that she had something to be grateful for. Now she had to focus on their elaborate birthday plan and immediately reprimanded herself for not checking on Amanda and her mother.

EPILOGUE

Amanda had suggested Christmas Eve for the fundraising dinner.

Dr. Bennet had told Aleruchi that he wanted to surprise his girlfriend by adorning his Bernadette outfit one last time. Aleruchi thought it was a queer way to propose and she reprimanded herself. *Catherine wouldn't judge*, she thought.

Exhausted, she sat down. She tried to reach her sandals but couldn't see beyond her bump and huffed. She couldn't remember being this round during her last two pregnancies, after just five months. She cussed and covered her mouth in shock, then looked around.

She looked at Princewill at the other end of the hall, laughing at something Rogers had said, and grimaced. She tried to reach her bag, which had fallen to fit and grunted. Sighing ruefully, she reclined and caught sight of her son and Misha and smiled. Misha's parent started walking towards them, her father less pleased - the women in his life had carried the vote.

Aleruchi laughed: *He was going to have to accept an African son-in-law, whether he liked it or not*. She understood his plight', having promised his daughter in marriage to another man. She also knew her son. She turned to see Mrs Martinez, the event's organiser, look around surreptitiously then snuck to a corner of the room, took off her shoes, massaged her feet and tucked them into her shoes and returned to welcoming guests.

Jacinta joined Aleruchi with a sigh. She frowned,

shoving her friend's hand away from her glass of ginger beer. "So, Catherine's parents already knew that she had cancer and refused to spend some time with her?"

Aleruchi shook her head. "She didn't have time to tell them. Her mother was expecting a grandchild that day, and her father didn't know who she was."

"What? How can? How come?" Jacinta asked, stretching her hand away from Aleruchi.

"Her father lost his memory," Aleruchi sighed gloomily. "They abandoned her while we were still at St Francis High. Alfred was all the family she had."

Jacinta reclined. She would never have known. It was weird to find Catherine with so much confidence even when she was in a pickle. All her anger dissipated when she found out that Catherine had cancer. Now, she was filled with guilt after she'd learned more about Catherine's chequered past. All the resentment towards the two women was a total waste of time.

Rogers and Princewill walked over to them then Rogers nudged his wife to make room for him.

"What's with you and your phone today? Am I boring you?" Jacinta asked Rogers.

"*Haba!* No o!" Rogers exclaimed and quickly tucked the phone in his pocket and set his cane aside.

"You seem a little disconcerted. Let me ease the stress, eh." Princewill murmured and smiled mischievously as he took his wife's hand in his and began to massage it.

It was distracting. And Aleruchi's attempt at shrugging it off made his massaging her even more intense. Aleruchi sniggered when her stomach grumbled and glanced up at her husband, who now was laughing at her. He dangled a packet of crackers in front of her.

"They say it helps."

She sighed, glad he didn't hear her stomach growl, or he would have been all over her with all the party food he could amass. She loved the attention but was beginning to feel smothered.

Jacinta sniggered as she watched her son. She still didn't like this new girl. Anita had always been in the picture, and suddenly, there was another girl. She may not have liked Anita, but she was used to her. Did she not bring up her son to be better than his father? Maybe she was reading something into nothing.

"Alright, what is it?" Rogers asked and took her hand in his.

"What is what?" Jacinta asked and began to play with her hair.

"He'll be fine, you know."

Jacinta rolled her eyes. "I know."

"Then stop worrying."

Jacinta squinted at him, knowing that any explanation would guarantee unwarranted advice.

"He's better than me." her husband said and excused himself.

She smiled. Rogers was right. If Elfreda made any attempt at reuniting with Andrew, she was ready to bring up a story of a pair of polka-dotted shoes. Glad for Aleruchi's old pictures. There was no way she would have connected Jacinta to the girl that made her hide under the bed in a room that had a dead man. She had forgotten about that day. Those darn polka-dotted shoes

The past months had made her realise that she was a very forgetful person and was glad for it.

Amanda had slunk away when she saw someone, she looked like and figured the lady could be her mother, but the lady had told Jacinta that her baby had died a cot death. A Jewish businessman called Mr. Abdiel impregnated the woman. She was going to talk to the woman soon. The woman wasn't going anywhere not with Jacinta being her mother, which probably would make Jacinta her grandmother. She was taking more than her emotions could handle.

She raised the glass of wine to her lips and paused when her mother's voice filtered into her thoughts: If you succeed in finishing one, you'll realise it wasn't going to be enough. She carefully dropped the glass at the bar and left the room.

A few minutes later, she walked back in still not fully prepared for her speech. Uncomfortable, she took a champagne flute in her left hand and quickly switched it like her mother always did for her. Trying to focus, she lowered her head and another memory filtered through 'Poise is not the pendulum. It's the iroko tree that's unwavered and unruffled by the wind' something her mother always said when she had a presentation.

She inhaled deeply and exhaled slowly, arching her back as she slowly raised her shaky hand. Victor, Misha, Andrew, Jackie, and Dali helped steady her. Misha nodded her encouragement.

She climbed the pedestal and sighed. "A mother is called forth and prided upon. Her vestment, a tulle of random botheration and battles. The virtue of her offspring transient, yet her anger short-lived.

Oh mummy, why take your foot off the pedal? How could you let the renegade plaque outlive you? The oasis had not yet applied itself, so why then would you permit

demise to touch your opine self, or take you into the piracy of its grimy fleet; to the unknown lands to tarry in the harems of bitter buccaneers in the mockery of corroding waters.

The wind smothered you. You intervened. If you didn't, how then would you have been able to ignite the fire of this oil lamp so hidden, its reinvented itself and cast away its wick? Wiser you left and strength I'll find not too soon, I hope. A rare feat of colourful emotions plaque me, but I'll steal every smile you left behind until I dull this chaos of pain."

Amanda shuddered, her mouth moved, but words could no longer come out. She tried to keep her lips from trembling, but they were out of her control. She was already quivering when Jacinta and Aleruchi came and flanked her just as the paper that had her speech slipped. She sighed wistfully, and the let tears flow free as she watched it go with the wind.

Jacinta let go of her hand, so she could wipe her face then held her free hand. Amanda squeezed Aleruchi's hand, and Aleruchi nodded.

Sighing, she continued. "I hope you've set sail into the most profound pleasure attainable. Where the cheapest perfume is made from happiness; so that the neon lights that once echoed the forlorn and the descants of trespassers will be the guiding light to your cheer.

That the insane host of the ne'er-do-wells would be far from your enchanted treasures; that the tale of sinking sands would be a mirage, remorse for the perplexed as the Lord receives you with outstretched arms and your soul soars with radiance to regions where hope is not longed for but dispersed.

I'll hold your principles and teachings dear, they'll be

my guiding light to illumine my path, to deviate from contemptuous reasoning, and to empower me as I carry your torch forward..." She looked at Misha and Misha brushed the other hands off the flute and handed it to her friend. Amanda nodded her thanks. As she raised her flute, she added. "To my mother, Mrs Catherine Kachi Alfred Osuji, my beacon of light."

"Here, here," Everyone echoed. "Beacon of light."

Aleruchi sighed as she watched Amanda leave the podium. Catherine always wanted to be liked even when she was selfish. Aleruchi wished she could witness this. She looked at Jacinta and they held each other's gaze. Whether impetuous or salient, Catherine always brought people together, and Aleruchi believed she would finally find peace.

THE END

Acknowledgment

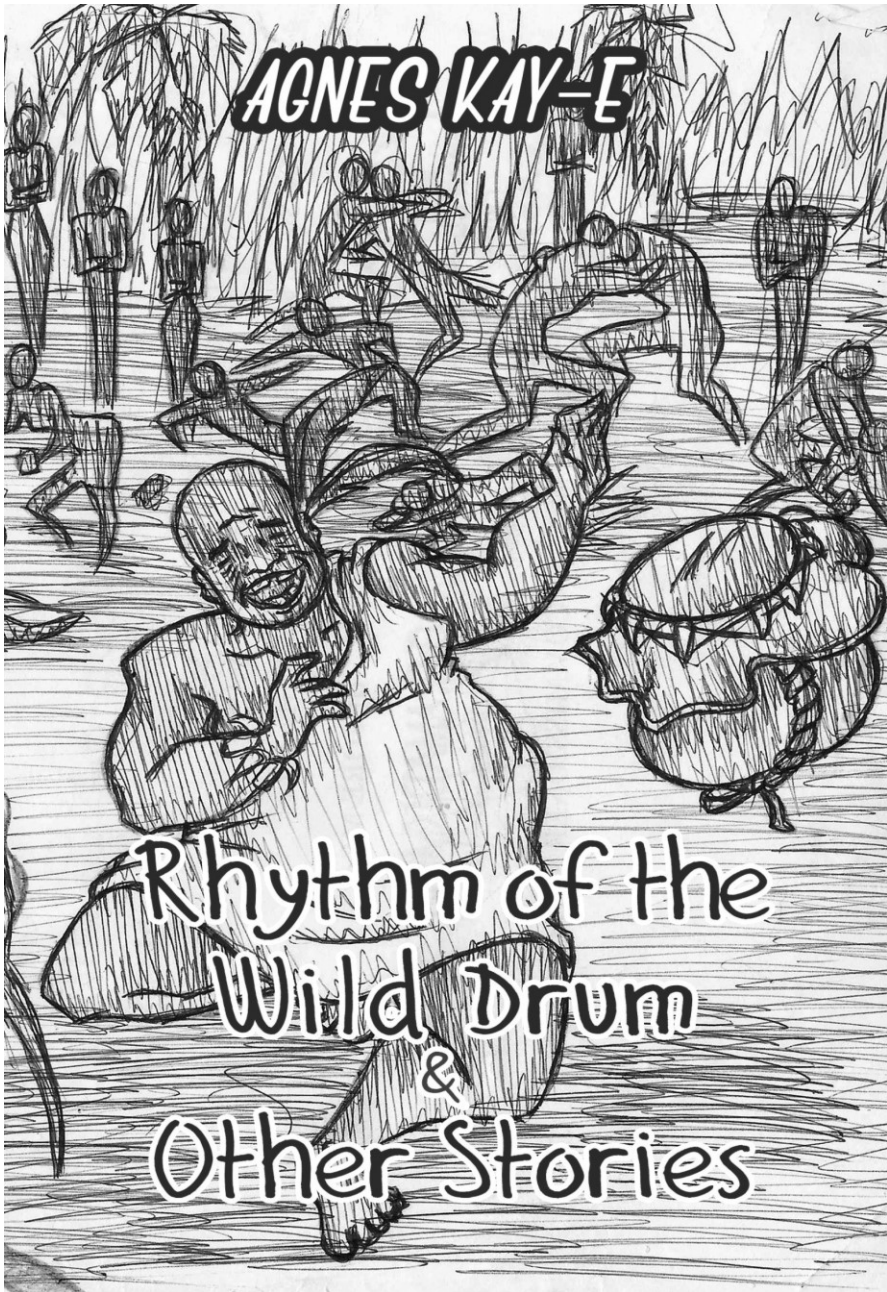
Blessing Helen Ezinwo

Paul Inyang
Pastor Kehinde Olajide

Columbus Chukwu, Victoria Agali, Beauty Princewill, Nkiru Darlington, Nnenna
Nnadi, Michelle Emeji-Onyeoziri and Khotobar David.

Also, by Agnes Kay-E

Rhythm of the Wild Drum and Other Stories



The Girl From Home – Women Fiction

*The Girl
from Home*

AGNES KAY-E

Nicholas' First Nativity – Children Fiction



Nicholas' First Nativity

AGNES KAY-E

As Kemka Ezinwo

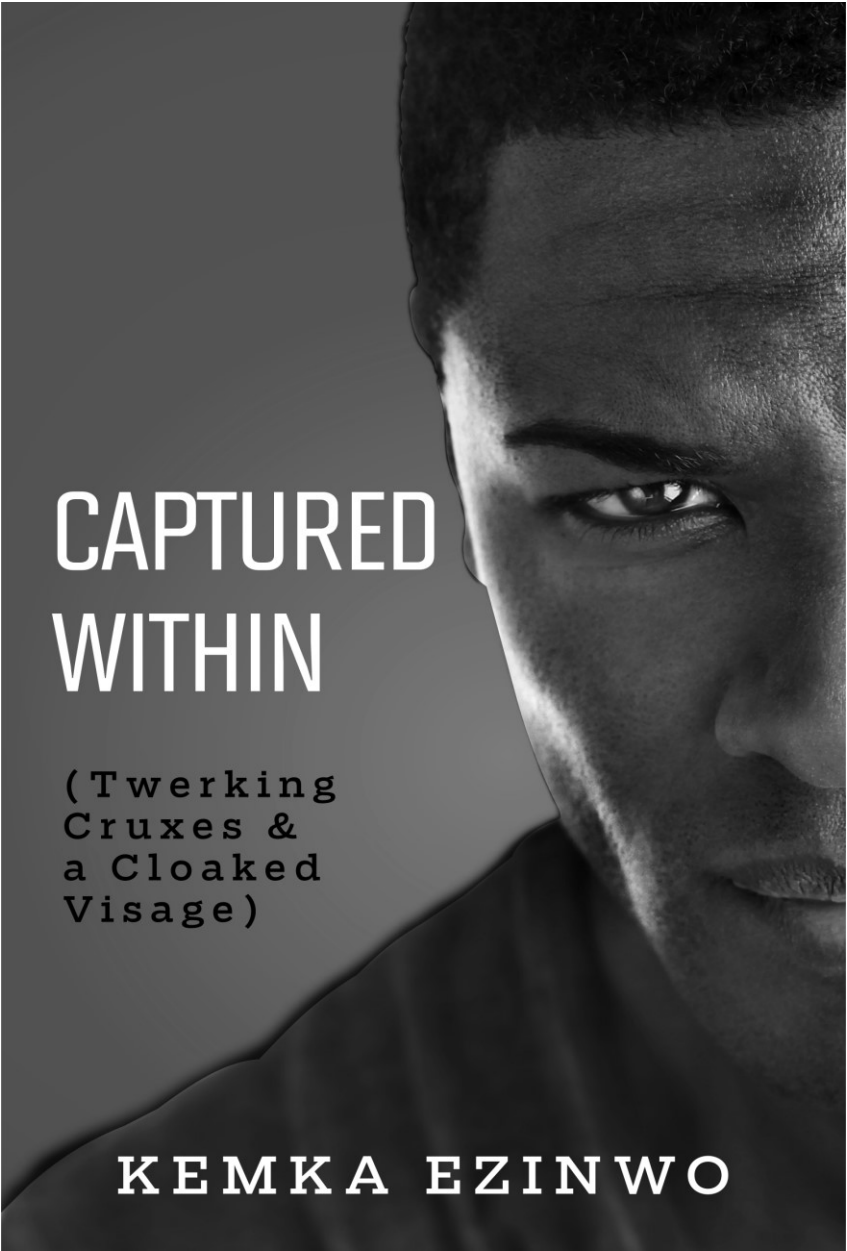
Something New



KEMKA EZINWO

Also, by the Author as Kemka Ezinwo

Captured Within



CAPTURED WITHIN

(Twerking
Cruxes &
a Cloaked
Visage)

KEMKA EZINWO

Sneak Peek: Captured Within

The crispy august wind smacked Matthew Udoh. He could barely see through the fog, let alone, find the aluminium bucket. He hated the harmattan season because his skin would shrivel like the smoked mackerel his mother bought for dinner and then itch for hours. Should he open his mouth, his already chapped lips would tear; the last time it took weeks to heal. The sun wasn't out. He trembled at the thought of pouring cold water over his body. He shuddered: the escaping moon cast its reflection on the surface of the water in the bucket, reminding him of its icy coldness. Lifting a bowl full of water, he held his breath and threw the water over himself. The water landed on the ground with a light thud, splinters of it touching his feet – he had shifted before the water fell. His mother's voice echoed, rekindling the courage he needed.

I need oil on my skin, he thought. Then he winced touching his cheeks as the memory of when Eka-Effiong's hand stroke his cheek resurfaced – he heard chirping much like the little blue birds that circled "Tom's head in the *Tom and Jerry* cartoon which he and his friends had watched through a crack in the door of Ette Okon's house. He never understood how such a frail-looking woman could lash out such pain.

"I'll never take what doesn't belong to me again!" He muttered to himself.

Thinking of *Tom and Jerry*, he smiled. Ette Okon would never have discovered how rats started getting into his house

if Livinus had not gone bragging to his sisters.

His skin had started to itch, but he couldn't get his hands through his clothes because they were snug.

"Matthew!" his mother shouted from the back of the house. He could tell she was coming out of the bathroom from the sound of the zinc door.

"Have you eaten your food?" She asked in *Ibibio*.

She always brought a smile to his face probably because she was the only family he had or because she was easy to talk to. He was once told that his mum was the belle of the village, that she stood tall among her peers – still did, with long, black and glossy hair, that the superstitious suspected she was a '*mammy water*'. She was slender, and her dark skin glowed, her eyes shaped like cat's eyes stamped with hazel-coloured pupils. She had a small pointed nose, and her lips were small, all neatly tucked in an oval-shaped face. Nobody understood what she saw in his father - One minute he was in a good mood and then another he was in a bad mood. (No one knew about bipolar disorder then). Matthew was told he had his mother's looks, though he didn't see how.

His skin started itching again.

He rushed to where his food was and his eyes lit with joy. It was *garri* and palm kernel. His jaws hurt as he chewed, but he didn't care. It was like eating rice and chicken on Christmas day. He hurriedly ate his food as he didn't want his friends to see him soaking *garri*. Nevertheless, he couldn't help waiting for the *garri* to swell.

Matthew's mother, Matty, she was so called because it was shorter than calling her Eka-Matty, watched her son eat with

relish and smiled and murmured, "Thank you, Jesus!" For weeks, they've been eating cooked unripe pawpaw. She knew he ate it to please her. He didn't beg, which often surprised her. She turned towards the door she was leaning on to hide her tears and pray. *Please, God. Look not on my sins. Look on the faith I have in you and take my son away from this misery. Please don't let him grow up in poverty.*

"Mummy, I have finished eating o," Matthew said and wiped his mouth.

Smiling, she wiped away her tears.

"Mmami, thank you."

"You're welcome, dear child. I have a surprise for you."

Eka-Matty undid one end of her wrapper, loosening the tip to reveal scrunched-up money. She gave it to him. She opened the door to withdraw something in a black cellophane bag: it was a pair of slippers. The money was from the sale of palm kernel: it wasn't enough to cover both his school fees, and a pair of sandals. Matthew jumped up and down in excitement, and then wiggled his waist and jumped on his mother who started laughing. He was glad to be paying his fees on the first day of school; something that had never happened before.

His friends, Livinus Orhiunu and Ambrose Livingstone arrived just as he was putting the money into his pocket. Livinus was talkative and chubby in an intimidating way; even the senior prefects feared to flog him whenever he was late. His father even suspected him of stealing food at night. His father never caught him because he did it in the afternoon.

Ambrose, on the other hand, was lanky, reserved and taller than most people his age with four older brothers of which, three were now late, and seven sisters. His mother and Matthew's mother got along but weren't friends, which was expected as Ambrose's mother was old enough to be Matthew's mother.

They arrived at school late because Livinus had forgotten something, again. Mr Kalabór, the duty Master, was at the entrance of the school with his *koboko*. The staff and students of Saint Barnabas Primary School, Kono didn't take kindly to this his *koboko*. No one openly objected because Mr Kalabór was related to the Headmaster. However, some teachers shielded their children and played the 'mind-your-business' game when it came to the other students.

Mr Kalabór glared sternly at them. "Why are you always late? I let you pass yesterday, but that is not happening today. Kneel!"

Matthew was already shaking like a leaf under heavy rain. He gave everyone six strokes of his *koboko*, but when it got to Matthew's turn, he frowned, maybe because he was afraid the boy would die. He quickly thought of a way to protect his reputation.

Mr Kalabór hissed at Matthew. "Come with me!"

Matthew followed.

When they got to the staffroom, his frown was replaced with concern.

"Sit down. Are you all right?" Mr Kalabór asked softly.

Matthew's reply was inaudible. His eyes glazed, his mouth watered as the different aromas of displayed food hit him. A

staff on maternity leave had sent food from the celebration of the safe delivery of her first son. Mr Kalabór noticed how the little boy's eyes danced from one dish to another, offered to get him some food but Matthew refused. Mr Kalabór got a paper plate and filled it up with food.

"I won't tell if you won't." Mr Kalabór whispered.

Before Mr Kalabór could say, 'A', Matthew was slurping and gulping away with such speed that the star-nosed mole would envy, and a grass cutter would relish. He had just finished eating and was wiping his mouth with the back of his hand when a light-skinned girl walked in, pulled by the ear into the room by Miss Boyd. Her skin shone like Ette Okon's Sunday shoes after it had been waxed with the Kiwi polish he claimed was a souvenir. She was so thin it looked like a feather could knock her down, with her nose as pointy as the cones they were told to make in class last term, and her hair was brown and curly. Matthew stared at her. He only realized his mouth had been open when he accidentally swallowed something: *saliva, a fly?*

She giggled covering her mouth to muffle the sound.

He looked over at Miss Boyd whose hand was still on the girl's ear. The girl looked a lot like her even though Miss Boyd's face was covered in pimples. *She must be the new girl that Livinus' sisters were talking about yesterday; I can almost swear they were jealous.* He remembered he had seen her with Mfon when he went with his mother to sell palm kernel.

The Labour Master came in, saw Matthew and grunted, "Don't you have a class you should be in?"

Before the teacher could utter another word, Matthew ran

as fast as his wobbling legs could carry him. He couldn't understand why his legs were suddenly wobbly.

From where she was standing she could see him run to his class. It was her class too. *Very white teeth for a village boy!* She twisted her mouth dispassionately as she tried to clean her teeth with her tongue.



Annette got into the class just as Miss Boyd called out her name.

“Present!” Annette answered.

The Form teacher, Miss Boyd looked up, noticing that Annette was standing, although she knew that Annette wasn't late for school. Not caring for whatever reason Annette might have had for being betwixt, she gave her two strokes of the cane. Annette wanted to explain to the teacher that someone was on her seat; through the tears, she pleaded with Livinus to give up her seat, and he merely looked at her like she was stupid. Matthew beckoned her over. She picked up her bag which had been dislodged, dusted it and went over two desks to sit with Matthew. Livinus was furious but said nothing.

During the break period, Ambrose's twin sister walked over to Matthew's desk and struck her chest, “My name is Miebi! I know your name is Annette. This is Mfon!”

“We have already met.” Mfon retorted, irritated.

“Oh, okay. Well, I'm going to ease myself,” Miebi stamped her feet angrily and briskly walked away.

Mfon watched Miebi leave and almost hissed then turned

her attention to Annette. They talked for a while, and Mfon realized that Annette hated school and was living with Miss Boyd, her mother's sister. Mfon made a personal declaration to make school a little bit bearable for her. Annette was a bit distracted in their conversation; her focus was on Matthew who was playing football with his friends. She found him weird. He dragged his feet when he walked, though he stood tall. He drooled when he spoke, and his head looked droopy like her Uncle's own did anytime he fought with his female friends. She loved the way he talked like he was counting his words, unlike her father who's was like gurgling water.

Livinus wanted to get back at Matthew for stealing his chance of talking to Annette, so he kicked the ball hard towards Matthew who deftly dodged it. It went flying in the direction of the girls falling into Annette's food splashing all over her white school uniform.

Livinus ran towards them, then came to a halt a few meters from them in case one of them would lash out like his sisters usually did.

Mfon reprimanded Livinus and hushed Annette when she started to whimper.

"I am really sorry. I didn't mean to," Livinus pleaded.

They didn't believe him, not after his action in the classroom. He looked gloomy with his slumped shoulders. They sneered at him and hissed when he passed. Livinus prayed that the rest of the day would pass quickly. He was the first out of the class when school was over, but the last in the line for devotion. As they sang, '*Now the day is over...*' he looked at Matthew scornfully.

As soon as devotion was over, Livinus brought out a baseball cap from his school bag and put it on.

“What do you think?” he asked Ambrose who was more interested in the dispersing crowd than Livinus’ new scheme.

“The sun is very hot o!” Livinus said to make sure his friend saw the cap.

“It is,” Ambrose said casually, looked at Livinus and shook his head. “Where did you get that cap?”

Livinus grinned sheepishly. “Why? You like it eh?”

“That is not the answer I was expecting, so –” Ambrose retorted.

“What is wrong with you? A question here, another question there, can’t you see and not talk? Eh?” Livinus readjusted the cap furiously.

Ambrose responded defiantly, “I will talk. You know why? Because you are always doing things that get us into trouble, not you, not all of us, but –”.

“Okay, okay, okay!” Livinus said trying to shut him up.

Ambrose pretended not to get the message and continued with mouth twisted, glaring, eyebrows raised. “So where did you get that cap?”

“Oh, shut up!” Livinus retorted with irritation in the Igbo language.

Ambrose gave him a querying look, wondering what he said. They overheard girls giggling, and as their footsteps drew closer, Livinus looked back and caught sight of Miebi. Miebi was walking in front of Annette and Mfon as they came towards Livinus and Ambrose before they veered to

the left side of the path that led to the church. Livinus stared at Annette with hands knotted behind him, not knowing what to say.

“Do as if you did not see me o, you hear! Do as if you did not see me!” he called out to Ambrose’s sister a minute later. Miebi said something inaudible to the girls, and they started giggling. This infuriated Livinus.

Ambrose called out to the girls. “Please wait! Has any of you seen Matthew? We’ve been waiting for him.”

Livinus jabbed him.

“Oh, I saw him go back to the staff room,” Miebi said to Ambrose, twisting her hair and blinking at Livinus.



“Master, you sent for me,” Matthew said quietly.

“Sit down,” Mr Kalabór replied as he stacked the files he was holding.

Matthew sat and waited for several minutes.

Mr Kalabór had ducked into the Headmaster’s office with some other files tucked under his arm.

The clamour of diverse pupils had gradually gone extinct, leaving the school compound with the silence of the cemetery that was behind it. Matthew shifted from one buttock to another. He kept peering out of the only open window. It was getting dark, and though he didn’t want to be punished by the teacher, he didn’t want to be punished by his mother too. He didn’t even get to tell his friends where he was headed.

“Master!” he called out. There was no response until the

fourth time when Mr Kalabór's head jutted out of the door of the Headmaster's office that was now ajar.

"Yes, Matthew, I told you to wait. I want you to go somewhere with me, but I need to finish this first," he said, showing him some more files.

Matthew scratched his head, "But, but Master my mother... she is expecting me to come and do some chores for her after school. I cannot be late!" He could tell something was wrong deep in his stomach, but he didn't know what to do. "Master let me go and tell her that I'm with you and I will come back right away."

"No!" Mr Kalabór said in a loud voice which resonated around the room startling Matthew. Noticing that the boy was shaking Mr Kalabór added quietly, "I'll go with you to your mother and tell her. You just wait a while. Okay?"

Both Mr Kalabór and Matthew knew that Matthew's friends would be waiting for him. Mr Kalabór's thoughts went to the broken fence that separated the school from the forest and the cemetery. His cousin, the headmaster, had discussed it with the bricklayers who were to repair it the following day.

Matthew knew his teacher meant well; he fed him in the morning, and he was going to go with him to explain to his mother why he was still in school. The problem was that the teacher had not stated his reason for inviting him. The school compound was looking spooky under the beam of the moon by the time Mr Kalabór had finished with the files. Matthew followed him as they made their exit.

"Who goes there?" Someone shouted.

Mr Kalabór almost jumped out of his skin and instinctively covered Matthew's mouth. As the person drew closer, Mr Kalabór pushed Matthew until he was behind him when the man came to a halt in front of them. It was the gateman.

"Sorry O! I think it those *sumal-sumal tiiffu*, you know, the ones *wen* broke the fence."

"Oh! I understand." Mr Kalabór answered nonchalantly as he twisted his wrist to check the time.

"You don't see them *abi*? Your brother is a catch one them *tiiffu* yesterday."

"Eh... I'm running late. Good night," Mr Kalabór said.

Mfon was close to the main gate. She had come back to pick up her homework books - she'd forgotten them while she was cleaning the class. She thought the gateman had caught her. From where she squatted, she could see all of them, and couldn't make sense of what Mr Kalabór and the gateman were saying or why Matthew was standing behind Mr Kalabór. She just needed to get out of there, especially as insects seemed to have crawled up her dress.



"It is late! Matthew is never this late!" Eka-Matty muttered.

Her instinct was to go out and look for him when he was just an hour late but decided against it. For all she knew, he could be playing with Livinus again. When he hadn't returned after dark, she knew something was wrong and went to every house he had ever visited, but he wasn't found.

Ambrose's house was the first she visited.

Ambrose frowned. "The Social Prefect gave him punishment for not wearing the right shoes, but he should have finished it since. We waited until we were tired and left,"

Mma-Tonye, Ambrose's mother got ready to join Eka-Matty to search for Matthew.

"Mma-Tonye, you just recovered. Go and rest I can manage."

"I'll hear of no such thing!" The older woman said sternly as she impatiently pulled the slippers from Tonye's feet. She readjusted her wrapper and turned to Ambrose. "It is bedtime."

Eka-Matty knew better than to argue with Mma-Tonye, so they searched everywhere even the school. When they went to Mfon's house, Mfon couldn't speak as her mother kept giving her warning looks. It was clear that the mother didn't want to be involved in another police *wahala*. Besides, she never liked Eka-Matty, and she never hesitated to show it. The problem was that Eka-Matty never noticed Eka-Effiong's wild gestures, twisted looks and also never listened to gossip.

When both women got to the Police station, they were advised to wait for twenty-four hours before they could make a missing person's report.



Mfon's elder sister Udeme - better known as Eka because she was her mother's first daughter - took on herself the role of an investigator to catch her fiancé cheating. She had a

reliable informant the pious Mrs Naakie, village gossip and more compelling evidence from nosy neighbours and pusillanimous, covetous friends. Udemé didn't care much for him. He was her mother's choice for her. She just needed an excuse to end the relationship. She almost caught him a year and three weeks ago. Ever since she'd confronted him on several occasions, but, with the precision of a spirited liar, he denied.

At eight-thirty in the evening, she walked to the roadside restaurant following a tip from her reliable source. She wasn't a night-out-of-the-house kind of person, but she desperately wanted to catch him red-handed. She sat down in the dimly lit part of the restaurant to be inconspicuous. She didn't realise it was an area dedicated to the promiscuous people who ventured to sidestep long enough to cheat on their significant other. She whirled the bottle of fizzy drink as she waited. She watched two men approach the scandalous area and sat on the table adjacent to hers. They were hard to ignore. They were both thin. One was dressed in a green shirt with geometric design; his trousers just about covered his ankles. The second man had a fearfully robust waistline for a thin man and wore an *agbada* that looked twice his size. The one in green shifted in his seat looking around sneakily while the other one placed their order.

"Annie, I have found a boy like we discussed." The one in green shirt finally spoke.

"Kalabór, is he clean?"

Mr Kalabór nodded proudly. "Yes and no one will miss him."

Poor boy! Udeme thought momentarily distracted from her mission.

“You’re sure?” Annie asked through a mouthful of roasted tilapia.

“Yes, I am sure.” Mr Kalabór spat.

“I don’t intend to offend you, but I don’t want any of this to get back to me.” Annie adjusted his oversized agbada again. “You know I am a man of repute and –”

“Aren’t I equally a man of repute? I succumbed to teaching in that God-forsaken school just because I needed the required object for a new start. What I need to know is, will this work for me as it did for you?”

“What sort of question is that?”

“Look, I’m taking a risk here. I want to know if its worth it. Is it?” Mr Kalabór asked in a sombre tone.

Annie smiled broadly, delicately pulled down the sleeves of his *agbada* and pulled it back up and said, “Of course, Baba has been good. Eh! But you don’t want it to come back to haunt you, you know, it’s blood.”

At least not physically! hehehe! Udeme shook her head. *They’re probably ritualist. Which boy are they after?*

“You need not worry about that. His father died a few years ago. His mother sells coconut and palm kernel. She cannot put up a fight or even afford to go through the right channels.”

“Can’t afford to?” Annie queried with a frown.

“She no go school *nawh!*” Mr Kalabór said, with irritation and anger in his voice.

Annie cleared his throat, but it sounded like something

between a choke and cough.

“Say it abeg, what is it?” Mr Kalabór said, eyeing Annie suspiciously.

“Nothing really,” Annie paused and added slowly and quietly, “it’s just that the boy must be a virgin for the thing to work o!”

The man sniggered. “He is. Is that all?”

“Yes, that sounds good, where is he?”

Mr Kalabór tilted his head in the direction the boy was. Udemé couldn’t help herself because the profile of the mother was quite familiar to Eka-Matty’s. Curious, she followed his gaze and saw the boy. It was like ice-cold water had run down her spine, the hair on her skin and the hard-to-reach areas of her body stood straight. It was Matthew, Eka-Matty’s son. He was sitting at a table towards the left side of her fiancé who was now fondling a light-skinned girl. She was torn between confronting her fiancé and sending the boy away. She got up, but her legs crumbled, and she leaned on the chair for support and then rooted to a spot, her legs began to shake. She couldn’t leave him there not after his mother had stood by her all these years. So, summoning up a little courage she went inside and tugged Matthew out through the exit meant for the staff. She gave him all the money she had on her; one naira and twenty-five kobo then instructed him to run home as fast as he could. Her hands were still shaking, but she had to confront her fiancée.

She gasped. Her fiancé was holding his head in his hand, blood pouring down his left side. She was about to ask him what happened when he started to stagger. Apparently, the

light-skinned girl had a fiancé; ironically, her fiancé had heard rumours that she was philandering, and decided to find out the cause of her distraction. It was unfortunate that Udeme's fiancé was the distraction that day. Udeme felt like laughing and crying at the same time as she was overwhelmed with other kinds of emotion. Most of the people in the restaurant left quickly at first sight of blood, not because they could or couldn't help, but because they didn't want to be witnesses to what happened when the police would arrive at the scene.

She finally got help from the restaurant owner's husband. He had just returned. He came in and helped Udeme carry her fiancé into his motor, a 1966 Chevrolet pickup truck. It had been a gift from his late boss. The car belched all the way to the hospital.

Sneak Peek: Rhythm of the Wild Drum & Other Stories

Before recorded history, there was a land of twelve kingdoms called Evóvuotu. It was so-called because it consisted of two kinds of people: the Okoruchi, and the Ehuehu. They were ruled by the King of All Living Folks. While there was a King of all living folks, there was also a Chieftain of Divinity, Wealth & Duty.

The Chieftain of Divinity, Wealth & Duty was gifted with Anya'ogu and was the keeper of Ófòr-Oguneli. His supreme duty was to ensure there was no breach of duty by the Okoruchis and to guide the Paramount Ruler. He was also to counsel the king as well as ordain one when it was required. Paramount Rulers, although of equal ranking as the Lord Marshals, never joined the army but had similar training as everyone born in Evóvuotu.

However, the Chieftain of Divinity, Wealth & Duty was usually born on a day without the sun, rain, or a cloud in the sky. It was an unusual occurrence as the birthday had to be in between two rainy days before the harvest season began. If there was no Chieftain, then the King of all folks took on the responsibility of the Ófòr-Oguneli for safekeeping until one was available.

1.

Several seasons had passed since Anyanwuze, offspring of Egbe became the King of all Living Folks. He became caretaker of the Ófòr-Oguneli handed him by his de'nnâ. As the caretaker, he had a vague ability to wield its powers. However, the

powers not being his to wield drained him of his physical element, thereby depleting his lifespan (a precaution and a deterrent).

It was the first time since the reunion of the twelve Kingdoms that it had no chieftain since the early passing of the last one during the reign of Egbe, de'nnâ of Anyanwuze. The last of the Paramount Rulers had passed away eighty cycles ago, sixty cycles after the last Chieftain. As none of them had handed their totem capes to their kin, their powers automatically returned to Ófòr-Oguneli. (Anyanwuze was a prince but not made crown prince at the time because he was still a childling when the last chieftain died.) Fortunately, the Paramount rulers lived long and were borderline corrupt.

Anyanwuze, offspring of Egbe and King of all Living Folks was an old merfolk saddled with choosing his successor. His favourite and most capable offspring was taken from him to the great beyond, but destiny had fortunately left him five offshoots. He adopted his late nwónnenanna's offspring, but as they came of age, they grew greedy and hostile. Three of these offshoots got his attention, but he waited to see the one that'll develop the spirit of kindness. He set tests for them, and they continually failed until he gave up. One of them was Uzò. King Anyanwuze had three refrains for his offspring's offshoot: a leader does not cower or hide when bullied or threatened; shouldn't be generous to his enemies; and, must seek to enrich his Kingdom.

With time Uzò, (nicknamed Okpararebisi because he liked to be in charge of the food) caught his attention and quickly became his favourite. Uzò a.k.a. Okpararebisi was the youngest of King Anyanwuze's offshoots, a carbon copy of his de'nnâ, he was kind and generous, but the King suspected he would make a weak leader and couldn't run the affairs of his compound much less a kingdom.

Okpararebisi was now king. During his reign, there were no Paramount Rulers because a Chieftain of Divinity, Wealth & Duty had not yet been born. Okpararebisi reigned without interference, but he was nearing his end, and no hope was in sight. With all the powers he took from the Ófòr-Oguneli, he could not cause his wives to birth him an heir to the throne. Desperate, he searched far and wide for an antidote to extend his life span or a legitimate offspring to carry on his legacy. He had used every lore he could evoke from the powers in the Ófòr-Oguneli all to no avail.

Okpararebisi was now a Master of Illusion so much so that he looked young, lean, and agile to everyone who came across him though he was the exact opposite. But when the date has been fixed in someone's timeline, only the Lord of All could extend it, and everyone knew that immortality was a tale by moonlight to teach childlings morals.

The Ófòr-Oguneli would have to be handed over to a new King. It was too much power for a simple folk, yet no babelings were born on the said day in the twelve Kingdoms. At least that was what all

living folks believed, but Okpararebisi knew better. He always knew, for the Ófòr-Oguneli's true glory shone, then he'd trace the babeling and murder it. But unbeknownst to him, not far away from the palace Kingdom of El'ikenueze, just below the borders of the northern Kingdom of Rumuochara, a place designated for the unusual, the cruel, the atrocious, and even the lewd, a babeling was born.

Meanwhile, Nkóli, the queen of Rimeóku, the weemate of Okwelewe, King of Rimeóku was missing.

The first time she'd escaped was during the reign of Anyanwuze's de'nnā, and he let it slide because he could see her – it came from being mated. Okwelewe understood her loneliness; Rimeòku was a desolate realm for a living folk - nothing grew, nothing lived. He let her get a taste of her old realm if only to stop her from turning spiteful.

This time he couldn't feel, sense, or find her. He had a feeling that one of his nwónnenanna may have helped hide her. He didn't know of any other power strong enough to obscure his sight. Whoever or whatever it was gave him a cause for concern. He decided to visit the world of living folks. It was the only place she had ever visited, the only realm she'd ever known, so he thought it wise to start there. He would have readily gotten rid of her, but his de'nnā had permitted him only one weefolk, leaving him no choice but to find Nkóli and bring her back.

Okwelewe, the King of all Dead Folks didn't know what love was, but he knew immortality was torture

without a companion and he knew the stirrings of the loin had to be gratified.

Out of semi-genuine concern for his weemate, Okwelewe left the affairs of Rimeóku to his first offspring Ónwu and went off in search of Nkóli. He refused to hand his sceptre to Ónwu because of his careless curiosity and knew it would be a slight on Ónwu if he handed it to any of his younger nwónnenanna. He couldn't take it with him to the realm of living folks because Nkeazu, the keeper of the barrier between realms, would rather die than let it pass through her woods. Besides, if he left with it, the Lord of All would discover that he left his post. A forbidden act.

Ónwu, the soul reaper was bored with handling his de'nnâ's mundane duties even though he enjoyed it, its repetitiveness was driving him insane. He wanted something more, approximately new and possibly intriguing. His de'nnâ was supposed to have been back ten cycles ago.

One day he wandered into his de'nnâ's throne-room and picked up his de'nnâ's sceptre and caressed it like he always did. As he did, he felt a sensation from the tip of his fingers work its way up to the rest of his body. He started to scream from the pain and then from the fright of being transformed. He tried to shake off his de'nnâ's sceptre, but it was stuck to his hand.

Not long after he could hear his nwónnenanna, Kagbuo and Nonw'elizie screaming then passed out. When they came through, they were different, in the land of living folks they would be called grotesque.

Ónwu's jaw elongated, his eyes were as red as blood and his brows wispy white, his complexion as dark as night, his pets turned into the likeness of goats with elongated jaws, fanglike goatee, their hinds long and thin with spikes on the head and eyes to match his.

His buxom Nwónnenanna, Nonw'elizie was now thin, without eyes and looked like a ghost. One half of Kagbuo's body was living folk worthy with a wispy blackness in place of an eye, and the other half was bones; his skeletal half had orbish-eyes in its socket. He had a gnarled bone around his waist. They all had a ghostly trim from their waist down.

"What have you done?" Kagbuo asked, angrily.

Before Ónwu could answer, he was whisked to the balcony of the palace. Beside it, a chariot began to form from rising bones sewn together of their own accord. As soon as it was completed, his gnarly, goatlike pets rose to it and huskily neighed. He caressed his pets and giggled, but it sounded like a thin cackle. Kagbuo covered the ear of the living side of his body.

Ónwu squinted and tilted his head. Ideas filled his thoughts, and he formed a desire, a desire to visit the realm of living folks. A realm that could keep his de'nnâ from returning to his duties was a realm worthy of his visit. The problem was that he couldn't go through the portal unless his de'nnâ consented. One day he discovered that it was easy to leave when a soul had reached atonement status. Outside the realm of Rimeóku was the Enwere tree folks of the realm between realms and Nkeazu, the

leadtrunk, wouldn't let him pass.

After too many failed attempts, he befriended Icherekini, Nkeazu's offspring. In one of their negotiations, he discovered that the young Enwere were falling ill and a stench of rot oozed from them, but they wouldn't die. He made her swear an oath: if he succeeded in solving their problem, they would let him pass to the realm on the opposite side, and she agreed. His investigation revealed that they missed their family, a feeling that they were no longer supposed to have after their transition.

It wasn't hard for him to scoop water from the river of dead thoughts because Nonw'elizie, its guard, had strong stirrings for Icherekini. He poured droplets on the stumps of the young Enwere, the following day the realm smelt of wood and frost. It took three moons for Icherekini to repay his kindness.

Finally, free to roam the realm of living folks, he went through with the sceptre, but it returned to its cradle as soon as he set foot in Evóvuotu. He roamed for a season until he was bored. Time moved differently from his realm. Here, he didn't have a physical form so all they saw was an apparition at night and he enjoyed the fright he gave even if it was fleeting. He also noticed that he could permeate through anything, even people, and he could desire to be someplace else, and he would materialise there, albeit without form.

One day, he became curious of the couple who seemed so animated by laying atop each other and disturbing the otherwise rhythmic sound of the

night. So, as the merfolk arched his back, he looked straight at the merfolk. The merfolk froze and then slumped. Instantly, an apparition, an exact replica of the merfolk escaped from the slumped body like a wisp of air. It lingered aimlessly and then came toward him. Startled, he shielded his face, but a light escaped from his wrist. He didn't remember wearing a wristband, but there was one on his wrist. It bore the symbol of his de'nna's authority. He turned his palm up, and the wristband expanded. After swallowing the apparition, the wristband returned to its former size just as the light disappeared.

Amused, Ónwu decided to find out how the wristband worked. He looked back at the weefolk as she struggled to get the dead merfolk off her, gasping and covering her mouth. She looked around as she pulled down her hide before running away. He laughed, and it sounded like a very bad laugh. Just then, his pets materialised before him, and he knew what to do.

A pungent smell wafted by. As soon as he caught the scent, he'd unintentionally materialise there. It didn't take him long to realise the odour was the stench of death. He also realised that he could now feel strange things in his body, which wasn't as translucent and bright as when he first entered the realm of living folks. It was curious and intriguing and somewhat scary, but it beat returning home. More so, this realm had colour, and he loved colour, especially the one that seeped out of the neck of a merfolk just before he got the apparition.

What he didn't realise was that as he lingered, several living folks fell ill with unidentifiable ailments. His pets lingered too, swallowing white goats so much so that goat owners started painting their goats, so the unknown thief would miss theirs.

Trying to catch an insect to halt boredom, he caught the stench of death and followed it. Confused at not finding an apparition, he began to suspect that the wristband was no longer working. The problem was that the stench was on a living folk. Intrigued, he waited, desiring the soul of this folk, so much so that he refused to follow any other apparition. That desire bound Ónwu to the realm of living folks like bees are bound to honey.

2.

Back in El'ikenueze, Okpararebisi toyed with the illusion of Chinasa he'd created. The maid sat in front of him in the final pose he'd chosen for her. But the illusion magnified his discontent and impatience and most of all, his desire for revenge. He had decided to move on by getting one of the weefolks he'd inherited from his de'nnâ's cousins to conceive. None did which only increased his anger and the guilt he felt for not waiting for his Chinasa. No living folk was innocent of his wrath. When the guilt wore off, he'd go back to deflowering the younglings of the palace kingdom. He took advantage of every weefolk he came across, not caring that they had a mate.

Now the twelve Kingdoms were really desperate for change since there were no blessings done

before the planting season, the harvest had dwindled. There was a widespread drought, the streams and rivers had dried up in some Kingdoms, and the people have had to migrate. Some adversely affected went to other Kingdoms to work for food, some sold their younglings as slaves or gave their younglings off as wives for food. It was even rumoured that some lent their wives out to wanton merfolks.

An Elder from each household in Evóvuotu came to visit the King for counsel. It was the first time in recorded and unrecorded history that a meeting of that magnitude was taking place. It would have been a festival had it not been for the gloom that heralded the meeting. Restlessly, they waited for the appearance of their King.

One of those elders was Ónu from Rumuoriji, the south-west part of the palace Kingdom just beyond Njigi hills. He kissed his teeth several times as he waited. He was the only patient person in the group. Patient because he had something the twelve Kingdoms desired. He, however, hoped they were desperate enough to take in the news with open arms.

Soon after the King joined the meeting, they begun to discuss politics and tax. Ónu suggested; that the King in his infinite wisdom should hand the throne over to his cousin while they continued their search for the new Chieftain of Divinity, Wealth & Duty.

Okpararebisi raised a brow while he listened and pondered. He wanted to discharge them so he could

rest his frail bones but needed to find out what the slippery folk called Ónu knew. After a while, he asked them to go home and ponder on Ónu's suggestion because he had a more pertinent concern; the next chieftain. For some reason, he couldn't find the Okoruchi that made the Ófòr-Oguneli glow just like he couldn't find a cure for his old age. It was a matter of time, He nodded and smiled to himself, he'd been getting rid of threats and traitors for so long he'd lost count. He had his cousin wrapped around his finger. He would never relinquish the throne to someone so gullible even it was his offspring.

The following day they reconvened at the palace. Soon after they cleared their itinerary Ónu stood up, clearing his throat.

"I have news," he said, kissing his teeth dramatically.

They responded with murmurs, some impatient, some sceptical but all eager.

"Because you are called Ónu does not necessarily mean you should use your mouth like a weefolk all the time," Omena'ala muttered in his raspy voice.

A few people lowered their head to laugh as it would have been an insult because Ónu was much older than them.

Ónu eyed Omena'ala of the palace Kingdom. They had been head-locked since Ahu gave Omena'ala the piece of land near the river beside El'ikenueze after he'd pledged it to him. "There is a childling born on the said day."

The news was followed by an excited buzz.

Ónu gestured for them to calm down before clearing his throat.

Okpararebisi raised his brows slightly, his interest piqued. He hadn't seen or felt the lull of the call, but he knew it was only a matter of time before the gods would try something new. However, hope was a risky business.

"Why are we hearing of this now?" Ômadike of Rumuochara asked, eyeing Ónu suspiciously.

"Where is this childling?" Someone in the back asked.

"Are you reeling us into one of your duplicitous schemes again?" asked Njuru of Eliotu, a former palace guard in the time of King Anyanwuze.

"Are you sure?" Mekaweli of the palace Kingdom inquired curiously.

Ónu rubbed his eyes to hide his grimace. This was why he hated these meetings. People always interrupted.

Okpararebisi was interested in this new development. As King, he was privy to information from all kinds of people, but this childling was unheard of and therefore an emergency problem. "Let him speak," he said softly turning his gaze to Ónu and urged him to continue.

"The childling is in the outskirts of this very village near the boundaries of Onyenwe." Ónu paused emphatically.

"How can? How come?" Nchi of Ochezo in Elichei Kingdom gasped.

Ome'e of Eli-Avali, the oldest of all the elders, took some snuff to his nose and sneezed before

nodding. "I suspect it's Isekó."

"Eh?" Omena'ala gasped, his eye twitching. "Isekó!"

"Isekó? Of all places?" A young elder from Akpunwó of Eli-Avali asked.

Ónu ignored the young merfolk sitting next to him and continued, "Born to Erii."

"Which Erii?"

"How many Eriis do you know?" Igala of Omeoha in Eliruzógu snapped at his friend.

"The murderer?" The youngest of the elders leapt up like something hot had been placed on his seat. "A leopard does not change its spots."

Everyone glared at him; he had used the wrong parable it seemed.

"Can a lion birth a snake?" Njinji of Elindichie asked, a little puzzled as he tapped on his walking stick.

"No o!" The elders chorused and began to whisper between themselves.

"But a childling is innocent of its de'nnâ's sins," Oche-Eze, the Chief Priest quietly added, rubbing his tired painted eye.

Ónu couldn't help but notice that the King was now in a pensive mood as the murmuring increased.

Okpararebisi raised a solitary finger, and everyone quieted then he gestured and the murmuring, though hushed, continued.

Amadi of Óròdomanya in Rumuije leaned further into his cane; his back was already hunched with age. He harrumphed several times to get the

attention of the other elders then snapped. “What is the point of cutting off ringworm from a leprosy infested body? We need a Chieftain.”

Fear gripped most of the elders, and while some averted their gazes, others looked questioningly at the King.

“No offence, Your Majesty, but you aren’t getting any younger,” Amadi of Óròdomanya finished with an exhausted sigh.

Okpararebisi nodded slowly. He’d learned long ago not to argue with Amadi. He was the most free-spoken person and the most respected he knew.

Onwuchekwa of Anyadike in Elidikenónu groaned, “Yes, of course, and if this childling was born on the said day that is all that matters.”

“I think there is more,” Omena’ala added when he saw Ónu still standing.

“You have all forgotten so easily how he beheaded his weemate because she helped his nwónna...” Igala spat in a strangled voice as he tried to be heard.

“Into his bed,” Another elder muttered, and the others broke into laughter.

“I would have done the same thing,” Ónu said matter-of-factly. Some of those laughing covered their mouths to hide the sound. “But that is not the issue.”

“Then what is the issue? Because you do not farm does not mean -” Oongu of Eliotu stopped to soothe his shin.

Omerò had struck Oongu’s shin with his cane and glared at him sternly and warned with a raised

brow. "Sit down. He who has no head has no need for the cap."

Oongu glared back but did as he was told.

Igala smiled with kind eyes. "Wait until you are old enough, dear youngling. You're still new to these things."

Okpararebisi's patience was wearing thin. He needed to quench their thirst for his replacement as soon as possible. The meeting was getting rather long, and it was getting in the way of his thoughts.

Omena'ala grimaced and shook his head exasperatedly. "He just wants to waste our time as usual."

Incensed, Omerò asked. "What is the issue?"

Ónu paused dramatically and then casually said, "It is a girl childling."

3.

The assembly fell silent. Even the morning birds and the noisy turkeys that prided their nuisance in the palace seemed to have discovered silence. It was the first time they had been in that kind of dilemma. The elders, the chiefs, Paramount Rulers, and Lord Marshals, even the subjugates to the Paramount Rulers were all male. The only known female with the same quality of authority ever known was The White Priestess and the Queen. No merfolk sought the Queen's audience. The White Priestess was allowed the privilege of male audience's supplication if her husband became the go-between.

What would become of them should a weefolk

become the Chieftain? Or worse still, if the Lord of All decided to make her the head of all living folks, a Queen?

This is going to be easier than I'd thought. Okpararebisi smiled inwardly. Knowing the ego of merfolk, he could get them to approve his offspring albeit illegitimate, who by all count was now a merfolk, and had excel in all rites of passage. He decided to wait until nightfall to meet with his offspring. He'd only known about his offspring when he was under Uzò's spell and hadn't seen him since. If they would not have his offspring as heir to the throne, then they should be better off without the Ófòr-Oguneli.

Okpararebisi grimaced. He still desired to have a babeling by a weefolk of his choosing, not Uzò. His stay with her, under her spell, was still sketchy and he'd rather be aware when he gives a weefolk the seed of his loins. He could sense the soul reaper close by, desperate as always. He'd begun to sense him a few seasons ago and still hadn't figured out how the reaper got out of Rimeóku.

However, how he got here was irrelevant, his concern was that hope had been rekindled, and he didn't have much time to snuff it out. He looked up, rising, and everyone else joined him. Sighing, he swept his eyes around one last time. Who knew what the future had in store for them should his offspring be King, but that was the only way he was going to relinquish the throne and perhaps Ófòr-Oguneli.

"Ónu, Omena'ala," he called and then whispered

to one of the guards beside him and waited until the guard returned with four warriors and continued. "No merfolk will cut off his nose to spite his face."

The congregation nodded.

Okpararebisi reached out to the Ófòr-Oguneli but stopped himself long enough to reach Ófòr-Nkigwe. He raised the Ófòr-Nkigwe above his head and declared. "Our warriors will go with you to fetch the new Chieftain. This is a time of change, after all. We must embrace it. Go and bring our babeling home."

"You are wise, your Majesty," Oche-Eze muttered with a curt nod. "It's only a merfolk that is blind and deaf that the elephant will trample upon." Oche-Eze was glad that they were coming to a consensus so he could go and investigate the rumours about his weemate as the gods had promised to grant him insight. He unfolded his legs in readiness to get up using his Ófòr as a prop when it began to vibrate. He immediately let go. Carrying his satchel, he moved towards the King and his counsel just as he started his incantations then he sat down folding his legs. He eulogised the ancestors of the twelve Kingdoms as he produced the tools of his trade.

Okpararebisi frowned, not liking where this was leading and unable to stop it.

Oche-Eze spread out a stripy animal skin and tossed his cowries onto it. He pondered for a while, shook his head, and tried again. He let out an exasperated sigh and scratched his bald head impatiently and tried again.

Everyone preened their eyes, some cleaned their ears. It was unusual for a divination during a large congregation unless it had been the reason for their convening.

Oche-Eze opened his raffia bag and produced two calabashes, one with murky liquid and the other with white powder. He cupped powder in his hand then opened his palm to blow the powder in four cardinal points. He lapped some of the murky liquid and did the same thing. He sighed dramatically, then dug the cowries out of his bag and tossed them lightly as he did more incantations. Finally, Oche-Eze slunk back from the cowries and looked again. He shook his head and shrugged forcefully. Shaking his head, he took another look and sighed dolefully.

The people began to murmur.

“Hear, hear!” Oche-Eze called out dutifully. “It happened in the dark, but the sun snuck in to expose its buttocks. Ah! The buttocks of a merfolk! Regality is in his scrotum? The wild drum he summoned by stroking its slumber has a tune. The rhythm that was put to slumber before time has begun, the dreaded music of the formidable is beckoning to its drummer. The drum has recognised the one who stroked it and has demanded a dance. The time has come for it.” He gathered his cowries still shaking his head dolefully. He picked his feather and used it to scribble on the ground, poured libations, eulogised the deities of the Evóvuotu, gathered the tools of his trade, got up and backed away from the King and

his counsel until he reached his Ófòr.

There was a long pause. Everyone was expecting more information and perhaps a solution. The gods seemed to enjoy showing off their wisdom because the people were dazed with confusion.

“Is that all?” asked Omeneri of Imidike in Elidikenónu who had been quiet the whole time.

Oche-Eze peered at him, irritated. “I say what the gods lent my eyes to.”

Omeneri was sure that there was more. “But-”

Oche-eze stared at him coolly, gritting his teeth. “The gods have spoken.”

The elders chorused. “So be it.”

Okpararebisi nodded and walked away from the meeting. The elders waited a few more minutes for him to disperse them with blessings or invite them for refreshments as was customary, but when he didn’t they left for their homes, each lost in his own thoughts.

In the excitement, Ónu told his second weemate that the offspring of her Nwónnenanna would be crowned the next Chieftain. She was so excited that she dared to ask him to give her the whole details of the meeting. He was so glad that he would be affiliated with people of influence that he told her everything. She was quiet while he ate. He had just finished his last morsel of pounded yam before he realised that she hadn’t told him how her day went. He frowned at her. She was supposed to be dancing and rejoicing. Eriri’s offspring was after all her niece, but she was frowning.

He cleared his throat.

She didn't respond.

He washed his hands and wiped them on his goat-skin kilt before tilting her chin up to face him.

"What is it?"

"My lord, the night has ears," She answered in a small voice.

"Speak to your husband," he commanded.

She fidgeted and exhaled deeply. "My lord, this is good news."

"But...?"

She laid her hands on his lap. "A mouse that removes the palm nut that turns out to be the bait of a trap should have known that palm nuts do not grow on the ground."

Ónu shook his head and kissed his teeth. "Thank you for the food."

Sensing his annoyance, she gathered the food bowls and quickly left for her food hut.

Ónu sighed reprimanding himself, his weemate's warnings had never failed him. He pondered, remembering the King's countenance towards the end of the meeting. *Four warriors! I was concerned about that. The King's willingness may indeed be a trap. I must leave at once!* Quickly, Ónu summoned his weemate.

"Bring me my satchel."

He carried in his satchel gifts and a small a large flint in case the path his de'nnâ had once shown him was now overgrown, there had been a drought for so long the leaves had fallen off most of the trees not to talk of tall grasses. Following that path, he'll

arrive at Isekó in a quarter-of-a-moon. He had to make sure to go unseen, so instead of lighting a torch, he caught as many fireflies as he could and put them in the gourd-lantern his offspring invented. Whatever his offspring had put inside, it made them stay. He felt a little guilty using the gourd-lantern - he didn't want a yellow-bellied offspring, but the devices he made always worked. He only began to appreciate it when people came to trade for it making his second weemate a wealthy weefolk.

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