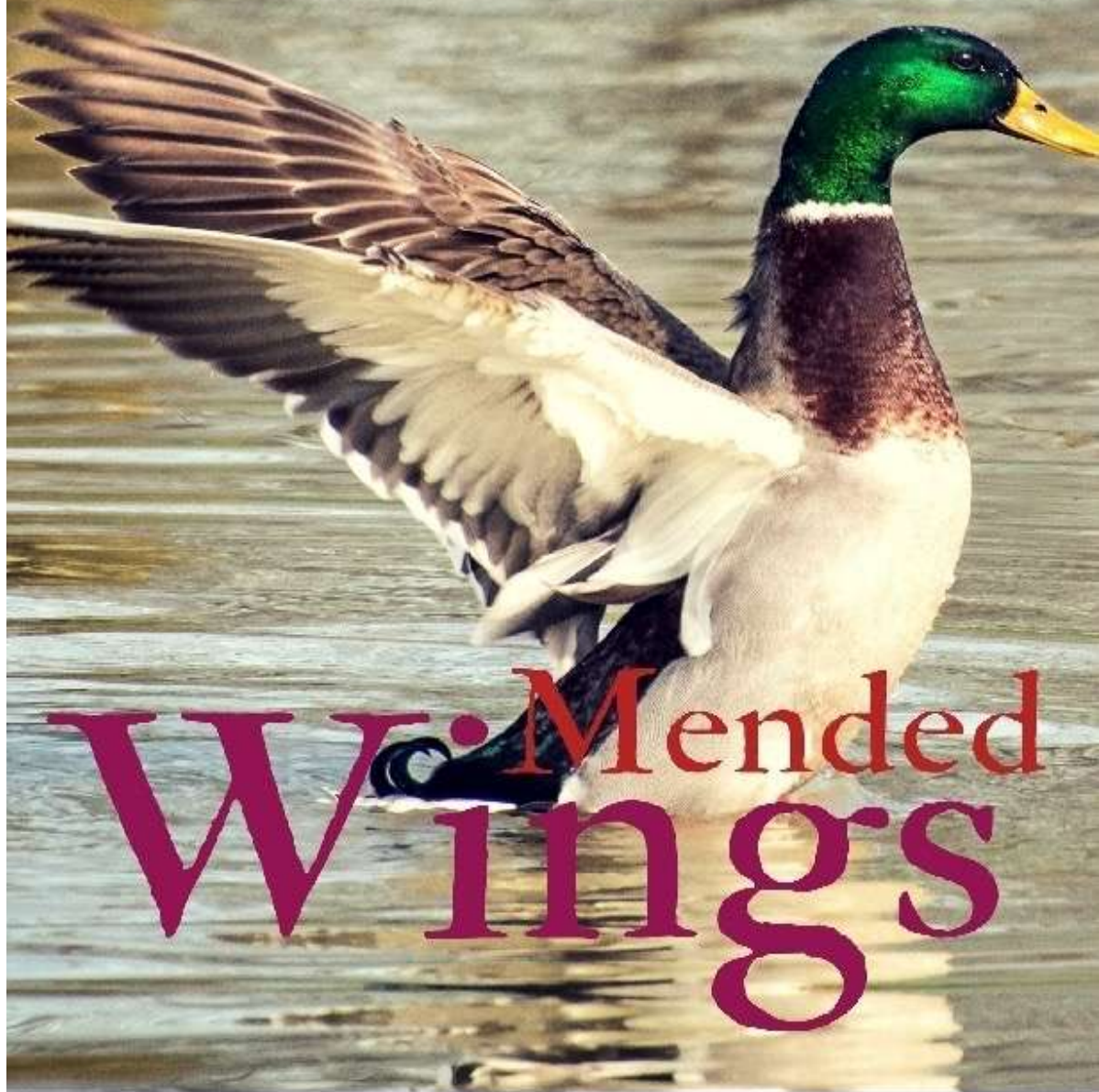


An inspiring tale of consequence



Winged Mended Wings

Elizabeth Kazeem

**MENDED
WINGS**

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DEDICATION

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

Chapter 1

Ella Jacobs hurried into the almost-filled church, her eyes searching for an empty chair. An usher smiled at her and pointed her to another usher ahead, who directed her to a vacant seat. She walked briskly, her face down, feeling as though all eyes were on her despite the fact that majority of the eyes there were shut. She dropped her bag on the chair and shut her eyes in prayer.

A while after, Ella opened her eyes. On the pastor's order, she turned to her left to pray with her neighbour. She froze and stared at the figure facing her. The sound from the speakers around precipitously fainted. The voices of people became distant. And the intermittent shout of the pastor on the altar fell to the background. Her mind must be playing tricks on her, she thought.

She blinked. The figure was too good to be real. A tall man, about 6' 2", with thin musculature that betrayed his masculinity but graced his appearance, and a well cut out face that displayed the grace with which God creates. He looked nothing less than a model on a fashion magazine. His clean cut disclosed a skilled barber did it recently. His heart-shape face, brown eyes with thick eyebrows hanging protectively over them like knights, and nose like a small almond fruit, were like never she had seen. He had a one-sided dimple that branded his smile in a stylish way. Judging by his set of teeth, he could be taken for a dentist or an ambassador for a brand of toothpaste. They were like sparkling

gems, and his lips were liberal to expose them at every smile. The branded navy blue suit he was wearing, which had a tag showing the logo of the church on its lapel, exaggerated his spotlessly fair complexion. Ella's eyelids fluttered. To have gotten that special tag, he couldn't be but a ranked member of the church. But what was he doing amidst the congregation? He should have sat on the altar.

Her eyes fell on his trousers. He must have aggressively ironed it for traveller's creases to be so evident on it, she thought. His shoes were simple, but not like his brothers'. Even her dad, who was considered the richest in her family, in all his glory couldn't have afforded the shoes. Her stomach rumbled. What time didn't permit her to do was drool.

"Hello, did you get the prayer point?" he said, smiling.

She shivered. His voice nailed it. It must have been an angel's in disguise. How could a man have such a pleasant voice? "U-uh yes, I did," she said.

The environment, which had been somewhat distant few minutes ago, came alive again and she realized she had been lost in admiration of her neighbour, which the pastor had instructed her to hold and pray with. She held his hands, closed her eyes, and opened her mouth but words stuck to her throat.

His hands were warm, suddenly making her realize hers were cold. She forced her mind off him but all she could do was hit her lips against each other continuously and nod her head. Her mind was too choked to know what to pray for.

"In Jesus mighty name we have prayed," the pastor said from the altar.

“Amen,” the congregation chorused. She dropped his hands reluctantly and took her seat. How had she not noticed him? Perhaps because she had been late for church and prayer had started before she rushed into the church, hurriedly looking for a place to sit. She had never seen him before. Was he a first-timer? He couldn’t have been, with that tag on his lapel. There was definitely more to it. She kept pondering on her new fascination until sound of applause interrupted her thoughts and she unanimously joined the congregation in clapping.

“Glory to God, glory to God. Our God is good!” a man on the altar said, smiling.

“All the time,” the congregation chorused.

“It’s been a wonderful time in God’s presence. I will like to invite our brother. He’s a lover of God, a worshipper, a teacher of the word, and he’s a vibrant youth. Let’s clap for the Lord as I call on Brother Joel Mason for his ministration,” he said and dropped the microphone as sound of applause filled the building. Ella’s jaw dropped as the man who was seated beside her rose up and walked to the altar. She fixed her gaze on him as he left. She was right. She knew there was something about him she couldn’t lay her hands on. But why didn’t he sit on the altar? How could a pastor be that handsome? She just couldn’t understand.

His voice came through the microphone, returning her attention to church. “Glory to God, who was, is, and is to come. Thank you everyone. I’m humbled to be in your midst, and it’s a privilege to stand before you people of God..”

Her mind travelled. His voice was so heavenly. And the way he seasoned each sentence with smiles gave her goose bumps. His

composure, cadence, and fluidity of words were like she had never seen or heard. Where was he from? He definitely was not a member of her parish. Probably he had joined the parish when she travelled. That couldn't be it. She was away for only one week. He had to be a member of another parish. She kept wondering until he started to sing.

Her lips parted as her jaw dropped. She couldn't believe her ears. But she knew if singing were the criterion by which God chose favourites, the man's seat would have already been secured in heaven next to God. None of the choristers in the church had ever sung like him, or so she thought. There was something special about the way he sang. The voice, passion, control, organization, gestures... Ella was lost, lost in the world of admiration. Or was fantasy a better word?

By the time the fourth worship song was ending, many people were on their knees, some were crying, and some were rolling on the ground.

Ella began to cry and wave her hands although she wouldn't know if it was because she was connected to God, deeply touched by the worship songs or...

The worship session finally ended, he prayed and taught the word. Service went so fast thereafter, before she knew it, benediction was said and people dispersed. She rose up and walked to the ushers' room where ushers always had a meeting after the church service. She was part of them and the fact that she didn't officiate that day didn't exempt her from the meeting. She joined them and to her pleasure, the meeting was brief.

"You're welcome back, Ella," Debbie said as she walked Ella outside the ushers' room.

“I’m glad to be back,” Ella said. They walked through the corridor that led to the porch of the church, talking. As soon as they walked into the porch, Ella’s eyes caught a glimpse of the man that had stolen her attention throughout the service. He was standing close to the church entrance attending to people in turns. Some he shook their hands and smiled, while some he spoke quietly but briefly with.

She wished she could join the few people around him and have a chat with him but she thought she shouldn’t. What would she say when she got there? Would it not be evident she was attracted to him? Or was crushing on him the right expression?

“Ella, let’s also say hello to Pastor Joel. I was touched by every bit of his message,” Debbie, who was also looking in Joel’s direction, said.

“That message was extraordinary. I was so connected. But is it really necessary we go there to see him?”

“It’s no big deal,” Debbie said and threw her hands up in the air.

As though that was the nudge Ella was awaiting, she nodded.

“Alright. After all, we won’t be the first set of people to say hello to him,” she said.

“Exactly, that’s my point?” Debbie said. They walked towards him.

“Hello,” Joel said to Ella and Debbie after attending to those who had come before them.

“Hi, sir,” they chorused. “God bless you, sir. Your message is a blessing to me,” Debbie said.

“God be praised. He gives the will and the enablement.” He grinned, innocently sending chills down Ella’s spine.

“Will you be attending our parish every Sunday from now on?”

Debbie said, fiddling with her fingers.

“Hmm. I can’t be too sure. But it’s a possibility,” Joel said.

Debbie scrunched her nose. “Uh uh. Please make it real. Not just a possibility.”

He smiled. “Alright, God will have His way. By the way, I guess you already know I’m Joel Mason. Can I know your names?”

She placed her hand against her chest. “I’m Deborah Adebayo. People call me Debbie,” she said and faced Ella with obvious expectation.

Ella’s throat seemed parched, and it was as if her tongue had been fastened to the floor of her mouth. She was more comfortable with enjoying their conversation than having to speak. And now that she was expected to speak, she was not ready. She smiled sheepishly, clearing her throat.

“She’s Ella Jacobs, assistant head usher and youth sisters’ coordinator,” Debbie said, rescuing her friend.

“Hmm, nice. That reminds me, you sat next to me in church right?”

Debbie glanced at Ella. Ella nodded and smiled.

“I guess it was your coming late that excused you from officiating,” Joel said with an arched eyebrow.

Ella smiled, her mouth shut. When she realized they were looking at her expectantly for an answer, she knew she had to talk. “U-uh. Yes. I travelled. I just came in this morning and I didn’t want to miss church. That was why I came in at that time.”

“That’s commendable. We must always thirst to be in God’s presence. God bless you both, have a wonderful week.”

“Amen, thank you, sir,” Ella and Debbie chorused.

“You never told me you sat with him in church,” Debbie said, as soon as Joel was out of earshot.

“Well, there’s no big deal in that. I didn’t even notice him until later.”

“Alright. I understand. I was just wondering why you didn’t want to talk while we were with him. Do you dislike him or something?”

“Debbie, why would you think that? He has done me no wrong. Why would I hate him? Besides, we’re expected, as children of God, to love everyone. I’m just tired, the stress of the journey and all.”

“Okay. The Lord is your strength.”

“Amen. Come with me, let me drop you home.”

“Don’t worry, I’ll be fine. You should rather go straight home and get some rest.”

“You didn’t ask me. I volunteered.”

Debbie shrugged. “I know but...”

Ella shook her head. “Don’t but me. I insist. I’m dropping you off,” she interrupted.

“Alright, your highness. Thank you,” Debbie said and they both laughed. They chattered on as they walked to Ella’s car.

Chapter 2

It was a bright Sunday afternoon. The sun shone effortlessly, sending her rays through every opening and crevice possible.

Evelyn Olawoye walked into the living room, a glass of water in her hand. “So, how was church service on your side?” she said and sat in the nearest sofa.

“Hmm. ’Twas fine. I got in just before word ministrations. But it was edifying,” Ella said and lifted the last spoon of rice in her plate to her mouth.

“That’s good. What was the sermon all about?”

“Well, it was,” she swallowed “it was about Christian growth.”

“Nice. So, is there any point to share?”

“The message was heavy. It was a new pastor that preached. You needed to see how the Spirit moved.”

“You now have a new pastor? What about the other ones?”

“They are still with the church. I was just seeing the guy for the first time. The funny thing is that I don’t think he has been ordained a pastor yet, ’cause he was introduced as a brother. But He was so amazing. You should have worshipped in my church today. The sermon was number one of its kind. And not just the word, he’s so cute. He looked like a fashion model. He was charming. He was well dressed. Nothing about him was out of place. Even his shoelace was knotted in a grand style. His smiles alone could cheer up a young widow...”

“Ella! What is happening here? I smell a rat. How did you get all the fine details about him? Was he the one you studied in church or...”

“Auntie, what are you saying now? It’s not what you think. I was only telling you the person who preached today was really all in one. When he made the altar call, you can’t believe it, even ministers and workers went out to rededicate their lives to God. That was how much effect his words had on people. I saw it all. I didn’t close my eyes. You know I’m an usher and ushers don’t close eyes often, especially not during altar calls. You needed to see how people were trooping out to surrender their lives to Jesus. All those you’d never have thought had any secret sin.”

“Really?”

“Yes. And when he started praying in tongues, the auditorium caught fire. Seriously, I can’t get him out of my mind. He’s the type of man I pray day and night to marry. A man who carries anointing. A man who can stand the devil.”

“I hope you’re not daydreaming about this man already.”

“Is it bad to daydream? The Bible in 1 Corinthians 12:31 says ‘But earnestly desire the best gifts. And yet I show you a more excellent way.’ That’s what I’m doing.”

“Ella, when did you join the group of people who quote the scriptures out of context? That’s not what The Bible is saying. You’d better quickly watch it and take correction before you...”

“Before I what, auntie? I’m just appreciating a man of God and celebrating God in him. That should not be a bad thing to do.”

“Ella. I’ve never seen you like this. Are you okay?”

“I’m okay. You’re just not trying to understand my perspective. Wait, I have a question. Is it a sin for a Christian sister to have a crush on a Christian brother?”

“Hear yourself, assistant head usher. Crush. What a word from the pit of hell. Don’t you know crush means infatuation, sexual attraction towards an opposite sex?”

“That’s not what I’m talking about. It’s a common word that is used when someone likes another person so much.”

“So much that you daydream, so much that you can’t get him out of your head, so much that he becomes the lord of your heart and mind. Ella, crush or crushing is not godly. I’m not saying it is a sin for a sister to admire a brother. But when you start allowing the admiration to degenerate into idolatry or lust, it becomes a sin. Before you know it, you’ll start imagining yourself in his arms, by his side, or even in his bed. Remember the word of our Lord Jesus in Matthew 5:28 which says ‘But I say to you that whoever looks at a woman to lust for her has already committed adultery with her in his heart.’ He is telling us that adultery starts from the heart. It’s not until you sleep with a person have you committed the sin. One could commit it by having immoral thoughts. Don’t let any flash of light blind your eyes.”

“God forbid. I’m a child of light. Don’t say negative things to me, please. I was only asking a question. Why will I crush on him? I’ll never. My heart is sanctified.”

“Amen.”

Ella rose to her feet and carried the tray in which she had eaten.

“Uh, wait. Sit down.”

“Auntie, I’m tired, I want to get a good rest. You know I’m resuming work tomorrow.”

“I won’t take much of your time, just a few minutes.”

Ella sat reluctantly, her brows furrowed. “I’m all ears.”

“How’s Kunle? I’ve not seen him around of recent.”

“Well, he knew I travelled. Why would he come around?”

“It’s been three weeks if not more that I’ve seen him. When did you travel? Was it not just a week ago you left this house?”

“Auntie, I talk to him as frequently as necessary. That is what is important. He’s busy with other things.”

“Are you sure he’s busy or displeased with you for a cause? Are you guys on good terms?”

“We are not quarrelling. He’s my fiancé, I should know better.”

“Alright then, but I won’t stop telling you the right thing. This your cold attitude towards your relationship is not so good. You treat him as though he’s a regular co-passenger on a public bus.”

“How should I treat him? Should I be hugging him about? I’m not married to him yet. So, how could you say this is cold attitude? That’s what is expected. I’m a model to hundreds of sisters. How could I not take caution in all I do?”

“I’m not saying you should not be spiritual or a model to millions. Weren’t you the same person who saw crush as a good thing a while ago? That’s by the way, though. I’m just saying you should be more kind to him. Of course, you should keep your courtship holy, but that doesn’t mean you can’t see him in open places and discuss often to keep you both focused on your goals.”

“Often, like every day?”

“Not necessarily daily. But once in one or two weeks is not bad. After all, you are in the same city.”

“Alright. I’ve heard all you’ve said. Thanks so much for your love and care.”

“Hmm. You’re welcome.”

Ella carried the tray and walked toward the kitchen.

Chapter 3

Let's all be on our feet as we take the benediction in unison," Joel said to round off the bible study program.

The congregants rose up and chorused the benediction.

Joel walked away from the pulpit to his seat. He went on his knees, closed his eyes, and began to mutter words, nodding intermittently, his hands and fingers curled into fists. It took him about ten minutes to pray before he stood to his feet. He glanced around. There were only a few people still hanging around. His eyes drifted through the large auditorium and settled on a lady at the altar. She was on her knees with hands clasped and face lifted up, praying in tongues. Nothing magnetized him as the tears that flowed freely from her closed eyes, meandering down her cheeks. He stared. Her face was not strange. He had seen the face regularly for four Sundays now and during weekday programs. What could be the problem? Why was she crying? He sat down and crossed his legs. He had to speak to her. He would wait until she finished praying, he determined.

Seconds rolled into minutes. He checked his wristwatch; it was 5:30 p.m. He had waited for her, twenty minutes. He had many things to do, but her tears begged him to wait, or so he thought. As though she knew what he was thinking, she opened her eyes, wiped her face, adjusted her hair, and rose to her feet.

He stared at her on impulse. She was stocky, statuesque and fair, with dense lustrous black hair providing her neck a shade. She turned and their eyes met. His eyes locked hers.

He walked toward her. "Sister..."

"Ella," she completed.

"Yeah. How're you doing?"

"I'm fine."

"Are you sure? I saw you pouring out yourself to God."

"U-uh." She stole a smile. "Well, that is normal. He's our father and He told us to cast our care on Him for He cares for us."

"You're right. God is faithful to every of His word. I'm sure He'll meet you at the point of your needs."

"Yes, He will."

"Be assured. Everything is going to be alright."

"Thanks so much for the encouragement. By the way, I loved today's Bible study. It was revealing."

"That was the Lord's doing. His word is new and inspiring every moment."

They went towards the door. "You're so lucky to have such gift of the Holy Spirit," she said with a smile.

"He's the potter. I'm nothing but clay in His hands."

"More of God's grace upon you."

"Amen, thanks. So, where are you going?"

"Home. It is not too far from church."

"Oh, really! No wonder you're always punctual to programs."

Was he serious? Had he been noticing her? It had to be but a joke. That couldn't be true. The church was a mega one with many hundreds of people, although, there were always few people in attendance of weekday programs. But that wasn't enough reason for him to have noticed. Or did he have eyes for her already? She tittered. Her thoughts were ticklish.

"I have no reason to be late. I honour God in all. That's what we're called to do," she said.

"Beautiful. Well spoken."

"So, which parish were you attending before?"

"I attended Kingdom Alive Parish in the United Kingdom."

"That's quite funny. Kingdom Alive Parish in the United Kingdom." She smiled. "What then are you doing in Nigeria?"

He smiled. "Are you stylishly asking me about myself?"

"Uh, not really. But can I ask?"

"Of course, you can, but that will be after you've told me about yourself first."

"There's nothing much about me."

"Okay, tell me the little," he drew a quote in the air, "about yourself."

"Alright. I'm Daniella Jacobs, the last child of three, a Christian, and a graduate of Business administration. I work with a small company. I live with my aunt and her family." She searched his eyes.

"Go ahead, I can hear you."

"Well, I think that's all."

“That can’t be all, but I’ll take that for a start. Now to your question, I’m in Nigeria as led by the Lord. I’m Joel Mason, the second son of my parents who are based in Nigeria here.”

“Nice. Tell me more.”

“Maybe we should both take that for the day. We’ll get to know more as time goes on.”

“Alright. Thank you.”

“Do you mind if I drop you at home?”

“Yes, thanks. I brought my car.”

“Oh, forgive me. Where is it parked?”

She pointed to an old blue Toyota Camry. “That’s it over there.”

“What a coincidence! That’s mine beside it on the other side.”

Ella looked at the vehicle beside hers. It was a new black jeep.

“Are you serious?” She smiled. “How could this be?” she muttered.

They chattered on as he walked her to her car. He watched her drive carefully out of the parking lot. He waved at her, boarded his vehicle, and drove off.

Chapter 4

Ella stood from the sofa as the knock on the door became louder. Not now, when she was enjoying her time alone watching her favourite program, would she expect anyone to intrude. Couldn't people stay in their own homes on weekends? she thought.

"Who is it?" she said with a frown. It had better not be Mama Dee, her aunt's friend, who frequented the house as though hers were flooded, or she would get a bit of her...

"It's me, Kunle," the man at the door said, interrupting her thought.

"Uh." She gave a soft sigh and rolled her eyes. "I'm on my way." She opened the door and stood behind it, glowering.

Kunle Adedoyin entered, a broad smile livening his oblong face. "Hello, Princess."

"Good afternoon. You didn't tell me you'll be here," she said, holding the door open as though expecting him to change his mind and leave.

"I'm sorry about that, dear. I was in the neighbourhood and I decided to check on you. Besides, it's been a while we spent time together."

"But you could have informed me still. I could be out of the house, you know."

"Well, thank God you're in."

She shut the door and walked to the living room. “That doesn’t mean you’re welcome,” she muttered.

“You said what?”

“Never mind. Please have your seat.” She pointed her hand to the chair opposite hers.

“Thank you.” He sat in the chair. “How’re you?”

“I’m fine.”

“What’s happening? It’s been a while. You seldom pick my calls, and when you do, you’re always eager to end the call. What have I done wrong?”

She shot him a piercing stare. Her eyes captured it all—the ill-ironed grey suit he wore with a pair of black shoes thirsting for polish, the boil on his eyelid, which exaggerated the size of his eye, and the scar on his forehead like lightening on a cold night. Irritation welled up her throat. “I’ve been very busy at work. The little time I have off work, I give to church and my bed. You know how hectic my work is, don’t you?”

“I know. It’s just that I feel something is wrong. We haven’t been communicating as we used to.”

“I said nothing is wrong. The time is just not enough.”

“Hmm. Okay.” He nodded. “I’ve been thinking and praying. I think it’s high time we solemnized our relationship before God and men. It’s been over a year we started courting. We aren’t getting any younger. And I strongly believe God wants us to take the bold step and marry. When we’re together, we’ll be able to manage our time better.” He looked at Ella, who was staring blankly into space. “Treasure, you’re

the beauty with which God has complemented me. You're the special gift of God to me. And I intend to treasure you all my days and to love you as Christ loved the church and gave Himself for her. Let's get married."

All his statements sounded like woe story in her ears. "Thank you. I understand your point but I'm not ready to take that step. I've not heard God concerning that."

"Treasure! But you heard God before the courtship. He hasn't changed his mind about us."

"You're not God to determine that. It's true that He gave a go-ahead before we started seeing each other, but that was for courtship."

"He has told me you're the right person for my life. I've prayed about marriage and I have peace in my heart. I believe it's time."

"I need to pray about it also. At least, I'm also a party in this relationship. If God told you it's time, He'll tell me too."

"Alright. I don't mean to pressurize you. Take time and pray about it. When should I be expecting a response?"

"I don't know. I'll let you know when I hear anything. Until then, please give me some space. I don't want anything clouding my vision."

"Space as in?"

"As in you should stop calling and reaching me incessantly until I receive an answer from heaven. I don't want to hear from my thoughts or feelings."

"But it's not as if we're just starting a relationship, why should it be that serious? We were prayed into this courtship in the first place, so why do you need to..."

“To pray?” she interrupted and shook her head. “Courtship is not marriage. Marriage is a covenant. If I say I want to confirm what I heard before, should it be a crime?”

“No. You’re getting me wrong. I’m just saying we don’t need to cut communication just because you want to pray about an issue. I don’t even know how many days that will take.”

“As many months as I need, I’ll take. And I expect you to display understanding by not calling or tailing me around.”

He sighed. He knew something wasn’t right. Not that Ella had been excited about him from the start, but she had been getting along very well after a few months of cold treatment. His thought had always been that she’d change for better as time went by and she had, until lately that the tide turned against him. He fell on his knees and clasped his hands.

“Treasure, please, forgive me if I’ve wronged you in any way. I’ll desist from doing anything that will annoy you. Just forgive me this one time.” His eyes searched hers.

“Please sit. You’ve done nothing wrong. I only need some time to pray and put my thoughts together. Marriage is a journey of a lifetime, no break, no divorce. I must have a strong word from God before entering.”

He rose up reluctantly. “I love you very much, Ella. I want you to keep that in mind. Go and pray about it. I’m confident you’ll get a go ahead.”

“Well, let’s hope so.”

“So, what’s on your mind?”

“Nothing, I just need to rest. I’ve been up since very early this morning.”

“Please try to rest more. May God continue to...”

The door handle turned and the creaking sound interrupted him. Mrs Evelyn Olawoye entered the house, her husband, and her two children following closely behind.

“Hello,” Evelyn said, smiling, as she walked into the living room.

“Good afternoon, ma. You’re welcome, sir,” Kunle said, having risen to his feet.

“You’re welcome. Tim, come and hug me,” Ella said and smiled. Tim, the younger of her aunt’s children rushed toward her. He was her favourite. She carried him in her arms and kissed his forehead, tickling him thereafter.

“Kunle, I’m glad to see you. It’s been so long since you came here. I hope you’re fine.”

Kunle nodded. “Yes ma, I am. I...”

Ella shot him a pregnant glance. And he immediately understood what she meant.

“Uh, I’ve been busy,” he said.

“I see,” Evelyn said.

“I hope you’ve entertained your guest,” Mr Olawoye said, as he left for his room.

Ella smiled. “He was just leaving before you came in. It’s been a while he came.”

“Really. Thank God, we arrived on time. I’d have missed you. Thanks for visiting. I appreciate and do want to see you more often,” Evelyn said.

“Alright, I’ll try my best. Thanks for your hospitality.”

Ella sat Tim on the chair and faced Kunle. “Let me walk you to the door.”

“Okay, thanks.”

She walked him to the door, said her goodbye, and shut the door.

Chapter 5

Oceania Eatery was posh. It was the type that warded off the poor by its mere appearance. The reception had people seated in groups of two and more, here and there. And many came in, placed orders, got their requests, paid, and left. Joel and Ella sat on the left side facing each other.

Joel dabbed his lips with a serviette and smiled. “Look at you. Do you think the widow wasn’t wise to have obeyed Elijah and made him a meal from her last? She trusted in divinity. An average person of today asks how offering is spent. Definitely, one could have asked Elijah why he must be the first one to eat,” he said.

“You’re right. Another person could have insisted on eating the quantity left and dying thereafter or could have told the prophet to multiply the flour before she made his meal. People believe more in what they see now, even the so-called Christians,” Ella said.

“You can’t be less right. What a paradigm shift.”

Ella drank from her cup. “We’ve been talking scripture since we came and I’ve enjoyed every bit of it. I never could have thought it was possible to do Bible study in a place like this. Thanks for sharing your time with me. A beautiful time, it has been. Thank you.”

“You made it beautiful, dear. Something like this is common in the UK. We used to go on a date like this often, even with total strangers,

and teach the word over meals. Glory to God. Many souls have been won.”

“Hallelujah. You’re doing well, sir. I can’t pray less of more grace upon you.” She smiled and supported her chin with her hands, her elbow resting on the table. “What do you do when you’re not teaching the word or ministering in songs? Do you have something else in Nigeria?”

He smiled and glanced at the half-eaten pie on his plate. “I’ve told you earlier that my parents are based in Nigeria. They have a business and my siblings and I are on the payroll. The church supports with a definite stipend monthly. And I also have a business here in Lagos, which someone is managing for me. When I’m not doing the kingdom work, I dash into my business and sometimes I check on the family business. Before I travelled to the UK, I was fully involved in my parents’ business, although I served God as well. But since I came back, I’ve been busy, speaking engagement here and there, ministrations unending. But it’s good. I’m doing all for a bedazzled crown in heaven.” He burst into laughter and she joined.

“I’m happy for you. I’m sure you’d be in God’s gold list, if there were something like that.”

He smiled. “Meaning?”

“Never mind.”

“Okay.”

“But you could have stayed in the UK. Why come home?”

“I need to settle, get married and raise kids, and so on. I prayed about it and I heard Nigeria. That was when I made up my mind to

return to Nigeria. I discussed my plan with the senior pastor. And my church in the United Kingdom gave me a transfer to the parish here.”

“Hmm. That’s good. So, what are you doing about your plan, which brought you here?”

“I’ve been praying about it but I’m yet to get a name.”

Ella smiled. Her eyes betrayed her and disclosed her joy about his confession. “Well, praying is important, especially for someone like you. You need a woman who is like-minded and spiritually sound, who will support your ministry in every way possible. Not the one who will become a future burden like many ladies we have around now.”

He laughed and searched her eyes. “You’re not a part of them, are you?”

“God forbid. That’s why I’ve also been taking my time to pray for the right partner. I don’t want any man bringing me down either. I want someone who will charge me, who will be the pastor, priest, prophet, and head of my home. A man we can grow together. The Bible says iron sharpens iron. You know, someone souled out to Christ that I will submit to and love for the rest of my days.”

He watched her with heightened interest as she spoke and gesticulated with her hands.

“That’s a good goal. But beautiful women like you have a flock of men swarming around them. If care is not taken, it might be...”

“That is why I’m not letting down my guard. Holiness is priority. I won’t give in to any man until he’s endorsed by the heavens. Why do you think I’m not already married?” she interrupted.

“I’ve not thought about it actually. But I think I have an idea from all you’ve said. You’re waiting for the right man.”

“Exactly.”

“You don’t look that old to me, anyway, although physical appearance could be deceptive.”

She smiled. “I’m not old. I was twenty-seven on the 10th of July.”

“Really. You look even younger than that. Your beauty is fresh and unique.”

“Thank you,” she said and giggled.

“You’re welcome.” He glanced at his wristwatch. “Oh! I have to go now. I have a meeting with the choir this evening.”

“Alright. Thanks for everything.”

“All thanks to God. Would you allow me drop you home since you didn’t bring your car?”

She laughed. “Of course. A beggar has no choice.”

“You’re not a beggar, my dear. You’re a god with small g. That’s how The Bible describes you. Never talk less of yourself.”

“Hmm. Thank you.” She smiled. Every of his word was pleasant in her ears. How could he speak so well? She discarded her thought, rose up, and followed him to his car.

Chapter 6

Joel held Ella's hand as they walked down Crescent Street. The street was platted in gold. Flowers and ornamental plants adorned the sides of the road. She'd never walked in such a street. Although the sun had set, the arrayed streetlights made it difficult to believe what the time was. Persistent fireworks excited the sky. The sight was enchanting. Or was entrancing the perfect word?

Her dress was beautiful, like none she had worn before. Jewellery adorned her hair, ears, and neck. Her steps were punctuated with grace as she walked hand in hand with Joel, her husband, into the church. The church was overfilled. Everyone rose up to welcome Joel and Ella, and sound of applause rent the air.

She couldn't hide her euphoria. They walked toward the altar and a man handed them microphones to teach the church. Just as they collected the microphones, Kunle emerged from the congregation and stopped them. Despite the cheering from the congregants, his voice was distinct.

"Ella, please come with me, there is a large gaping pit on the altar. There is no way you'll mount the altar and not fall into the pit. Come with me. But you must leave him. I can't take you both. Give me your hands, let's go," Kunle said.

"Go where? You liar," Ella said. She looked intently at the altar. It looked stronger than ever, adorned with precious stones. "Where is the

pit? Are you saying the altar of God could harbour a pit? You would be disappointed if you think you could stop me from feeding my flock. Look at them,” she spread her hand toward the thousands of congregants cheering them on, “they’re waiting for my husband and me.”

“They’re not your flock, they are the Lord’s. He’ll feed them.”

She sniggered. “You think you can deceive me from reaching where God has designed for me? You lie. Psalms 16:6 says ‘The lines have fallen to me in pleasant places; Yes, I have a good inheritance.’ Leave me alone.”

“This isn’t a pleasant place but hell. And this man isn’t your husband; I am.”

“Oh, lying liar.” She ostentatiously waved her left hand, a golden ring, with a diamond gem affixed, glinting on her ring finger. “You see, he’s mine.”

“There’s someone else the Lord has prepared for Joel, the one whom the Lord will use to break the yoke on his neck. Your place is by my side, Ella.”

“What yoke?” She glanced at Joel’s neck and saw a weighty golden chain padlocked at the joint. “You call this a yoke? This is nothing but a fanciful jewellery. Don’t badmouth it just because you can’t afford one.”

“May the eyes of your understanding be opened. Listen to me and escape torment.”

She stared at him with contempt, a wretched mendicant was better off. “You, filth. Get away from me!”

“Ella, the ways of God are higher than our ways. Please give me a chance to show you how much God loves you.”

“How much God loves me to give me you filth? Leave me alone,” she screamed.

She pulled Joel’s hand and headed for the altar. Suddenly, she saw it. The pit was real, emitting a great force to pull her in.

Ella jumped out of sleep. Beads of sweat formed on her forehead. It was a dream. A nightmare. The devil must be trying to fool her, she thought. She knelt down and began to pray, casting, binding and rebuking the devil and his agents.

She wiped her face after a long prayer session and sat at the edge of the bed. Kunle was definitely up to something. Did he bring up the discussion of marriage in order to take her from the singles and prevent her from marrying the right man for her? But there was a pit there indeed, she thought.

“How could a pit be on the altar? It’s a lie of the devil. Marrying Kunle is that pit you saw. Won’t you feed your flock? Even Jesus told Peter in the scripture to feed His flock. Can’t you withstand persecution for the sake of the cross?” a voice in her head said.

“No. That is not the will of God for you. The calling of God differs from man to man. Remember, Uriah died despite having a good intention. He wanted to save the ark from falling but he was not a Levite. It was not his calling. Saul offered sacrifice in Samuel’s place and lost his kingdom. God owns the church and He won’t leave her untended. The glamour isn’t real. Nothing in this world can offer you such glamour. Kunle is your man,” another voice dropped in her mind.

“That’s a lie of the devil. Remember that the devil can also quote the scripture. You can’t leave Joel. He has the anointing. He’s blessed and he has all you desire in a man. You’ll be the Aaron for his Moses. And you’ll be celebrated. Why must you accept something of no value in the name of humility or God’s will? Don’t be fooled. Do you think it was merely coincidental that he sat beside you on his first day in church or that he noticed you out of over a thousand women in the church? Are there no better women there than you are? It wasn’t a coincidence that you saw him again immediately after you cried out your heart to God to direct you. Joel is the man,” the first voice added.

“That is not true. Be aware that The Bible in Ephesians 6:11 says ‘Put on the whole armor of God that you may be able to stand against the wiles of the devil.’ Ella, do not be ignorant of the devices of the devil. You can fast for hundred days and still come across a device of the devil. The onus lies on you to make decision whether to win over or lose. Remember, a person might be excellent and yet be bad for you. God is the best matchmaker. That Joel has a calling doesn’t make him yours. God will show you where to serve Him always. A little with God is mighty. Do not be deceived,” the second voice said.

“Ella, an assistant head of department in the church and a sisters’ coordinator, marrying an ordinary member of another church. Where will you put your oil? How will you explain to people? Who will rekindle you when you feel weak? Do you think Kunle who can’t pray for two hours can do you any good? Be wise. Iron sharpens iron.”

“Kunle is a believer. A genuine child of God, who is operating in God’s will. He genuinely loves you. Don’t forget you got a go-ahead before you started. Has God told you otherwise?”

“Believer, my foot. Didn’t he try to kiss you one day. If not for your resolution, what would have happened? Joel is the fire. He’s holy. He’s the one you’ll never regret marrying.”

Ella sighed and lowered her head unto her palms. Her mind was on fire. She stood up and walked into the bathroom. She had to get a cold bath and sleep. She’d leave her decision-making process until morning, she thought.

Chapter 7

Kunle Adedoyin sat on one of the three black sofas in Mrs Olawoye's house, his forehead thrown into furrows. He puckered his dry lips, seizing the moment to ruminate on Mrs Olawoye's question, which was hanging in the air. He wasn't sure if explaining everything to her would worsen the situation. He didn't want anyone to see him as a person who would always allow a third party to mediate in his marriage in the future. But he knew keeping to himself wouldn't resolve the issue either. His problem was getting out of hand, and if he didn't take appropriate decision, he'd be back to square one.

Talking to Evelyn should not be a problem. After all, Ella had been living with her since she graduated from the university and was her intimate friend. Moreover, Evelyn had been aware of his relationship with Ella from the very beginning and had given as much support as needed. He hushed, thinking of what action to take.

"You have not answered my question. What is going on between you and Ella? Something is not right and it's obvious. Let me know if there's anything I can do," Evelyn said.

Kunle heaved a sigh and adjusted in his chair. "I don't understand what is going on. Ella has become a total stranger to me. She doesn't..." Words failed him, frustration written over his face.

"Hmm. I understand how you feel. Calm down and try to explain what's happening."

“It is true that she was indifferent toward our relationship in the beginning, but I felt she would change with time. Few months later, things got better and my joy knew no bound. I never knew it would be short-lived. I never expected the apathy to resurface and reach its peak.” He paused and swallowed. “When I noticed she was avoiding me and wanting out of the relationship, I took my time to wait on the Lord and pray. I came to Ella after receiving God’s consent and told her we should start planning to get married. She told me she would pray about it and demanded that I stay away till she gives me an answer.”

“How did you respond to that?”

“I did my best. For the first week, I stayed put. No communication of any sort. The following week I could not hold in. I would send text messages to her, asking about her welfare and telling her how much I loved her. She called me that weekend and said I was only prolonging the time she’d take. She said if I didn’t stop trying to communicate with her, she wouldn’t pray about it. She insisted she couldn’t communicate with God and me at the same time.”

“Are you kidding me?”

“No, I’m serious. I apologized and gave her three weeks to pray. It was the fourth week that I was forced to meet her at work. I asked what was going on and she said I should stop tailing her around, as she wasn’t a kid. I reminded her that it was the first time in almost two months we were seeing. After much complaint, she said the visions she had about me were bad and that each time she prayed about it she had a bad dream. I asked her if she asked the Lord for a word. She said she wasn’t

comfortable with the relationship and that she had a feeling I would prevent her from serving God.”

“Did you try to convince her otherwise at all?”

“Yes, but all my promises and pleas fell on deaf ears. She insisted that all the odds were against me and that she was in the relationship in the first place because she had heard God and not because she’d wanted to.”

Evelyn shook her head. “You mean Ella said all these?”

“Yes, she did. She told me she no longer felt any spiritual backup and couldn’t continue the relationship. Ever since then, she rarely picks my call and never replies my text. She even warned me not to visit this house or report anything to you. I’m just so…”

Evelyn exhaled. “Hmm. This is a big issue. The devil is at work here. We have to be sensitive. First, I apologize for everything she said to you. Please find a place in your heart to forgive her.”

“I have forgiven her. I just want peace.”

“Thank you. Second, we’ll both have to fast and pray about this situation.”

“That won’t be a problem. I want our relationship restored.”

“Alright. Please inform your pastor so he could pray along with us. I’ll also talk to her. Please be patient. Only the patient dog eats the fattest bone. Let’s commit her to God’s hands.”

“I’m worried that she could have received a wrong message from someone out there. The change was too abrupt.”

“It’s possible. Nowadays devil uses anybody, even the most respected pastor if care is not taken. That’s why every counsel or

prophecy received from anyone must be brought side by side with the word of God. If it's contrary, it must be discarded. So many wrong messages being preached today that have hardened the hearts of many. God will give us victory.”

“Amen. I sincerely appreciate you. God bless you.”

“Amen and you too.”

“I'll do as you've said. Although I've not stopped praying, I'll intensify it.”

“That's good. Thanks for honouring my invitation.”

“You're welcome. I appreciate your hospitality.”

“You deserve even more, my brother.”

He smiled. “I'm flattered.”

They talked about few other things and laughed before Kunle took his leave, his hope renewed that the situation would be resolved.

Chapter 8

Joel Mason opened the door to his apartment and held the door open for Ella. He closed the door behind them and walked into the living room. He pressed the switch boxes of the light bulbs and air conditioner.

“You’re welcome to Mason’s home. Please make yourself comfortable,” Joel said to Ella who was busy whirling her head around, scrutinizing the whole place.

The living room was big, with adjoining study and dining. Furniture, of perfect match for the painting of the room and the curtains, were arranged in style, adorning the room. A mini rug, lying underneath a glass table holding a small waterfall pot in the centre of the space enclosed by the sofas, took her attention. It was her favourite colour and it was beautiful. Everything in the room was in the right place, adding to the overall beauty, including a few pictures and paintings hung on the wall.

The house got a five-star rating from her. It was the kind of house she’d dreamed to live in.

“This is awesome,” she said after a brief silence, “and I must say, you’re meticulous. Your house backs up your looks, unlike many men who look good and always dress well but would need two weeks to clean their houses before a visitor could be allowed. This is commendable.”

“Thank you. I am flattered.”

“And you have a great taste. This place speaks volume about you.”

“Really.” He smiled and sat on the opposite sofa. I’m glad you like it.”

“I sure do.” She nodded. “Do you stay alone in this place?”

“Yes, until I’m married.”

“How do you get food and stuffs?”

“In the market of course.”

“I mean cooked food. You eat out most times, right?”

“No. I cook. Only on days when I’m either too tired or very late outside do I visit eateries.”

“Are you serious? What type of food can you cook?”

“Various types. Rice in many forms, beans, yam, stew, different types of soup, local food, name it.”

She burst out laughing. “I’m surprised. I wasn’t expecting a positive answer. Did you cook in the United Kingdom too?”

“Why not? I was born and bred here in the country. I travelled to the UK about seven years ago. Cooking is something I’m used to. I have three siblings and only the youngest is a female. We were raised to do everything possible.”

“That’s fantastic. How cool of your parents.”

He stole a smile. “What should I offer you?”

“Nothing.”

“I don’t have n-o-t-h-i-n-g in the house. I have food, juice, non-alcoholic wine and so on. Place an order.”

She laughed. “Look at you. You want to display your cooking prowess already. Anyway, I’ll be fine with a cup of juice. Thank you.”

“As your lordship pleases.” He left and returned with a tray containing a goblet and a container of juice. He placed it on a small table, moved the table to Ella, and served her a drink.

“Thank you, she said, smiling.

“The pleasure is all mine.” They continued the banter, hopping from one topic to another.

“There are so many broken homes here and there. Even pastors and church elders are caught in the web,” Joel said.

“That was why I said it’s better to marry at forty and have a lasting marriage than to marry at twenty-four and divorce at forty. Marriage is sacred and is expected to last for a lifetime. For me, divorce is not an option.”

“Hmm. What if it were an abusive marriage?”

“No matter the condition, divorce is not an option for me.”

“You’re right. Jesus tells us in The Bible that except for sexual immorality, no one is expected to divorce his or her partner. Even in cases of sexual immorality, one is supposed to forgive. If God could forgive our sins, we’re rid of reasons not to forgive others. But in cases of physical violence, both may separate temporarily, pray and review their relationship, then come together again.”

“I agree with you. That’s why it’s important to get it right. Once one gets it right, you can look forward to joy unending. Issues will definitely arise, even in a wonderful marriage, but both parties must work toward resolution rather than divorce. Praying before marriage cannot be overemphasized. Thanks to God, who is faithful, when we go to Him in prayers, He directs us.”

“He does. But we must be willing to obey.”

“Definitely.”

“Take me for instance, I have prayed and I know who I’m led to marry, but it’s left for me to obey.”

Ella’s eyes widened. “Really. Thank God for direction.”

“Hallelujah.”

“Have you informed the senior pastor and the lucky sister?”

“Well, not yet. I’m actually taking my time to observe the sister.”

“Until when do you intend to observe her? What if someone else speaks to her before you do?”

He laughed and shook his head.

“What’s funny? This is an era where ten brothers in the church claim to be led to marry one sister. So many people getting it all wrong.”

“I laughed because I’m confident she’s going to be my wife.”

“How could you be so sure?”

“That’s because I trust my conviction.”

“Wow. I like that statement. That’s good.”

“Sister Ella, have you been praying too?”

“I have never stopped praying.”

“Any conviction yet?”

She smiled and rubbed her eyes. “I believe things will fall into place soon,” she said, hoping her eyes would not disclose how much she wanted to tell him he was the one she wanted.

He sat straight in his chair and looked intently into her eyes.

“Sister Ella, what if I told you that you knew the sister who would be my wife?”

Her heart thumped against her ribcage. Someone she knew. Could it be someone in the choir or one of the female youth ministers? Why was it someone she knew and not herself? “Really,” she managed and forced a smile.

“Yes, you know her very well.”

Perhaps Sister Rachael or Sister Joy, she thought. After all, those two had always been flaunting themselves at him a lot. Two prostitutes in church clothing, she mused. Disgust welled up her throat. “Who could that be?” she said after a brief silence.

“Hmm.” He searched her eyes. “It’s you, Sister Ella. I want to spend the rest of my life with you, if you’ll permit me. I want to share all I have with you and grow with you. It’s you I have gotten heaven’s consent to marry.”

Ella froze in her seat. She couldn’t describe the feeling that overwhelmed her. Was it happiness, surprise or something else? She opened her mouth but words stuck to her throat. She swallowed and heaved a sigh, blinking and chewing on her lips.

“I understand how surprising this may be for you. I’m not expecting an immediate answer. Take all the time you need to pray about it. Let me know when you have an answer then we will know what step to take,” Joel said, disrupting the awkward silence.

Ella nodded. “I will,” she said. She would rather not say much before her emotion sneaked out of her voice. “I should be on my way home now. My aunt would be expecting me.”

“Oh. That’s true. I’ve taken much of your time. Thank you for coming.”

“It’s a pleasure.” She rose up and strolled to the door, Joel following closely behind.

“Let me drop you home. After all, I brought you here.”

“Don’t worry, I’ll be fine. I intend getting some stuffs along the way. Thanks for your hospitality.”

“You’re welcome, although, I wish I could do better. Please let me know when you get home. I’ll also call you.”

“Alright. Have a nice evening.”

“You too, thanks,” he said and stood at the gate, watching her as she walked away. He smiled, turned around, and walked in.

Chapter 9

Ella lay on her bed, her elbow resting on the widely opened Bible beside her. Thoughts filled her mind. It couldn't be a coincidence. She'd dreamt of Joel even before he had expressed his love to her. He had to be the one she was meant to marry. He was all encompassing, lacking nothing. But why was peace absent in her heart, the kind of peace that had washed over her heart when she had eventually agreed to begin a relationship with Kunle.

She sighed, the umpteenth time that morning. Her whole body and mind approved of Joel. After all, Joel was a believer who must have prayed intensively before deciding to extend a hand of love towards her. And he was one of those who heard God every second or so she thought. He couldn't have chosen wrong. That was the confirmation she was awaiting. If he could tell her that he'd received God's consent to marry her, then nothing else mattered. Moreover, she'd been having good dreams about him recently, unlike when she had just started praying about marrying Kunle, and she had negative visions about Joel. Nothing would deter her from making the right choice. But what if...

"Ella, open the door," Evelyn said, interrupting Ella's thoughts.

"I'm meditating. Can we talk later?" Ella answered, her nose scrunched.

"No. We can meditate together. It's important."

Ella knew nothing she said would make Evelyn turn away from her door. She reluctantly left her bed and opened the door. Evelyn walked in and sat on the bed.

“Come sit with me here. We need to talk,” Evelyn said as soon as she made herself comfortable on the mattress.

Ella stood behind the door, holding it open, a habitual action she put up to tell a visitor he or she wasn't welcome.

“Auntie, can't we talk later? I was in the middle of something?” Ella said.

“You'll go back to whatever that was when I leave.” Evelyn tapped the mattress. “Come have your seat.”

Ella exhaled deeply. She shut the door and sat close to the edge of the bed, facing her aunt. “I'm listening,” she said.

“How're you?”

“I'm fine,” she said, her countenance opposing her utterance.

“Thank God for that. Ella, it's not news that you're not getting any younger. What's going on?”

“Going on where? I don't understand you,” she said with raised eyebrows.

“Okay. Let me be direct. What has God told you concerning Kunle? You've been praying about him for a long time now. Time is running by, you people should start thinking of tying the nuptial knot. You need to let him know your stand.”

“Oh, that. Actually, I've not been serious about the prayer. But now that you've mentioned that time is running by. I'll get serious with it.”

“Ella. What has suddenly gone wrong with you? I just wanted to hear it from you. He told me that the last time he discussed with you about bringing his parents to meet yours, you refused and told him to give you more time. My question for you is this, what do you intend to do with more time? Answer me, Ella. More time for what? To build a house or what? And I heard you stopped communicating with him. You banned him from visiting this house and even blocked him on social media. That’s very wrong. How could you treat a man who genuinely loves you like that? That’s insensitivity of the highest order.”

“Auntie.”

“Don’t auntie me. Do you know how long you’ve been avoiding discussion each time I tried to talk to you about it?”

“You’re pressurizing me.”

“I’m not pressurizing you. You’re the one dragging what shouldn’t be dragged.”

Ella shook her head, anger trickling into her veins. “Auntie, you’re taking things personally. I was the one who said yes to courtship with him in the first place. And I still have the prerogative to say yes or no to marriage. It’s not a must-do thing. Seriously, we need to have a talk about something else of more importance and drop this issue.”

“Drop what issue? We’re not dropping this until it is resolved.”

“Flogging a dead dog is an exercise in futility. Forget Kunle. The earlier you do the better for both of us.” Ella turned her head to the side, staring at the plain wall.

Evelyn exhaled. She knew another approach was needed if she'd get Ella to talk. She stood up and went on her knees. "Ella, for God's sake, please tell me what is going on. What has this guy done to you?"

Ella jumped off the bed and pulled her aunt up. "Please, have your seat."

"I won't stand up until you tell me all that is in your mind."

"Okay, I promise, I will. Please sit."

Evelyn resumed her seat and stared expectantly at her niece.

"I can't marry Kunle. He's not the man meant for me. That's all."

"Ella. I'm your aunt. I can't see a pit and ask you to jump into it. I was aware when you fasted and prayed in this same house before you started courting this man. I knew how much confident and convinced you were. Are you saying God has changed His mind concerning Kunle?"

"Yes. And it isn't the first of its kind. God changed His mind about Eli and his generation in The Bible. He can change His mind about anyone."

"This is deception of the devil. Listen to me, no verse of The Bible stands in isolation. Picking a verse or an incidence in The Bible to justify one's decision without getting the true meaning by the help of the Holy Spirit will not save one when the consequences of such decisions arise. God is not an author of confusion. If indeed, God didn't want you to marry him, He would have told him too, and you wouldn't even need the unnecessary hostility you're displaying towards him. I'm not canvassing for Kunle. But the truth is that he will make a good husband for you. I've also been praying, and I thank God for the words of

assurance I received about Kunle. Besides, I'm beginning to get worried that it's getting late. I want you to settle in good time."

"If you're worried about me marrying late, you need not. I've met the man that will be my husband. He's a born again Christian. He's in the ministry. And he has told me to marry him, a decision he didn't take based on feelings."

Evelyn's eyes widened as she stared at Ella's mouth. "I knew it. I knew pebbles were in the beans. You couldn't suddenly refuse Kunle like that if there was none in the picture with you two. By the way, who is this man you're talking about?"

The thought of Joel parted Ella's lips in a deep smile. "His name is Joel Mason. He attends my church. He's young and vibrant. He's..."

"Wait, is that Joel the Pastor Mason you've told me tons about?"

"Yes." She grinned. "Your memory is good. He's the same person."

"The same person as the pastor you had a crush on."

She frowned. "Auntie. I didn't have a crush on him. I was only admiring him. And that was long time ago."

Evelyn laughed. "Now I get the full picture. I was wondering what was clouding your vision because I knew how sound your judgment used to be. I knew how much you received directions from God regarding issues. So, I was wondering what went wrong this time around."

"What are you saying? My visions are still as clear as ever. All the revelations I've had of recent assured me he is the one."

“Don’t be deceived. The devil is using your lust for that man to becloud your vision. You’ve wanted him from the very first day you saw him.”

“I don’t have lust in my heart,” Ella snapped.

“Lust is subtle my dear. Sometimes you never know when it creeps in. The Bible, in Proverbs 4:23, says, ‘Keep your heart with all diligence, for out of it spring the issues of life.’ Admiration isn’t a sin, but when care isn’t taken, it degenerates into lust.”

“I know. But this has gone beyond the issue of lust or no lust. Joel is the one I’m marrying.”

Evelyn shook her head. “Why do I have a bad feeling about this?”

“That’s because you’ve told yourself Kunle would be your in-law. Sorry to burst your bubbles, Kunle has no place in our family. The earlier you forget about him, the better.”

“So, your mind is made up.”

“That’s an understatement. I’m more determined. Joel will be my husband.”

“Have you told your pastor about it?”

“Yes. He has gone to see our senior pastor, and the pastor has sent for me. I’m meeting him on Thursday.”

“Ella. The spirit of God will not always strive with you. If you refuse to hearken to divine instruction and allow the devil to befuddle you, you’ll have yourself to blame in the end.”

“Are you placing a curse on me?”

“No, I’m not. I’m only saying you need to be careful at this junction. I’ll accept any man you bring because I can’t force any man on

you. I pray God will guide you. I leave you in God's hands." Evelyn rose up.

"Thank you. I can assure you that you'll love Joel. He's everything you love. You'll see."

"It is well with you," she said and walked out of Ella's room.

Chapter 10

The mid-week service had been anchored by Joel Mason. Little wonder it ended one hour after it started. He was a seasoned preacher of few words. He never needed a prolonged time to teach to inspire all. He always made use of whatever time he had so well despite the fact that if people were allowed to decide, they would have loved him to use more time. No wonder people sang his praise and rejoiced whenever he mounted the pulpit.

Rachael, a youth minister, walked toward Ella, who was in her seat praying. She sat quietly beside her, awaiting her to finish saying her prayers.

Ella opened her eyes after some minutes of praying and her eyes met Rachael's. "Sister Rachael, you are here. How're you?"

"I'm very fine, Sister Ella."

"Hope you enjoyed the service?"

"Enjoy? I was refilled. Pastor Joel's ministration couldn't have done any less. It was a wonderful time in God's presence."

"Hallelujah." Ella smiled. She was always excited anytime anyone passed a nice comment on Joel's teachings.

"I have come to see you, Sister Ella."

"Really?"

"Yes, I have something I must tell you."

"Alright, go ahead."

“I had a revelation. In the revelation, I saw you tied to a stake and tortured. You were so wounded that I couldn’t help crying. I asked the person standing beside me if there was anyone who could rescue you since everyone was only saying sorry and passing by. The person told me that you couldn’t be rescued because you walked to the stake and tied yourself there. I asked how that was possible and I was told that you defied all warnings and went there. I couldn’t help you despite how much I wanted to. The more I ran toward you the farther you seemed to be. Then I saw Brother Joel. I was so happy solution had come. I looked intently and saw him gesture to the torturers. He then walked away, smiling. And that was when the torture increased. When I woke up and prayed about it, I was led to Proverbs 14:12, which says ‘There is a way that seems right to a man, but its end is the way of death.’ That’s why I have come to tell you. I don’t know what decision you are about to make or have made but God loves you and wants you to have a change of heart.”

“Really.”

“Yes, Sister Ella. I keep hearing it in my ears that you’re moving towards a dead end.”

Ella smiled. “Thank you very much, Sister Rachael. I appreciate you. Many people’s dreams are parables. A dream might mean the opposite of what it seems to. Whichever way, God will lead us. Thanks so much.”

“You’re welcome. I’m leaving. Brother Joel is having a meeting with the aged today. He might need some assistance.”

“That’s true. You can go. I appreciate you.”

“Don’t mention.” Rachael stood up and walked towards the church left wing.

Ella squinched her face in disgust, eyeing Rachael with contempt as she walked away. Rachael must have desired to take her place. Seductress. After all, she had been stalking Joel, trying to win his heart. Did she think her stupid dream would change anything? If at all God wanted to send someone to her, would it be Rachael of all people? She was nothing but a person who needed deliverance trying to deliver others. Her plot had failed, Ella thought. She hissed, rose up, and walked to the pastor’s office.

Chapter 11

Joel stepped out of his room and walked into the living room. He sat opposite Ella, who was busy watching a program on the television. “Hope you’re enjoying yourself,” he said with a smile.

“I am. Thank you. That reminds me of a question I’ve always wanted to ask. Why do you always sit on that chair every time I visit?” Ella said in a clear voice.

Joel laughed. “You know, The Bible tells us to flee from every appearance of evil. To me, holiness is priority. I don’t want any dirty thought crossing my mind, which is why I sometimes sit opposite you. If we were in a public place it would have been different.”

“Hmm.” She scrunched her nose, and smiled. “Pastor of righteousness.”

Joel gestured. “That’s one of the reasons why I’ve been saying we should take the next step and get married. We are mature in all wise. What’s keeping us?”

Ella took the TV remote and lowered the TV volume. “Well, I don’t want people to think we are in a rush. We started this relationship barely five months ago. I don’t want people to start talking. It’s not even up to a year you joined our parish.”

“What does that matter? After all, we’re both mature and ready. Unnecessarily long courtship causes nothing but sin. And you know I won’t tolerate that.”

“Of course, I know. You who wouldn’t even hold my hands except when we’re praying together.” She laughed.

“E-l-l-a, that’s not true. I’m not an extremist, although I am principled. Bear with me. The time will come soon when you’ll enjoy the private me.”

“Hmm. Anyway, I was just pulling your legs. I’ll tell my aunt about our decision and contact my parents so we could set the ball rolling.”

“Thanks, darling.”

“You’re welcome.”

“Let me drop you home, it’s almost 6:30 p.m. I don’t want you getting home late.”

“Oh, I lost track of time. We’d better get going or you’ll have to explain to Auntie Eve why you kept me late outside.” She laughed and picked her bag.

“That reminds me. I called the mechanic repairing your car. He said the problem is with the car engine. That car is very old. So, I was thinking you should get a new car instead of changing the engine of the old one.”

“New car? Don’t forget that car is my aunt’s although I was the one using it before it broke down. I just want to have it repaired. She could feel somehow if I left her car with the mechanic and got a new one for myself. Besides I can’t afford a new car tyre right now, not to mention a whole car.”

“Okay. I’ll tell the mechanic to find a way to repair the car so you could return it to your aunt. I’ll get you a new befitting one.”

“Are you serious? You’ll get me a car?”

“Why not? I can’t be riding in a jeep while my fiancée is trekking around.”

“Huh Huh. You’re such a darling.”

He smiled. “You should know by now that there’s nothing I can’t do for you. Once it’s not a sin, I’ll do it.”

“Hmm. I wish I could kiss you.”

He laughed. “Let it remain a wish until I marry you. You’re too precious to be mishandled. When I take the appropriate step, I can take your hugs and kisses as reward.”

She hit his shoulder playfully. “You make me love you more and more every day. You’re a huge blessing to my life. Thank God I found you.”

Joel opened the car door and held it, gesturing to her to enter the vehicle. “I’m the luckiest to have such a wonderful woman by my side.”

Ella’s tummy rumbled or was that the butterfly feeling people talked about? She sighed and smiled, her heart filled with nothing but her love for Joel Mason.

Joel took his seat behind the wheel and drove off.

Chapter 12

No one could be more excited than Ella was, not only because it was a beautiful day with the sun shining effortlessly and birds chirping with glee, but also because it was her day, the day she was giving her hand in marriage to Joel Mason. What more joy could she have?

She turned her head, allowing her eyes to wander briefly from one corner to the other, and smiled. How could so many people turn up for her wedding? she wondered. The church was full to its capacity. Perhaps because she wore a double cap in the church, first as the assistant head of ushering department and second as the sisters' coordinator for the youth, or because she was getting married to the newly ordained pastor whom everyone loved. Either way, the day was beautiful. She smiled as she consented to marry Joel who in turn picked the ring on *The Bible* and slid it on her finger. If anyone cared to measure, her joy would overflow the measure.

The program ended shortly after the new couple exchanged their vows, signed their marriage certificate, and danced in thanksgiving to God.

Reception was even more splendid than she foresaw. She glanced at the right side of the hall and there they were gathered, gifts of various types and sizes, more than could be packed in one vehicle.

“God is amazing,” she said under her breath. Only God could have done such a beautiful thing, she thought. Was she that good to

have received all those gifts on her wedding? That couldn't be the reason. It was a sign of heaven's blessing on her marriage. Thank God she married Joel. She smiled at her thoughts.

If her wedding were rated, it would be listed among the top ones. She couldn't have wished for more. Her dress, his suit, accessories, and all they used were imported from overseas. She'd had her dream wedding. Now she'd look forward to having her dream marriage. All she knew was that she'd gotten the best, nothing could be better.

Chapter 13

A driver drove Joel and Ella to their new home in Verdi Estate after the ceremony that introduced them to the world as a couple.

Although Ella had wanted them to have their honeymoon in a posh hotel outside the city or at least anywhere special and different from Joel's house which would serve as their home, but Joel had insisted having the honeymoon in the house. He'd told her that lodging at hotels for honeymoon wasn't the best for them as Christians.

"How could we start our married life on a defiled public bed?" he had asked. And He'd finished it off by telling her they'd make no difference if they did what secular people did. Even though she had wanted to repudiate his opinion, she couldn't, after all, she knew of no verse of the scripture to corroborate her own opinion. She'd agreed not only because it was no case but also because she wanted to prove to him she'd be a submissive wife.

Joel alighted from the car and held the door open for his new bride. "Careful," he said as Ella hopped off the car. They walked hand-in-hand into the house leaving the driver outside to sort out himself.

After a short prayer, Ella beckoned on Joel to assist her pull off her dress to which he obliged.

"Should we bath together?" Ella said after much hesitation, as Joel unbuttoned her dress.

Joel smiled. "I don't want to bath yet. You go first."

“Okay,” she said. So, men could also be shy, she thought and smiled. Ella stepped into the bathroom and took enough time to have a refreshing bath. She walked out and towelled her body. She rummaged her box and brought out a set of lingerie she’d bought specifically for her honeymoon. She picked the pink one, wore it, and covered her hair with a cap. She stood before the dressing mirror and smiled at her reflection. She couldn’t fathom where all her timidity flew to, perhaps her wedding ring had imprisoned it. She applied a light makeup, checked her reflection again, and was satisfied with what she saw in the mirror. Although she was tired, she was determined to stay strong. She’d promised never to deny her husband of her body and she wouldn’t tonight. After all, it was her first night as Joel’s bride.

She walked out of the room, content with her look. She had to make a strong impression, she thought.

Joel sat on the chair watching a church programme on the television. She slowly approached him, goose pimples all over her. “Sweetheart, why don’t you bath now so we could eat and retire for the night?”

Joel turned his head to face Ella and froze. He stared at her. He’d never seen her like that. She was wearing a fitting pink polka dotted lingerie, which barely covered her hips; her face rid of the garb of heavy makeup, and her smile the type he never had seen. He coughed. “U-uh uh. I’ll go now.” He rose from his seat. “By the way, you are beautiful.”

Ella responded with a broad smile and a nod. Words just wouldn’t escape her mouth. She went into the kitchen, brought out their dinner from the fridge, and heated it before taking it to the table. Joel joined

her shortly after the table was set. They prayed and ate in silence, their eyes exchanging unsaid words. The atmosphere was heavy with emotions. She couldn't wait to finish her food and be in the arms of the one she loved.

Ella cleared the table as soon as they finished eating and joined Joel in the sitting room. She sat beside him, staring at the television, waiting for him to place her head on his chest. Wasn't that how romance started in the books she'd read? When she saw that he did nothing, she moved closer and positioned her head on his chest. How she wished his chest were bare, she'd have fondled the hair on it, but now that it was covered in a vest, she knew there was nothing she could do than wait for him to make the first move.

Ella's smell and touch sent chills down Joel's spine. He clumsily fondled with her nape. "Er uh. I think we should go to bed now. It's been a hectic day," he said.

She nodded and stood up. They went into the bedroom and lay on the bed.

"Let's pray," he said. He prayed on and on, and by the time he was through, Ella was fast asleep.

Chapter 14

Ella rushed out of the restroom to pick her ringing phone. She dried her hands with the hem of her skirt and raised the phone to her ears.

“Hello,” she said.

“Mason’s bride, how’re you?” Evelyn, Ella’s aunt, said over the phone.

“I’m fine. How’re you and the kids? How’s uncle? Hope you’re fine. Have they brought your goods?”

“Ella, which of your questions should I answer first? Anyway, we’re all fine and my goods have been delivered. How is your husband?”

“He’s fine.”

“Hope you’re enjoying the moon.”

Ella smiled. “Yes.”

“Sorry I had to disturb your moon. I just wanted to keep in touch. I’d been restraining myself since four days ago, but today, I couldn’t any longer.”

Ella laughed. “Just confess you’re missing me.”

“I’ll get used to your absence here with time. You’re in your home now. And I give God the glory.”

“Thanks. I appreciate you more than you can ever imagine.”

“So, how is your husband?”

“You’ve asked about him before. He’s fine.”

“Don’t mind me. I just want to be sure everything is fine.”

“Everything is wonderful. Thanks for calling.”

“Wait, Ella.”

“Yes, I’m here.”

“How’s the business of making babies?”

“What?”

“Yes, you know what I’m talking about.”

“Is that what people do during honeymoon?”

“Don’t feign ignorance.”

Ella chuckled. “Auntie. That’s not the only thing one can do. We talk, pray, play, catch fun together, and so on.”

“Those are icing on the cake, not the cake itself. So answer my question. How’s it? ’Cause I can’t wait to back your baby.”

She laughed again, this time louder. “Talking of babies already. Anyway the business is good and we are both doing great.”

“I’m happy to hear that. So, when will you be coming to visit?”

“I’ll be resuming work next week Wednesday. I’ll drop by your place when returning.”

“Alright, I’ll be expecting you. Tara, Tim, and their dad send their greetings.”

“Tell them I love and miss them so much.”

“Okay. Take care of yourself.”

“You too, good bye.” She dropped the phone and sat at the edge of the bed. Thoughts of Joel sneaked into her mind.

Joel had been a wonderful man. He woke up early, prayed, and afterwards made breakfast for them every day since she’d married him.

He treated her like a queen. They did everything together, from sleeping, to eating, cleaning, washing, playing, and praying, everything but bathing and using the restroom. If they weren't doing a chore together, he was doing it alone. He was indeed the kind of man she'd ever wished for. But there was one thing that bothered her. Something she'd been unsure to discuss with him. But at this junction, she couldn't hold it no longer. She rose up and left the room.

“Honey, there's something I'd like us to talk about,” she said to Joel.

Joel raised his head from the book he was reading to face her.

“What? Can we discuss it here?”

“Not in the study.” She smiled. “It's a bedroom talk.”

“Oh.” He dropped the book. “Can we talk about it later then?”

“Yes, but I'd prefer now.”

“Alright.” He smiled and stood up. “Let's go.” They walked to the room and sat on the bed. “Here we are. I'm listening,” Joel said.

“Honey, I really want to thank you for being a wonderful husband. Thanks for bringing joy to my life. Thanks for taking care of me, thanks for everything.”

“Sweetheart, you don't need to thank me. I'm only doing my duty, which I have just started in fact. I love you. When I say that, I mean it.”

Ella knelt down and held his knees. “Please forgive me if there's anything I've done wrong.”

Joel pulled her off her knees onto the bed. “You've done me no wrong. Just tell me what is on your mind?”

Ella whimpered and rubbed her eyes. “Why haven’t you touched me since we got married?”

“Ella, I can’t count how many times I have touched you. I touch you always.” He rubbed his palm on her arms.

“You know what I’m talking about. You haven’t slept with me since I got here.”

“But we had an agreement to sanctify our marriage by praying and abstaining from sex for the first few days.”

“Yes, but it was for the first three days we agreed on. We’ve been married for over one week. And you’ve ignored every of my attempts. If there’s something about me you don’t like, please tell me. How could I tell my aunt that you haven’t done that since we married? What do you think they’d say? I...”

Joel eyes widened. “Are you thinking of telling your relatives about this already?”

“No. I’m just saying.”

“Okay. No problem.”

“Is that all you’ll say?”

“What else do you want me to say?”

“I want you to do something about it.”

“Well, I’ve been taking my time because I didn’t want to rush you. But since you’ve mentioned it. Now I know you’re ready.”

“Yes, I’m ready.” She lay her back against the bed.

“Not right away. Do you think I don’t want it more than you do? I’ve just decided to take it cool with you.”

“Maybe I’m tired of cool. Can you make it hot?”

“I can’t rush myself. It’ll happen tomorrow night.”

“Are you kidding me? Is this something you affix time to?” She sat up and moved closer to him, her lips few inches from his. “Let’s do it now,” she said and attempted kissing him.

Joel ducked kissing her and moved away. “No. It can’t be earlier than tomorrow night. I need to put my mind together.”

Ella puckered her lips and shook her head. “Tomorrow night it is then.”

“Thanks for your understanding.”

“I wish I could say the same.” She stood and walked out of the room.

“What’s wrong with you, Ella? Seriously you need to...” His voice trailed off. He sighed. Ella was angry with him for the first time.

Chapter 15

Ella sighed, the umpteenth time, that night. She'd been waiting for Joel, who had himself locked in the bathroom for over half an hour. "Honey, what's going on?" she said.

"I'm coming," Joel said from the bathroom.

"You've been saying that consistently for the past one hour. What are you doing in the bathroom? Don't think I'll sleep off as usual. You can't keep failing to keep your promises. Tonight is your night." She hissed.

"You're shouting, Ella. Don't get on my nerves or else I won't do anything tonight."

"Sorry. I'm quiet."

He opened the bathroom door and stepped out into the room. He switched off the light bulbs and approached her.

"Why off the light? I can't see anything."

"Your eyes will adapt. Moreover, there's nothing to see. Use your mind."

"Switch on the coloured bulb at least."

"No light. It'll make me feel more comfortable," he said.

"Alright," she said, desiring to clear her doubt more than quarrelling with him over illuminating the room.

Joel lay on the bed beside his wife and pulled the coverlet over them.

Chapter 16

People moved out of the doors as the Sunday service ended, with few people left sitting in groups in the auditorium either talking or praying.

Rachael and Debbie prayed with the ushers and strolled toward the ministers' chamber. Debbie looked through the window and caught glance of Joel and Ella standing outside the church talking to a couple.

"Thank God. Pastor Mason is around. I've wanted to see him for quite a while now. Each time I tried gaining his attention, he was either busy praying, counselling people, or doing something. I must watch and wait for him to finish the discussion. I won't let today slip away without me seeing him," Debbie said.

"Many people always want to talk to him. Even his wife is always busy nowadays. She's the one all the sisters want to share something with," Racheal said.

Debbie smiled. "That's it. Every sister wants to be like lucky Sister Ella, especially with the way her husband relates with her. She and Pastor Mason are made for each other from heaven."

"Hmm. All seems well, but I have my reservation. I remembered telling her a revelation before she married him."

"What was the revelation about?"

"It was a frightening revelation. In summary, I tried to dissuade her from marrying Pastor Joel."

“Are you kidding me? You never told me this.”

“Well, the message was meant for her not you.”

“Won’t she see you as the devil now? Little wonder you two don’t relate well.”

“I don’t know what she thinks of me but what I said should’ve been long forgotten.”

“In your thoughts. Don’t you know she might think you are an agent of the devil sent to disrupt her life?”

“Sister Debbie, I couldn’t have formed the revelation. If I had just one spiritual gift, it was precise and accurate revelations. I sincerely had the revelation I told her. In fact, I called her thrice to tell her different revelations I had about her. It was after the third time that I stopped dreaming about her.”

“How did she react?”

“She thanked me and told me to pray for the gift of interpretation of dreams. She said the revelations had opposite meanings to what I said. And I kept quiet.”

“She was right. Now it’s evident that the revelations indeed meant good for her. The truth is I wish I were in her shoes now. See how more beautiful she has become. The beauty, honour, and grace her marriage has brought her in this church and even outside the church are beyond measure.”

“I’m happy for her. But I have my reservations still. My revelations had never been so real and worrisome like those I had about her.”

“Would you stop talking about your revelations? Spirit of discernment, ability to distinguish good from evil, is necessary for every

Christian. Sister Ella is not the type that will lack discernment. She definitely won't take that step if she wasn't sure."

"Don't say that. Even Jesus was tempted, how much more Sister Ella."

"But Jesus overcame."

"Yes, He did, I know. I'm only saying you shouldn't think of a human being as highly as that. Anyone can fall. Remember Samson, David with Bathsheba, to mention but a few. That is why God sometimes sends others to us to guide us. Take for instance, God sent many prophets to the Israelites. Anytime they went astray, He sent someone to show them the way.

"I agree with you. But think about the young prophet who listened to the old prophet and lost his life."

"His own case was different. God didn't tell him to rest but he did."

"All still boils down to Spirit of discernment, he could have discerned that the prophet was a liar and leave without turning back."

"Don't you know that sometimes our will shuts down the Spirit of discernment in us? Who knows if the young prophet was already hungry and was just tolerating God's word, and immediately he heard another directive, he gave in to it."

"Hmm. You're right. But all the same, may we never miss it in life. At the junction where confusion arises, God will always shine His light. May we not be blind to His leading."

"Amen. I just hope the marriage stays strong."

“Every marriage will have its own challenges. When they get to the bridge, they’ll cross it. They are both seasoned in the word. They’ll pray and overcome whatever challenge comes their way. We just have to be praying for them.”

“It is well.”

“Exactly, it is.” Debbie glanced at Joel’s direction and saw him opening the car door for his wife, smiling. “Sister Rachael, did you see that?” She shot Rachael a knowing look. “Anyway, I have to run now. He’s leaving. I’ll see you on Wednesday.”

“Extend my regards to them. Take care and have a nice week.”

“You too,” Debbie said and hurried to meet Joel, who was about driving out.

Chapter 17

Ella opened the door. She carried the groceries in her right hand and her bag in her left. She walked indoor, dropped the groceries in the kitchen, and dashed to her room. She turned her back to the mirror, her head turned backward to allow her see her reflection in the mirror. She stared at the large patch of bloodstain that stood out on the yellow skirt she wore. She hissed. How could she be having a heavy flow that defied all measure to keep it concealed, today of all days, when she had a presentation at work? Or was it the stress and anxiety she had previously that caused it? she wondered.

She removed the skirt and slid into the bathroom. She stepped out minutes after, dried her body, slipped into a brown negligee. She slumped on the bed and rolled in it, her mind filled with thoughts. Her husband of eight months had gone to a three-day conference, leaving her behind. She rubbed her face and sighed, her mind heavy with unshared thoughts.

Feeling of embarrassment that washed over her when one of the directors, a male, had called her attention to her stained skirt at work brought tears to her eyes. What would the director think of her? A woman who couldn't manage her body perhaps. How she wished she were pregnant. She'd have had to take a break from monthly flow. Now that she wasn't, she'd have her flow to handle.

How could she even expect to be pregnant when her husband slept with her once in a while? And all the times she complained, he showed grave displeasure and further delayed the next. He wouldn't even hear it, if she tried to bring up the issue of pregnancy. He would discard the discussion and tell her he should be the one worried, not her. She exhaled.

“Pray,” something impressed on her heart. Pray about what? Would she asked God to increase her husband's urge or would she pray for a miracle pregnancy? She discarded the thought. She already knew her failure to achieve conception was because of the erratic sexual meeting she had with her husband, what was there to pray about? She'd have to take actions or else nothing would change about her situation. Whatever it required her, she'd give it. If Joel refused to listen to a gentle discussion, he'd listen with a gun at his neck, she thought. She got off the bed and trotted to the kitchen.

Chapter 18

Joel switched off the light as usual of him whenever he wanted to bed his wife. He lay in bed atop her, a large duvet covering them.

Ella stealthily swiped underneath her pillow and reached for the flashlight she had carefully placed under the left edge previously. She didn't care if switching on the light would upset Joel. She just wanted the light on to satisfy her curiosity. If her husband had nothing to hide, he wouldn't have had such affection for darkness, she thought. Whatever he was hiding, she was interested in knowing.

Ella held the lamp in her right hand and turned it on.

Joel froze like a thief caught in the act. "Switch it off," he shouted and stretched his hand to take the lamp. Ella quickly moved the lamp away from his reach while directing the light at him.

"Why love darkness?" she said, flashing the light at his body.

Joel shot up subconsciously to snatch the lamp, removing the blanket off them. Ella threw the lamp further and scurried off the bed, running toward the light switch on the wall, which she put on as soon as her fingers reached it. The whole room lightened up.

"What!" Ella's eyes dilated as her eyebrows shot up. "What is that?" She pointed to the dildo fitted to Joel's pubic area. "How is this possible? What is this?" she screamed.

Joel rushed at her and covered her mouth. "You're screaming. It's almost midnight."

Ella slapped his hand off her mouth and stepped away from him. “I won’t keep quiet until you explain to me what is going on here.”

Joel loosened the toy and removed it from over his flaccid male organ. “I’m sorry, Ella.”

Ella burst out crying. “Sorry for what? Is this what you’ve been doing for almost a year that we’ve been married? No wonder I was never pregnant. I knew it. I knew something wasn’t right. You were always lacking in emotions when it got to that. I thought you were being over spiritual, I never knew you have a problem.”

“I don’t have a problem. Keep your voice down.”

“You don’t have a problem? Then tell me why you’ve been using this demonic object from the pit of hell on me all this while.”

“Keep your voice down.”

“Stop telling me to keep my voice down. How dare you? You wicked liar. How dare you fool me?”

“Honey, be patient, I can explain.”

“Then explain. But don’t tell me to be patient.”

“It’s not that I don’t want to be natural. It’s just that I uh u-uh.”

“It’s just that you are what? What is wrong with you? Why didn’t you tell me before you married me?”

“Were you not lusting after my look? Isn’t my physical appearance satisfying enough for you?”

“Who was lusting after you? Who cares about your physical appearance? Would that make me pregnant?”

“That’s your cup of tea. You got what you wanted.”

“How dare you talk to me like that? You are a son of the devil.”

His blood boiled. “Watch your tongue, Ella.”

“You should rather obey yourself. Who are you to tell me a thing? You, impotent liar.”

“Don’t let me do what I don’t want to do. Watch your tongue.”

Fury welled up his throat.

“What will you do? You can do nothing. I’m going to tell everybody, starting from the senior pastor to the least member of the church that you’re impotent, nothing but a dead horse, if you don’t show me otherwise right away. Prove yourself if you are man enough.”

“You can’t do that, Ella. Even if I’ll prove myself, it can’t be tonight. Give me some time.”

“Some time to do what?” She hissed and walked to the other side of the room. “I was wondering why you never allowed the lights on, never knew you were hiding. Your secret is out and I’ll tell as many people as I can that their beloved pastor is such a useless husband.”

Joel dashed at her and landed a slap on her face. “I told you to watch your mouth.”

Ella screamed and hit his arm. “You slapped me. You’ll regret this.”

Joel pushed her against the wall and hit her as much as he could. Ella retaliated as her strength permitted her. She was weaker. Her punches were no match for his. And despite how much she clawed his body, he wouldn’t stop beating her. He had crossed his elastic limit.

Joel hands went cold as he realized Ella wasn’t fighting back anymore. She lay on the floor still, her eyes shut.

“Ella, Ella.” He shook her. “E-l-l-a,” he screamed. “Lord, please have mercy,” he said repeatedly.

He stood up and ran into his closet, his arms stained with blood from the bruises he had sustained. He rummaged the wardrobe and picked a t-shirt and a trouser. He wore the cloth hurriedly, picked a dress for his wife, and with it, covered her naked body. He lifted her head and carried her outside to her car.

Chapter 19

Ella lay in bed in the room she shared with Joel, her pillow soaked with the tears she'd uncontrollably shed. Her head hurt as though thousands of drummers were seated on it, drumming. The pains in her body flagrantly disregarded her plea for relief. Her ribcage hurt. And only if she hadn't needed to breathe deeply, would the pain in her ribcage have been minimized. She whimpered as the event of the previous week flew through her mind.

Joel had never shown any sign of aggression. He'd been the meekest person she'd known. Perhaps she'd said too much. But didn't she deserve expression of her mind? How could he keep such a thing from her? How did he expect her to spend the rest of her life with someone like him? How could he not tell her before they married? How she wished she hadn't married him. Had she known, she'd have listened to her aunt. She wouldn't have ended with a man like Joel.

Distaste welled up her throat. She would file for a divorce. But what would she tell the church, her aunt, and all those who looked up to her? Divorce in a marriage less than a year. She couldn't do that. She was too respected to do that. She was a pastor's wife, and a minister. She was a role model for majority of the sisters in her church. She was always an example given whenever a happy marriage or choosing the right partner was discussed in church. How would she explain it? Wasn't she asked if she had confirmation from God before her wedding? How

could she tell them that she'd heard herself and not God? But what if she had died while he was beating her? Wouldn't he have married another wife? Or even use that as an excuse to stay single without any rumour about his problem? She kept wondering, tears dripping off her face.

Her phone rang. She ignored, her mind focused on her thoughts. The phone rang again and she reluctantly reached out to it on the bedside table. She wiped her tears with her palm and cleared her throat. She picked the phone and placed it against her ear.

"Hello, Ella," the voice at the other end of the line said.

"Hello, sir," she answered, forcing her voice to steer clear of her emotions.

"How're you?"

"I'm better."

"I'm so sorry I haven't called to check on you."

"No problem. Thanks, sir."

"I hope you're feeling better now."

"Yes. I should be able to resume work on Thursday."

"Alright. Take care of yourself."

"Thanks so much for your care and support, sir. I appreciate."

"You're welcome. Have a nice day."

"Thanks and you too," she said before she hung up.

It was her boss checking on her. She'd been absent from work since the event happened the previous Saturday and she'd told him that she was sick, as she couldn't afford to let the real news out.

She dropped the phone and rolled in bed. Her phone rang. What was it again? she wondered. She took the phone and saw her aunt's name displayed on the screen. She pressed the receive button and lifted the phone to her ear. "Hello, how are you?" she said.

"I'm fine. I went to Kerry mart and dropped by your office, I learnt you're sick and not at work."

"Yes, but I'm better now. It's mild malaria."

"Hope you're resting at home."

"Yes, I am."

"I'm on my way to your place. I just wanted to be sure you're at home."

"You don't need to come. I'm fine already."

"I'm on my way," Evelyn said and dropped the phone.

Ella knew her aunt was serious. But she didn't want her to see her like that, although the swellings and redness on her face had gone. But her face was still in a bad shape and the bruises on her arms were just healing. She got off the bed and went into the bathroom. She washed up hurriedly and stepped into the room, towelling her body. She picked and wore a long-sleeve blue gown she was sure would cover her body. She powdered her face and removed the net covering her hair, allowing her weave to dangle, covering the sides of her face and her scars. She took a last look at her reflection in the mirror and was pleased with what she saw before she stepped into the living room.

She branched at the dining and eyed the breakfast Joel had prepared for her before going out. She took the food into the kitchen and threw it in the trashcan. She opened the fridge, took out a can of

juice, and poured into a cup. She drank from the cup, moistening her dry throat.

She was just beginning to cook when her aunt knocked. She opened the door and welcomed her aunt.

“Hope you’re better now?” Evelyn said after exchanging pleasantries with her niece.

Ella forced a smile. “Of course. I told you not to bother to come, but you insisted.”

Evelyn grimaced. “Are you sure it was malaria you had or...”

“Or what, Auntie?”

“Did you go to the hospital?”

“Yes, I did.”

“And the doctor said you had malaria?”

“Yes.”

“Couldn’t you ask him to run a pregnancy test on you?”

Ella shook her head. “I’m not pregnant. I’ll know if I am. Nothing’s changed.”

“Are you sure?”

“Yes I am. I’m not pregnant. Was that why you came after you were told I was sick?”

“Partially,” Evelyn said and smiled. “I wanted to hear the good news first-hand.”

“I’m sorry to disappoint you. There’s no good news.”

“You didn’t disappoint me. You’ll have your own children soon by God’s grace.”

“And what if I don’t have children?”

“Don’t say such rubbish in my ears. You’ll be fruitful in Jesus name.”

“Amen. You don’t get. I’m just saying what if...”

“Stop talking in the negative. You’ll have soon. How could you allow such an evil thought to play on your mind? You know how a barren woman is viewed in our culture. Never say such a thing to yourself.”

“Okay. I’ve heard you.”

“How’s your husband?”

“He’s fine.”

“That reminds me. Kunle is getting married next week.”

“Wow. Congratulations to him.”

“I’ve always wanted to tell you but it kept skipping my mind. He dropped an invitation at my shop.”

“Okay.”

“You can’t believe who he is marrying.”

“Who?”

“Precious Matthew, Professor Matthew’s only daughter.”

“Good for him.”

“He even called me to...”

“Can we stop talking about Kunle already?” Ella shouted.

“What’s wrong with you, Ella? Did you just shout at me?”

“I’m sorry. I just have heard enough of it. I’m sorry I shouted. I am edgy, sort of, today.”

“Are you sure you’re okay?”

“I’m fine.”

“I didn’t mean to upset you with the news. I merely wanted to tell you about him. I thought you’d be happy that God is finally settling him. After all, you are happily married, too.”

“I’m happy for him,” she said before her emotions took over and she burst out crying.

“Ella, what’s wrong?” Evelyn jumped up from her seat. “What is going on? Please talk to me.” She sat beside Ella and mopped her face.

Ella forced back her tears and wiped her face with the hem of her dress. “Auntie, I’m fine.”

“You’re not fine. Stop saying that. I am your aunt. Talk to me.”

Ella sighed. She wished she could tell her aunt what she was passing through. Although Joel had been remorseful after battering her, and had promised never to repeat such. But she wanted to confide in her aunt, perhaps it would reduce the heaviness she felt on her heart. But what about her fears? Wouldn’t Evelyn remind her of how much she begged her not to leave Kunle? Would it not be a huge shame for her if her aunt knew Joel maltreated her? Would her aunt not say that she got what she deserved? She swallowed and discarded her thoughts. “I’m not happy. My friend at work is facing some challenges and I can’t help her,” she said after much hesitation.

“Is that why you are crying? What is happening to your friend? Tell me about it?”

“Her husband is maltreating her.”

“That’s bad. Is she a believer?”

“She attends my church and is even a worker.”

“Has she told your pastor about it?”

“Well, she’s reluctant. It took her a long while before she could confide in me. She wants a divorce.”

“Divorce? Doesn’t she know what the scripture says about divorce?”

“She knows Christ dissuades us from it, except in the case of adultery.”

“Exactly, which is why one must get it right from the beginning.”

“Now that she’s gotten it wrong, should she fold her arms and continue to be abused?”

“She could separate from her husband temporarily while they are being prayed for and counselled. After some time, when both are ready, they can move back together.”

“I am not sure she’s interested in temporary separation, because what is between them is beyond what can easily be resolved.”

“What could that be then?”

“She didn’t tell me. She only said it’s beyond my understanding.”

“Well, if she must divorce, she’d have to remain single until the man dies. Would she be able to bear that?”

“What’s the difference between being single and this?”

“And what? I don’t seem to understand you. Is Joel maltreating you in any way? You can confide in me.”

“Auntie, it’s not me but a friend. You should know Joel can’t do such a thing.”

“I know. But I can’t be absolutely sure.”

“He’s not that kind of a man.”

“I hope not.”

The door opened and Joel entered with a bag in his hand. “Honey, I’m home,” he said.

Speak of the devil, and he’d show up, she thought. “Welcome, dear,” she said, against her desire to do otherwise.

Joel heart raced as she sighted Evelyn. Had Ella told her what had happened between them? After all, he had apologized and told her to keep the incident between them. How could she have done that? “Auntie, good afternoon,” he said. He prostrated and greeted Evelyn, grinning.

“Good afternoon, my dear. How’s work and everything?”

“Very fine, ma. How’s your family?”

“Everyone is fine.”

Joel sat beside his wife, hugged her, and kissed her cheeks. He dropped the bag he’d brought in on her laps. “I was passing by a shopping mall so I decided to drop by and get you some stuffs.”

“Thank you,” Ella said and smiled.

“You’re welcome. You know I’ll do anything for you.” He planted a kiss on her forehead.

Evelyn smiled. “I’m jealous,” she said and they all laughed.

“Sweetheart, did you eat your breakfast I left on the table?” Joel said.

“Yes, I did.”

“Okay. Let me quickly prepare lunch so we could all eat.”

“Water is on the cooker,” Ella said.

“Alright. I’ll boil some rice.”

“Okay, darling.”

Joel stood up and went into the kitchen.

“Ella, you are enjoying. Should you not have prepared lunch before he came back?” Evelyn said as soon as Joel was out of earshot.

“I was about doing that before you came in. Besides, he likes doing the cooking. He doesn’t see it as a big deal.”

“Hmm. I must say, Joel is a good man.”

“He’s the reason I’m crying for my friend.”

“Now I understand. You don’t need to cry for her. Just pray for her.”

Ella brought out the content of the bag Joel had given her—shoes, clothes, jewellery, and a greeting card.

“Oh my God, greeting card! Do you celebrate Valentine’s day every day here?” Evelyn said, marvelled by the gifts. “Aren’t these too much?”

Ella smiled. “I’m not surprised, I’m used to it.”

“I’m so happy for you. You’re such a lucky girl.”

Ella forced a smile. Lucky, my foot, she thought.

They talked on and on before Joel set the table and called them to eat. They chatted and laughed over the meal. And a while after the meal, Evelyn left for her home, satisfied that her niece was in great hands.

Chapter 20

Ella woke up from her deep sleep. She turned her head to the left and saw a man sitting on the bed, with only his trousers on, his back towards her. He was in no way like Joel. He was fatter, shorter, and was bald. Ella eyelids fluttered. She glanced around, wanting to confirm where she was, and realized she was in her room. What was going on? She pulled herself to a semi-sitting position and that was when she realized she was naked. She pulled the blanket on her chest.

“Who are you? What’re you doing here?” she asked aloud.

The man turned to her and scorned her. “You’re awake. I was waiting for you to wake up so my boys could take their turns since I’ve gone twice.”

“What’re you saying? Are you crazy? What’re you doing in my room? Where’s my husband?”

He ignored her and walked to the door. “Hey guys, you can come in. She’s ready for you.”

Ella held the blanket in death grip, her eyes oscillating in their sockets. What was going on? she wondered. Perhaps it’s just another bad dream. Three men entered into the room and walked towards her.

“Who are you? Get away from me,” she screamed and bit the hand of one of them.

The tallest of them yanked off the blanket and forced her on her back. “If you cooperate, we’ll be gentle. If you don’t, you’ll leave us no choice than to rough-handle you.”

Ella spat into his face and fought with all her strength but they were stronger, and raped her in turns before leaving.

Ella lay on her bed, weak and in pains, tears pouring from her face. What sort of life was she living? Was the dead not better off? How the men entered, she didn’t know. The last thing she remembered was drinking a cup of wine Joel gave her while they were talking in the living room. How strangers got access to her room was shocking to her.

The door creaked as it opened and Ella pulled the blanket over her head, scared of the unimaginable.

“How are you?” Joel said with a smile.

Ella uncovered her face and stared at her husband in surprise. “Where have you been? What’s going on?” she said, her head almost exploding in anger.

Joel ignored her and smiled. He stood against the wall, a hand in his pocket and the other holding a wine glass.

Ella forced herself into a semi-sitting position. “What’s going on here?” She sobbed. “Can’t you talk?”

He shrugged. “I’m just being a good husband. You’ve been complaining bitterly and threatening me over my inability to fulfil one of my roles. So I thought about it and took your advice, which was why I employed those who were capable of giving you what you wanted.”

Rage danced in her brain. “Please tell me I’m not hearing right. Please tell me I’m dreaming.” She broke into fresh sobs. “You mean you got those people to rape me?”

“That’s no rape. It is an answer to your request. Remember you vowed to tell everyone about my problem if you failed to conceive by month end. You’ve always desired to be pregnant. I’m only trying to help you and as well save our marriage.”

“You’re truly a son of the devil. Cursed be the day I met you.” Tears flowed freely from her eyes. She wept not only because of her pain but also for the life she had chosen for herself.

“Don’t be angry. I was only trying to help.”

“Trying to help me by asking four men to sleep with me? Is that the help you can offer, you agent of destruction?”

“If I got only one person to do it, he could return to claim his child in the future. But when there are multiple partners, none of them would be bold to come and claim our child.”

Ella bit her lips until blood tinted her teeth, sobbing.

“In case you decide to disclose to anyone that I have a sexual deviation or that I made people sleep with you, you can go ahead. But I want you to know that I recorded a video clip of you and the first man. And I’m ready to share it with the world, telling them you committed adultery. Who will believe your story then? They’d think you’re just making up the story to justify your infidelity. So, if you love yourself, keep your lips sealed and pretend nothing happened. Be a good girl, and in good time, you’ll have the children you desire and I’ll have the rest I want.”

“I hate you, Joel. I hate you.”

“Maybe I hate you, too. I used to like you very much but since you started disturbing and harassing me, my love for you has plummeted. But don’t worry, I won’t send you away. I’ll need someone to do the chores at least. You’ll do my biddings and we’ll be fine. Be reminded that if you try anything funny, that video will go viral in minutes. Take that from me.” He walked out and slammed the door behind him.

Ella hit herself perhaps that would wake her from the nightmare she thought she was having. How did she come across this devil? she thought. Only if she had known...

Chapter 21

Ella's tears rinsed the plates as she washed them. The past few months had been hell in Joel's house. Not just because she did all the chores, but also because Joel treated her with disdain. Hardly did he talk or play with her as usual. Only when they were outside their home did they act a perfect couple drama. At home, they slept in different rooms, ate separately, and did nothing together. Their morning devotion had become mourning devotion.

His food must be ready, his clothes ironed, his shoes polished, and his room cleaned to time if she didn't want to be beaten like a criminal. Even when she did everything, Joel was still not satisfied many times. She had become nothing but a maid in the house. And as much as she wanted to talk to people about her plight, she couldn't for fear of her sex tape going viral on the internet. If Joel said it, he definitely would do it.

Little was the pain she got from the regular beatings and punishments compared to that she got from regular sexual assault Joel masterminded. Different people came at different times to abuse her sexually. And there was nothing she could do, since they always came as a surprise and always overpowered her.

The times she pleaded with Joel to stop it, he told her he wouldn't stop bringing people until she became pregnant, as he didn't want anyone questioning his fertility. And she had come to accept it such that

little did she struggle whenever they came, knowing that the more she struggled the more the pain. All her attempts to get back at Joel failed. She couldn't tell anyone, she couldn't even tell God. The weight of guilt on her mind that she had brought the situation on herself wouldn't even allow her pray. Her worst nightmare was not as terrible as what she was experiencing. No wonder her beauty was fading, forcing her to wear heavy makeup to feel presentable. She was always sad, and wouldn't eat, as she should. She lied to everyone who cared to ask that her loss of weight was deliberate to keep her in shape.

Anytime anyone made a comment in Joel's presence that she was looking sad or was lean, he would pick up a fight with her when they got home, screaming that she wanted people to accuse him of maltreating her. All sort of drugs and supplements had he brought home and forced her to use. And her makeup kit was superior to that of a professional makeup artist. He ensured at all times that she was physically attractive before going out with her, even if she had to wear an odd dress to cover the injury he'd inflicted on her.

Ella could have confided in her friend at work, if Joel hadn't stopped her from working, lying to people that the stress of the work was too much and was making her have miscarriages. And when her aunt had asked her, she had no choice that to answer in the affirmative, as Joel was seated right beside her.

Everyone envied her public life. Only if people knew what she was going through, things could have been different. She was a minister and would be sanctioned if she behaved badly toward her husband. The man that was taking her through the valley of death was highly respected and

valued by many. No one would believe her story. Not even her own aunt. Not with the way he treated her each time there was a third party around.

She wiped her hands on the kitchen towel and walked out. She sat on the chair and switched on the TV, just as Joel walked out of the guest room, which now served as his room.

“Where are the notes on my table in the library?” he asked, his nose wrinkled.

“I discarded them. I thought you didn’t need them again.”

“You discarded what? Are you sane at all? Why are you always overstepping your boundary? You’re doomed to suffer, and suffer you will.”

“Don’t use such words on me. Go to the dustbin and search for the notes.”

“I should go to the dustbin?” He came close and slapped her. Ella stood up and tried to walk away but he pulled her back and pushed her unto the chair.

Ella couldn’t shout as usual, as her voice was hoarse from excessive use. She tried pushing him away but he gripped her hand and landed a blow on her. She cried and scratched him with his fingers, which got Joel angrier, making him punch her more. And before Joel could control his anger, she had fainted.

Chapter 22

“You’re pregnant,” Doctor Matt said with a smile, facing Ella.

Ella winced. “I am what?”

“You’re pregnant. It’s nine weeks.”

Ella froze, unsure of her next action. Was she supposed to be happy that she was eventually pregnant or sad because she didn’t even want the baby anymore?

Joel laughed and shook the doctor’s hands. “This is great news. I’m so happy. Thanks, darling,” he said, bent and kissed Ella’s forehead, disrupting the awkward silence.

“I’m happy for you, Mr and Mrs Mason. But I’ll also encourage you to be more careful so that you don’t lose this pregnancy. Mr Mason, you have to keep an eye on your wife and keep dangerous things out of her way so she won’t fall again.” He cast Joel a pregnant glance. “And please, no violence of any sort,” he added and Joel nodded. “Mrs Mason, please be careful. You need to eat well and stay strong for your baby. And you’ll need to register for antenatal care.”

Ella nodded, knowing she would cry if she opened her mouth to say a word.

They left the doctor’s office after much counselling. And Joel drove his wife home.

Chapter 23

Ella sighed, the umpteenth time. Thoughts filled her head. She took a bottle, labelled poison, from the cabinet and poured its content into a cup, tears flowing freely from her eyes.

Joel walked into the kitchen to get a drink and saw Ella. He glanced at the labelled small bottle. “What is that?” he said.

Ella took the cup and raised it to her lips. “What’s your business with what it is? I’m going to kill myself and rid you of me. It’s not as if you wanted me here anyway.”

“Is that why you want to kill yourself?”

“Yes. It’s better to be dead than to live in this hell of a house.”

“I hope you know you’re buying yourself a ticket to hell.”

“Who are you to judge? Are you God? You are the hell’s candidate we have here. Not me.”

“Have you forgotten that whosoever takes his or her own life will be judged? The life we live is of God and not our own. Who are we to take it?”

She hissed and lowered the cup. “Mr Preacher, how sweet preaching is on your lips! How I wish you did one-tenth of the things you preach. Preach to yourself first before attempting me.”

He smiled. “I’m saying this for your own good. If a preacher preaches genuine word of God, whether or not he does it, if anyone obeys the word, such person will be saved, even if the preacher perishes.

So why should you hang your own safety on another's? Will taking genuine prescription from a sick doctor make you sick? Whether he treats himself or not, you'll still be healed if you followed the prescription. Once the word is genuine, it will stand."

"Excuse me. I don't need your sermon. You can fool everyone, but you can't fool me. You are a son of the devil."

"That doesn't change the fact that suicide is an abomination unto the Lord. By doing it, you could secure a furnished apartment for yourself in the pit of hell. Mind you, it isn't just your life you're about to take, you'd be murdering the baby inside of you. Double crime."

"Baby conceived out of pain and sorrow. Baby who has no father. It's not even a baby yet?"

"It will be and I will father it. But if you take its life, you'll rot in hell."

"The Bible tells us to judge not that we may not be judged."

"I'm not judging you. I'm stating facts."

"Just get out of my sight."

"Do as you wish. But remember, it has been appointed for a man to die once after which is judgement."

"Get out," she screamed.

Joel walked out of the kitchen, praying in his mind that Ella would change her mind. He couldn't afford to have to tell people why his wife committed suicide if she did. What would he say? How would he say it? But he could show people the video he recorded while she was raped. He could tell anyone who cared to ask that she was promiscuous and ended her life because he caught her in the act several times. People

would believe him. He was too respected to be doubted, and not with how he treated her with so much affection and respect publicly that people praised him. He discarded his thoughts and sat on the sofa, his eyes fixed on the television.

Ella wept. Although she was having a hard time, it was not comparable to the description of the agony in hell. Joel was right. Even if he were a devil's agent, he had talked right. Perhaps it was God reaching out to her through him, she thought. She dropped the cup and poured its content into the sink.

“Lord, I’m sorry. Please forgive me. I know I’m not worthy to call on You but I believe You are merciful and gracious. Please give me a way out of this mess,” she said. She fell on her knees and wept. “Lord, please forgive me, have mercy on me, and please give me another chance.” She prayed on, weeping.

Chapter 24

Joel sat behind the wheels, driving, with Ella in the front passenger's seat beside him. They had travelled for a program in another state and were returning home.

Ella sat, facing the side window, her elbow against the glass and her palm supporting her chin. She stared absentmindedly at the fast moving cars and grass at the side of the road, her heart as heavy as always. She'd been praying and asking for God's mercy but she still felt heaviness on her heart. So long had she been disconnected from God that heaviness of heart had become the norm.

Nothing weighed her down more than her marriage and the new life that was in her womb. Wonderfully well had she pretended in the public and suffered in the house. Confidence, charisma, and cheerfulness were words that had lost meaning and expression in her life. No wonder she was replaced in every post she had previously held in the church. The only special thing she did in church occasionally, as a minister, was moderate collection of offering. The so-called ministry she had wanted to guard by marrying Joel had slipped through her hands. She was worthless to herself, always depending on Joel for provision, useless in her ministry, maid in her home and restricted from her family.

Tears began to form in her eyes, gradually sliding down her flat cheeks. If only God could mend her broken wings, she'd fly high for the Lord, she thought. If only God could forgive and restore her, she'd live

for God. If only God could show her mercy, she wouldn't disobey Him ever again. If only...

The deafening sound produced by the burst tyre interrupted Ella's rumination. "Jesus. Jesus," Ella kept shouting, as the vehicle lost control.

Joel pulled the brake and the vehicle began to somersault before colliding with another vehicle, starting a fire.

Chapter 25

His Love Tabernacle church was filled to its capacity. Many people, who didn't have a place to sit in the church, sat on the porch of the church, and under tents outside the church, watching the transmission of the ministration on large screens installed to feed the people outside the large auditorium.

It was the last day of the singles' summit and the minister for the day was a widely known teacher of the word, Mrs Ella Mason. Little wonder the congregants doubled the previous day number. In spite of the thousands of people present in the auditorium, the drop of a needle could be heard clearly.

Many were crying and some were shaking their heads in pity. Almost everyone was listening with rapt attention to the preacher. Not only because she was an anointed, seasoned, sought-after minister, but because her message was touching the hearts of many and opening the eyes of countless.

She continued her message, "the accident was fatal. I thought I would die in it and be forgotten. But somehow, God saved me miraculously. I regained my consciousness on the hospital bed many days later and found myself alive but in a terrible condition. I had wounds all over. The doctor later told me I had 75% burns and femoral fracture. The scars are still here as evidence." She raised her hands and pointed to her face. "I didn't even have the courage to ask anything

from God, I just kept begging God for mercy, even while I was on the hospital bed. It got to a point, I was praying and wishing God would forgive me but allow me die so I could at least gain eternity. But God didn't take my life."

She mopped the tears on her face with a flannel. "Weeks after, I was told my husband, Joel Mason had passed away. I couldn't help crying. I still cry when I remember him till date. You could be wondering why I cried instead of rejoicing, I was crying because he didn't get a chance to repent as I did." She paused and sighed. "Shortly after, when my health started improving, I was told I had lost my five-month pregnancy and not just that, I had lost my womb because it had been torn during the accident. I couldn't cry, maybe because I accepted it as a punishment for my disobedience or because a part of me didn't want that child. I was just thankful I got my life back and I got time to repent. The doctor came again and told me I'd have to be on drugs for life because I was HIV positive. And that was when I broke down. I lost hope and my condition started deteriorating. Thank God for my aunt, siblings, Kunle, and a few other people God used for me. I accepted my state and started seeking the face of God. The journey to recovery was long, I must say." She dabbed the beads of sweat that had formed on her forehead with a handkerchief.

"I fasted and prayed. And God being ever merciful showed me mercy and mended my wings. Now my wings are mended and I can fly again. That is my story, not my message. My message for you today is Total Submission to God's will. Obedience is better than a thousand sacrifices. God sees better. He knows better. And His will is the best for

our lives. Jeremiah 29:11 says and I quote, ‘For I know the thoughts that I think toward you, says the LORD, thoughts of peace and not of evil, to give you a future and a hope.’ To the singles here, I say, another important decision you’ll take after surrendering your life to Christ is deciding whom to marry.” She nodded and swallowed.

“God does not drag our decisions with us but He’ll always show us the way. But most time, we choose ways that are pleasing to us instead. The Bible, in Proverbs 14:12, says, ‘There is a way that seems right to a man, but its end is the way of death.’ Get this now, that it seems right doesn’t make it right. You can’t force your will on God just as God won’t force His will on you. And you can’t have God take responsibilities for your own actions. Let me give you this nugget to hold onto, ‘if it ain’t God’s will, it ain’t God’s bill.’”

The congregants clapped, with many nodding.

“It is best if you acknowledge God in all your decision-making in life. Kunle that I thought was spiritually lower than me was the same person God used for me when I was dying. He’s blessed with a wonderful wife and four grown children today. You might be worried about people’s opinion, just as I was. What would people say? How could I tell the world Kunle was my husband? He was too unattractive and unspiritual for my liking. He had no post in church, blah, blah. The truth was I wanted someone I could be proud of, someone that appealed to my senses, and I cared less what God wanted for me. I got what I wanted indeed and you all know the end of the story. I’m not saying you shouldn’t aim for the best, or desire something beautiful. The Bible, in Proverbs 10:24, says, ‘The fear of the wicked will come upon

him, and the desire of the righteous will be granted.’ However, you must always submit your desires and will to God. Always allow His plan to override yours.”

People clapped again and different sound of agreement rent the air momentarily.

“Amen,” she said.

“Amen,” the congregants responded.

“Many things we trivialise in Christianity will count against us if caution is thrown to the wind. Crush, lust, infatuation, give it any sweet name you like, impatience, haughty mindedness, and so on, can cloud your vision and judgement. More reason I cried for Joel was that he was impatient. One day when we were discussing, he confessed to me that God never told him to marry me. He said God told him to wait. But because he was beginning to think people would realize he had a problem, and for the fact that he liked me too, he gave in and married me. Perhaps he wouldn’t have ended the way he did if he had obeyed and waited and hadn’t married me. After all, God created him and knew exactly what to do about his situation. Take this from me, as many believe, God is indeed merciful. He will accept you when you return in genuine repentance. Nevertheless, part or all of the damages you did to yourself while you were away might remain forever. Ten pairs of mended wings can never be as good as a pair of unbroken wings. Do not crave mending but crave power to maintain your unbroken wings. But for as many as have been broken, don’t wait until things get worse before you return and seek the face of God. And for any of you who still don’t mind mended wings instead of maintaining your unbroken

ones, hear this, I'll be fifty years old on Saturday, I don't have any biological child, although I have many spiritual children, and I don't have a husband, God is the husband of the widow, anyways. Listen, and learn. I could have had all those and still be in Christ if I had obeyed the Lord. But glory to God, I believe my name is written in the book of life. My soul is saved. The Bible tells us that it is better to enter into life maimed than to go to hell with a whole body. So, if you're listening to my message and you have spent your life in a terrible way in the past or even until now, done abortions, taken drugs, or made wrong decisions, come, the Lord can still mend and renew you. And your soul will be saved. No one knows when the end will come. If Joel knew, he would have repented before the accident. It doesn't matter what you've done in the past or how much you've disobeyed, just come now, He is ready to save you and write your name in the book of life. John 1:12 says 'But as many as received Him, to them He gave the right to become children of God, to those who believe on His name.' Surrender your life to Jesus Christ. Rededicate your life to Him if you've backslidden. He'll accept you, wash you, and change your story," Ella said.

People trooped out in twenties and hundreds, to surrender their lives to Jesus.

"Those of you with unbroken wings who can't fly or want God to help you keep your wings from tearing, come, lay it at His feet. He'll help you. He's ever ready. Come."

Many people walked out and she prayed with them before allowing them to return to their seats.

“If you have any disease in your body, lay your hands on it right now with faith in your heart. The Lord is going to heal you today. He’s a healer. By His stripes, you’re healed. In Jesus name you are healed.”

Sound of rejoicing rent the air as many began to wave their hands to signify they had been healed.

“I can see, hallelujah, I can see,” a blind woman, who had just received her sight, shouted.

Shout of hallelujah filled the auditorium, as miracles began to happen.

Ella prayed for many categories of people, those waiting on the Lord for future partners, direction in life, and many more. It was a day to remember for everyone who attended the program.

Ella lived the rest of her life sharing the gospel and touching lives, and through her God did many miracles.

Her wings were indeed mended, although she wished she had maintained unbroken wings.

The End

NOTE

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Thank you.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

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