

A tale of nonpareil love



# Loved

ELIZABETH KAZEEM

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BY

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## DEDICATION

This book is dedicated to everyone who yearn for acceptance and love, those who have been denied validation by men, and those who perceive themselves unworthy of God's mercy. You are loved!

## ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

I'm profoundly grateful to God for the gift of life. It's a huge privilege to be a vessel unto honour in His hands. May God's name be praised forever, Amen.

To Jesus Christ, the Mediator of a better covenant, which was established on better promises (Hebrews 8:6), be the glory. It was through His death and resurrection that I am saved. Now I can boldly call Jehovah 'Abba Father.' Thank You, Jesus, for submitting Your life so that I and innumerable others might be saved.

To the gentle and loving Holy Spirit, Who is a constant helper, I say thank You. He is indeed a great Teacher.

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

My thanks also go to Oluwafisayo, for his unflinching support, and Mr Victor Uwaham for his immense help in the translation of Igbo language used in this book.

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

## TRANSLATION OF LANGUAGES OTHER THAN ENGLISH LANGUAGE USED IN THIS BOOK.

- *Kedu ka oru di?* How is work?
- *Nwanne gi nwanyi nwere nsogbu.* Your sister is troubled
- *Nwanyi oma.* Good woman
- *Abeg, I wan know wetin dey do me.* Please, I want to know what is wrong with me.
- *Kedu ihe o bu, nwanne m nwoke?* What is it, brother?
- *Nwanne m nwoke, biko nyere nwanne gi nwanyi aka. K'anyi mee nkea dika anyi siri mee ndi ozo.* Big brother, please help your sister. We have to do this as we did others.
- *Aga m agwa gi okwu dika nwanne m nwanyi.* I will talk to you as a sister.
- *Mba.* No
- *Ngbati Ngbati* An epithet for Yoruba people.
- *Chineke taa ha ahuhu.* God will punish them.
- *Enyi m.* My friend
- *Abeg.* Please
- *Oha, Ofe akwu, Nsala, Ugba* Different Igbo dishes
- *Nne m.* My mother
- *Aru emee.* Abomination has been committed
- *Biko.* Please
- *They don close shop o.* They have closed down the shop
- *Nah your oga come this morning. He carry plenty people follow body. They don pack all the market wey they for shop inside one big motor. He con lock shop, send us comot and left. Your hubby came this morning. He brought many people with him. They emptied the shop in a truck. He locked the shop, drove us away, and left.*
- *Na your oga come. Na for outside we dey now. He don pursue us comot. I don dey call you since sef. Your hubby came. We're outside now. He has sent us out. I've been calling you.*
- *Your oga wey tall and yellow. Your hubby, which is tall and fair.*
- *Madam, abeg. No vex with wetin I wan talk. My papa dey sick, he dey for hospital. As month don end now, I wan ask say make you give*

*me my money wey I go take buy melecine for my papa. I no wan make he die as my mama don die. Please, madam. Don't be annoyed with what I want to say. My father is sick. He's in the hospital. Since the month has ended, I want to request my salary to buy drugs for my father. I don't want him dead like my mother.*

- *Madam, see, na my own pikin no well. Doctor say he go collect blood. Na the money I dey wait for. Madam, my child is sick. Doctor said he would need blood transfusion. I'm waiting for my salary.*
- *Ihunanya m. My love*
- *Ana m arịọ gị n'aha Chineke. I beg you in God's name.*
- *Kwa - Used as an exclamation. What!*
- *Na the money wey you need be that. Put am for your bag. That's the money you need. Put it in your bag.*
- *Oya, press yes. Now, press yes.*

## PROLOGUE

*THERE WAS NO* month as beautiful as the month of March. At least not in Nigeria. And not to the best of my knowledge.

The best day in the month of March was the twelfth—the day I was born. A day I celebrated every year since I smelt freedom. And of all the ones I'd experienced, this was the best. My thirty-first birthday.

The previous year, I had been down with malaria, depriving me of enjoying my thirtieth birthday. My thirtieth birthday party had been a small one organized by my best friend in my apartment. All I could do was reassure myself the following year would be special. And indeed, it was beginning to be.

My thirty-first birthday party was taking place in Lá Visca, the very heart of Lagos Island. Thanks to Ejike—my heart—I could afford the exorbitant bill of Lá Visca. My brain—Ebuka—paid for all that would make my chameleon parade a dream come true. And he stuffed my account with sufficient money just in case of an emergency.

Some other parts of me also contributed their quota, which enabled me to place each of them where each belonged, in order of importance.

Richard would have been my eyes if he hadn't disappointed me and made me search for someone else to pay for the DJ I wanted for my party. John stepped into that shoe. Of course, Richard's place belonged to John now.

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I gave other tasks to the rest and the ones who still craved to become part of me.

I tittered as my MUA—short for make-up artist—transformed my face. I had never looked this good, or so I thought. I muttered a word of prayer for Adaora, my best friend who paid the MUA's bill. She was the best friend anyone could have.

The MUA nodded. "I'm done. You look amazing. Look at the mirror and tell me what you think," she said, smiling.

I knew she had done a perfect job. I had been stealing glances at the mirror every now and then. She never dissuaded me. She was adept and patient.

I stared at my reflection in the mirror, simpering. "I love it." I nodded. "So much," I quickly added. It was true. I loved what I saw in the mirror.

"I'm glad you do. Now let's get you dressed up," she said. She stepped aside as I stood from the chair. Her work was done. It was left for my costumier to do hers.

Within an hour, I was out in my first wear of the day—a shirt tucked into a mini skirt with a fitting bolero, and a flowered silk sash tied around my neck in a way that called attention to the tiny gold jewellery on my neck. I intended changing wear four times, at least, if time wouldn't permit more. It was my day. I had to shine.

I strutted out of the room. A round of applause welcomed me. I smiled, waving like a model at the people who came to celebrate me.

The party started. Teniola—my left hand—had the order of program well organized. She was adept at event planning and had no choice than to showcase her skills for me. What were friends for after all?

I went into the changing room the second time. A flowing red dress ordered from the United States and Christian Louboutin Stilettos was up next. It seemed I was born with the dress. It was a perfect fit. My MUA did her wonders on my face for a few minutes to ensure my looks suit the dress. She quickly rearranged my hair before letting go of me.

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I walked out. A few people were just arriving. I took some time to greet them and ostentatiously showcase my dress, shoes, and Proenza Schouler's Satchel.

I glanced in the left direction and noticed two strange ladies smiling sheepishly at me. I almost frowned and squeezed my lips but for the poke Ada gave me. I knew what she meant. *Caution, it's your day!*

I smiled and waved at them instead. Excitement was written on their faces. It tickled my ego. It felt good being the centre of attention. That was how much they wanted me as a friend.

Another lady in the company of a man approached me. Her face was familiar but I couldn't figure out where I had met her before now. I didn't invite her to my birthday party. I was sure of that at least.

"Hello, Amy," she said, smiling.

I forced a smile. "Hi."

"Meet my fiancé, Raymond," she said.

I didn't even know her. And here she was, introducing me to her fiancé as if we were friends.

"Oh! Hello," I said and shook the man's outstretched hand.

"This is Amy, my friend," she said to her fiancé, "and the celebrant," she quickly added.

My friend? I didn't even know her name. Wonders would never end. "And your name is?" I said, trying to burst her bubbles.

"Angela," she said, still smiling.

I wondered how she could still smile. "I must go now. Thanks for coming to my party."

She wanted to be on my list of friends. I would enlist her later if she met my standard.

"You're welcome. And you're gorgeous," Angela's fiancé said, gaping at me.

I recognized that kind of look. I smiled, satisfied, or was it excited? No life could be better than mine.

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The MC called me to the stage to dance. And the DJ did what he knew to do best.

People came out one after the other to dance. I danced and relished the attention showered on me. It was all I needed to feel loved.

What a beautiful day!

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## CHAPTER ONE

*I GLANCED AT* the branded silver wristwatch that adorned my wrist. I had gotten it from Ejike – a present for my last birthday. The watch displayed ten past five. I had waited in the hospital reception for one hour, two minutes. If I could wait for this long, no one had the right to tell me I was impatient.

I already had a rough day. Now, this endless wait. My lips met and parted, giving off a hiss. That was the only way I could express my disapproval.

Although I knew how many people I met at the reception when I came in and no one needed to tell me they would see the doctor before me, but I was reaching the peak of my patience. The queue had moved very fast until the girl before me walked in and refused to exit. She looked healthy and seemed too tiny to have so many problems to stay with a doctor for this long.

I would have opted to see another doctor if not for my bond with Dr Agwu. He was more than just a doctor to me. He was my hitch removal. And he had never been judgmental.

The last time I had to see a female doctor because Dr Agwu was on leave, I blamed myself for getting into a problem in the first place. She scrutinized me as though I was filth. She must have forgotten my money would contribute to her salary. The moment I told her what I was in the hospital for, she scrunched her nose and shook her head in disgust.

I was sore displeased. I wanted to walk out on her and probably report her. I was sure the management of the hospital wouldn't think twice before disciplining any staff who maltreated clients. It was a private

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hospital. The management's goal must be to make profit and anyone who tried to stand in the way would be punished without hesitation.

Despite that, I couldn't leave her office. I had to endure the disgusting look she gave me, and the insulting undertone of her words. Eventually, I had what I wanted and left, but not without vowing never to return for the same cause that had taken me there. And I swore never to be attended to by a female doctor. I had deduced from the ones that I'd seen that they were just not what I needed.

No wonder I was excited when I was told Dr Agwu – my personal person – was around. A smile lifted my cheeks.

I turned my neck to each side. I still felt pain there. I hissed. I wished I hadn't dozed off on a chair last night. But it wasn't my fault. I couldn't stop thinking. The look Judith gave me in church and the statement one of the ministers uttered wouldn't leave my memory. I wished I hadn't gone to church yesterday. I shook my head painfully. The minister's statement paraded on my mind. She was the head of the greeting team – a team I had loved in the church until yesterday. The team welcomed everyone, who walked through the church door, in such a grand style that could make even a lunatic feel pleased with himself.

I was entering the church in my usual style – one step at a time, slow enough to allow anyone who cared to assess and marvel at my designer dress, shoes, and bag – when a greeter shook my hand, nodded and took my bag. She had a badge that displayed 'Greeter', the logo of the church and her first name. So I knew my bag was safe. It had always been.

The head of the team, who was also a minister, stood in my way. "You're welcome to church, madam. I'm glad to see you," she said and gave me a side embrace. She touched my belly. "The baby is blessed in Jesus' name. Please follow Sister T as she leads you to a seat. Sit as the queen you are in your Heavenly Father's presence and enjoy God's blessings in the service," she said with a smile bigger than her small lips.

I wanted to scream. Which baby was in my belly that she was asking God to bless? I was a sweet, beautiful, smart, single lady for crying out

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loud. Did I look pregnant? But I didn't get the chance to ask any question. She talked as if she was a programmed robot. I could only smile and follow the greeter who directed me to a seat.

I was almost getting out of the shock when I caught Judith, a friend's friend, staring at me. A lady seated beside her was whispering something to her. I would have thought she was admiring my Chanel bag or Louis Vuitton stilettos if her gaze wasn't on my belly. The lady seated beside Judith tilted her head and glanced at my abdomen before continuing her whisper.

Oh my! What in the world was happening? I stared at my belly. It was bigger. But it was nothing but fat deposit. And I was already planning to work on it. But why were those two matchsticks staring at my belly? If gaining weight was detestable to them, they should mind their business. After all, it didn't prevent me from doing whatever I wished. But then, was my belly big enough to be mistaken for pregnancy?

I didn't seem to understand. The loads of clothes I couldn't wear comfortably again flashed through my mind. I had always disregarded my weight increase and promised to start a routine exercise. Exercises I couldn't start because I had been very busy.

I sighed. What if I was pregnant? That wasn't possible. I couldn't be pregnant and not know. I was the master of my body. Such a big deal couldn't have escaped my notice.

The minister's prayer and Judith's look haunted me. I kept thinking and examining myself before I dozed off on the chair last night and woke up with a neck strain. I immediately knew I had to come to the hospital. Not for the neck strain but to clear the air around my bulging belly.

Maybe I had a fibroid or something only the medical doctor could explain. Or it was the mere consequence of the binge eating I had gotten used to recently. It had to be one of those.

The door opened. The girl who had entered the doctor's office over half an hour ago stepped out. I couldn't help it. My eyelids fluttered on

impulse. I gave her a look that bore all my anger and anxiety. Such a tiny figure with huge problems, I mused.

I stood and walked into Dr Agwu's office.

The consulting room that doubled as Dr Agwu's office was large, unlike the small offices the other doctors used. An ultrasound machine and an immobile stretcher were on the right, adjacent his table and chair. A few medical charts hung from the door that led to the procedure room behind him. The door was halfway open. Smell of air freshener filled my nose. I knew it was recently sprayed.

I had been in that room before. I knew what was done there. No wonder the girl took so much time. I understood now.

But wait, that tiny girl! She was already eating stolen eggs. My goodness! That girl couldn't be more than twenty years, max.

I hissed. Girls of nowadays wouldn't wait to undress before bathing. I flattened my lips in disgust.

"Hello, Amara. How're you?" Dr Agwu said and displayed his usual smile that assured me I could tell him anything.

I dumped my thoughts. It was time to mind my own business. "I'm fine. Kedu ka oru di?" I said, asking him how work was in Igbo language.

"Work is fine, Sis. Thank you," he said politely with another smile.

That was Dr Agwu's style. One could speak to him as much as one wanted in Igbo language, but he'd always respond in English. I wondered if his tongue were eternally relieved of speaking his mother tongue.

"You're welcome. Well done."

"Thanks. You're looking nourished. It's good to see you." He put out his hand to touch mine briefly.

I smiled. "If you say so."

"I'm sure you are not here just to get my compliment. So what brought you to the hospital?"

"*Nwanne gi nwanyi nwere nsogbu,*" I said.

"What's the problem, Nwanyi oma?"

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My eyelids flew up. He just called me a good woman. It was the first time I would hear him speak the language since I'd known him, a few years before. The nervous part of me became still. I was sure my problem would be resolved if at all I found one.

"I'm gaining weight. And I don't understand why. I know I've been eating anyhow these days, but there may be more to it." I rose to my feet and spun slowly. "Look at me, for crying out loud." I resumed my seat. "I get bigger by the day. Please examine me." I switched to a common Nigerian creole. "Abeg, I wan know wetin dey do me."

Dr Agwu smiled as though all I'd said was nothing big. "Don't worry. You'll be fine," he said. He checked the files on his table and brought out the one that had my name on it. It was no surprise to me. I had submitted a small blue card to the lady in charge of health records at the reception. I knew the blue card, which had my file number written boldly on it, was used to locate my file.

Dr Agwu opened the file and began to write, stopping intermittently to ask me questions, which I provided answers to. He looked up from the file. "When did you say you last saw your period?"

"Last week Monday," I said without having to think deeply. I didn't need to. It was only seven days ago.

"How long did it flow?"

"One day," I said.

"One day?"

His question almost got me anxious again. But then I remembered I had hoped the menstrual flow would be minimal as I was on a journey to Abuja and didn't want to be stained. When it came faintly and then disappeared, I believed it was my wish that was granted. After all, people said wishes could materialise sometimes.

"Yes. One day. Anything wrong with that?" I said with a cocked eyebrow.

"Has it been lasting for only one day in the past?"

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“Well, there was a time it used to last for four or five days. But the ones I can remember in the past few months didn’t go beyond two days,” I said with confidence. After all, I was the master of my body.

“Alright.”

He wrote in the file. He asked another series of questions which I answered to the best of my knowledge.

“You’ll need an ultrasound scan....”

All I wanted was clarification. Even if I needed a test done only in Pluto, I wouldn’t mind.

“I’ll do all you say is necessary. Money is not a problem.” I displayed a smile that was intended to tell him I was capable to deal with whatever he brought on the table.

Shortly after, I was on the examining table. Dr Agwu touched, pressed, squeezed, measured and did all he deemed necessary. Next, I was on another couch, staring at the screen of the ultrasound machine and hoping nothing I couldn’t handle would come up. If it were fibroid, that would be okay. But not some diagnoses that had death linked to them.

Dr Agwu pressed the plastic bottle in his hand, forcing some of its content—cool, blue gel—on my belly. He removed something he later called a probe from the ultrasound machine and placed it on my abdomen, moving it about on the gel previously applied on my belly.

He fixed his gaze on the screen. I didn’t understand what the unstable black and white coloured images meant. He squinted and froze an image on the screen. He glanced at me and stared back at the screen.

My heart skittered. Bad news? I stared at him. His facial expression was cloudy. I blinked. I could feel the pulse in my temple. Oh no! Maybe it was something grave he’d observed.

“Kedu ihe o bu, nwanne m nwoke?” I said, running out of patience. I wanted to know what was happening.

He stared into my eyes. “Amara, you’re pregnant.”

I exhaled. Bless my soul. Thank goodness, it wasn’t what I feared. But think of it? How could I be pregnant? I didn’t understand.

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Dr Agwu pointed at the screen. "This is the baby's head." He moved the probe further on my belly. "And these are the bones of its legs..."

My attention drifted. I couldn't place my finger on it. Pregnant, how? How possible?

Not that I was a virgin. But I remembered John had been careful in the past few months. And Chimobi, I wouldn't even allow him to touch me without protection. Chimobi knew that as well. It was only Ejike that could do as he wanted. But he hadn't been around. He was enjoying life in Australia.

It would be better if the pregnancy were Chimobi's. At least, it would yield me money if it couldn't bring about marriage. Chimobi wouldn't think twice before giving me any amount I requested for the termination of the pregnancy if he didn't feel ready to marry me yet.

But it would be best if the pregnancy were Ejike's. It could be the perfect force to make him marry me. He was the one I loved. And he had enough money that could suffice us all our days. But he hadn't even touched me in close to six months. He was to return from Australia the following month.

"It is twenty-two weeks plus two days now," Dr Agwu said, cutting through my thoughts.

"God forbid! What is twenty-two weeks?" I blinked. There must be a mistake somewhere.

"See for yourself." Dr Agwu pointed at the scary ghost he called the image of the baby in my womb. "Amara, you are pregnant. No doubt. I've been practicing for over ten years. I can recognize a foetus when I see one."

Dr Agwu was right. He had personally scanned me on four different occasions in the past. Twice, the result had been positive. He couldn't be wrong now.

My voice stuck to my throat. My brain kicked to work. It had to tell me how I was pregnant for five months and I didn't know it. It had to explain why my body deceived me into thinking everything was normal. So annoying.

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Dr Agwu finished. He wiped the gel off my belly and pulled down my dress. Before I could pull myself together, he was back at his table, documenting in my file.

I shambled back to my seat. I took a deep breath and fixed my gaze on Dr Agwu. "Nwanne m nwoke, biko nyere nwanne gi nwanyi aka. K'anyi mee nkea dika anyi siri mee ndi ozo," I said. He had to do to this pregnancy what he'd done to others before it.

Dr Agwu shook his head. "Are you not ready yet?"

Ready? Was that even a word in my dictionary right now? How could I be ready without a man? Was I supposed to marry myself?

"I don't know. The right man has not shown up yet."

Dr Agwu hushed. He stared at me for minutes, his eyes probing my soul through the windows of my eyes. No one needed to tell me he was judging me in his mind. It was his first time. He had never done this before.

The silence figuratively gored me to death. What was that look for? Was I not going to pay for the procedure?

"Amara, aga m agwa gi okwu dika nwanne m nwanyi. Listen carefully to what I have to say. You can't keep doing this to yourself. Remember what happened the last time. I was even surprised to see you pregnant. This may be your last opportunity at it. If you insistently want me to go ahead and terminate it, well, I will do my job."

My hope returned. Dr Agwu would terminate the pregnancy if I wanted. That was what I wanted to hear. I didn't need the introductory speech. I didn't care that I almost died the last time I had an abortion in this hospital. That was in the past now. The future was greater than the past.

"The procedure will be different this time around. I'll induce labour. You'll give birth to the baby. Then we'll hand it over to you to discard. It is already bigger than what I could handle the previous way. I can induce you as soon as you're ready."

What! Like seriously? Was I going to go through labour only to discard the product? The same labour women told tale of. Or what was Dr Agwu saying? The excruciatingly painful process. My head forbid. I could

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barely endure the pregnancy termination procedure despite series of analgesics, let alone labour.

“Amara?”

“Oh, Doctor. Thank you. I understand you but isn't there another way around it? I don't like the labour part.”

“The other way is to allow the baby mature. You can have it the normal way or we bring it out surgically. Then the baby becomes yours.”

I shook my head. Dr Agwu didn't seem to understand. “I can't have a child outside wedlock. I can't. I'm not even sure any of the unserious peanuts following me about is ready to embrace responsibility.”

Dr Agwu smiled. I guessed my description was funny to him.

“Try them.” He formed a fist to support his chin. “Try them and see. I don't want you to decide on impulse. Go think about it,” he said, his voice laced with gravity.

I got his message. I didn't need to waste many words trying to make him understand. “Thank you. I'll get back to you.” I rose to my feet and hung my Gucci bag over my shoulder.

“No problem. Don't forget antenatal care is important. Just in case you think it right,” Dr Agwu said.

I nodded. But not in agreement. I simply wanted out of his office. I was done with the useless talk of keeping the baby. I walked to the door and left his office.

## CHAPTER TWO

*NOTHING COULD MAKE* me fuss as a misplaced car key. One glance at the cerulean latest model of Toyota Camry at my disposal made me more worried.

What if someone had taken the key, waiting for me to go in search of it before driving off my car? Not this car. This car was equivalent to the blood in my body. What I did before Ejike could buy me this car was fresh in my memory. I had craved for it. If Ejike had even requested I give away my legs in exchange for the car, I wouldn't have thought it twice. It was the car that made me complete. A complete Lagos babe.

Now, the key was nowhere to be found. I'd rather die than allow my car to be taken away.

My emotion was already a mixture of acid and base. This endless search for my car key was pouring fuel into the fire. I emptied the content of my bag on the bonnet. Nothing much was inside. Two cans of Pringles, strawberry flavour, just how I liked it. A roll of tissue. My wallet and of course Avon lipstick. I couldn't stand not having my lips touched up as necessary.

The key was the only thing I remembered putting in the bag that was missing. Thoughts ran through my head.

I checked my memory. After leaving the hospital, I had driven to a pharmacy to get a one-step diagnostic kit. I was bent on confirming the pregnancy myself. I left the pharmacy and walked to the shop opposite to get the Pringles. Then I returned to my car. How could my key have disappeared?

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I had removed my wallet from my bag at the pharmacy when I wanted to pay. Maybe I had mistakenly dropped my key in the process. I dashed into the pharmacy. I couldn't imagine anyone picking the key.

The pharmacy attendants didn't waste time to tell me they didn't see my key. I glanced around. Nothing looked like it. It couldn't be at the other store. It was the change I collected at the pharmacy that I used at the shop. I didn't even touch my bag until I walked out and dumped the Pringles in my bag.

I walked out. My head dropped and my face crumbled into creases. I'd had enough for a day.

"Hello."

I looked up. A tall, swarthy man was standing beside my car. He smiled halfway, the type only models of sophisticated brand fashion house could afford.

My heart skittered. Was this a plan underway to steal my car? Girl, this was Lagos. What else would this mean? The handsome dude was up to something. I took quick notice of his features, just in case I needed to describe him to the police. He stood at about 6'1". Blemish-free skin. Oval face with the type of hair cut that was perfect on it. Neatly shaved. White vest on jeans and a pair of black trainers.

*Bring your tactics on.* I approached him. I made my face as fierce as possible to warn the stranger not to try to play on my intelligence.

"Good evening," he said in a way that showed he was expecting me to say something.

I didn't answer. I didn't want to provide him an opportunity for a prank. A lot of rumours had filtered into my ears. Things were happening in Lagos. One had to be smart or be spanked.

I minimized the gap between us. "What do you want with my car?" I said authoritatively.

He raised his finger. "Does this belong to you?"

Kwa! That was the key I had almost died, searching for. The polythene in my hand fell off. I closed the gap and reached for my key. As

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opposed to what I thought, he didn't struggle. I snatched the key from him. I heard the sound of my bag hit his leg but that didn't concern me.

He smiled. He stepped aside and walked away, but not without looking at my one-step diagnostic kit that had dropped out of the polythene bag to get fresh air. I rushed to pick up the kit when I noticed his gaze.

He left without a word. He must have thought I was a weirdo. Seriously, was I not? I didn't even say thank you or act in a proper manner to the gentleman. It wasn't my fault. It was due to all I'd heard.

I stepped into the car and secured the doors, just in case the stranger decided to come back. I turned on the air conditioner and rested my head on the wheel. I laughed hysterically. The thought of how I had acted the other time couldn't produce less reaction. I started the car and drove home.

When I entered my apartment, I knew the bathroom was my first point of call. I collected some urine in a cup and reached out for the diagnostic kit. Thank God, I bought two. One now and the other first thing in the morning. I wanted an error-free result.

The strip must have gone crazy because it attested to Dr Agwu's finding in less than a minute.

This was no longer a joke. I was pregnant. Maybe after I slept and woke up in the morning, it would be gone like a bad dream.

Sound sleep sneaked out of my reach throughout the night. No thanks to the nightmares that plagued my sleep and forced me back to my senses intermittently to reason why this was happening to me now.

The first urine I produced in the morning didn't escape testing. The second kit couldn't go to waste. When the result came out positive, I decided to discard my doubts and embrace the truth.

It was high time I sat and reasoned. At this point in my life, I mustn't fail to think of the future. I was old enough to have a child. My parents were expectantly looking forward to marrying me off.

I sauntered to the bedside table and reached for one of my two phones. It was the iPhone Chimobi had recently bought for me that my

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hand touched first. I picked it up, scrolled through my phonebook, and dialled Chimobi's number. He was the most regular visitor I'd had of recent. And he never visited without undressing me.

The line went off. He didn't answer my call. I checked the time. It was quarter past six. Chimobi couldn't have gotten to work at this time. He was the manager of an importation company based in Lagos. And from our past conversations, it seemed he never left his house earlier than seven in the morning.

I tried his second number. It rang repeatedly before he picked.

"Honeycomb," he said.

I rolled my eyeballs as if he could see me.

"I've been calling you. Where did you drop your phone? Gone out with girls?" I said, agitated.

"Which girls? I was in the bathroom."

"Hmm. Bathroom."

"Good morning. How're you?"

"I'm not fine. I'm sick."

"Really? How're you feeling? Have you been to the hospital?"

"Yeah. I went yesterday."

"Good. That's okay. Take your meds and get some rest. I have to go dress up for work."

Just like that? He was putting me off already. He couldn't even ask me what the doctor said.

"Chi, we need to talk," I said just before a feminine voice reached my ears.

Were my ears playing trick on me or was it really a woman's voice I heard?

Click! Chimobi hung up. I called back but he rejected my calls. What was happening? I hadn't even told him I was pregnant and he was already rejecting my calls. I mused.

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I dropped the phone and went into the kitchen. The stench of rotten food slapped me on the face. Was that coming from the waste bin in the kitchen or elsewhere?

My eyes caught a glance of the stack of unwashed plates in the sink and the food remnant that littered the place. Now it was getting clear. How could I use these many plates without washing them? I guessed it was my own adaptation to pregnancy. Every chore seemed too cumbersome. Procrastination was my saviour.

I picked the can of air freshener I used whenever I had to use locust beans or kpomo in my cooking.

The can almost got emptied but the putrid smell was gone.

I would wash the plates when I returned in the evening. My priority now was boiling some rice to eat. While the rice boiled on the gas cooker, I took out the stew I had specially ordered from the restaurant that prepared most of my meals. I warmed the stew and scooped some to eat my salty rice. I couldn't go through the stress of washing off the excess salt after the rice was done. It wasn't too bad. And since it was hot, I could just hurry it down my throat before my tongue could reject it.

My phone beeped. It was a text message from Chimobi notifying me that he would branch at my shop at ten to discuss what I had to say.

I left the house and went to my shop where I sold fabrics. My salesgirls had put everything in place before my arrival at quarter to ten.

Chimobi drove by in the afternoon. I ushered him into the cubicle I used as an office and a resting place.

Chimobi sat, leaning forward, his hands on the table.

"What happened in the morning? I heard a woman's voice over the phone," I said and searched his eyes.

"Amy. Let's focus on the reason why you called me. There's no time for needless argument. I have a meeting in an hour's time."

"Chimobi. I'm not happy with how you're treating me. Can't you answer a simple question?"

"Why are you doing this? Let's just talk."

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“Not until you tell me who the woman was. I’m sure I heard a woman talk to you. Don’t shy away from the truth.”

He sighed. “Amara. That was Stella, my younger sister I told you about. She came on Thursday. She’ll be leaving next week.”

I kept quiet. Not because I completely believed him, but he could be saying the truth. It was Igbo language I heard the person speak. She could be his sister.

“Alright. Why didn’t you tell me she is around?”

“Please don’t start a needless quarrel. I wasn’t thinking about her. How would I know I hadn’t told you?”

“It’s okay. My regards to her.”

“Alright. Thank you. Now let’s discuss what’s on ground.”

I reached out for his hand. I patted his hand lovingly. I wanted him to feel as much love as I could feign.

“Chimobi.”

I stared into his eyes perhaps I could read what was on his mind. But I couldn’t.

“Yes? I’m here.”

“I’m pregnant.”

“What! You’re what?” he said, his voice displaying budding anger.

“I’m pregnant. I told you I went to the hospital yesterday. It was there I realized I am carrying your baby.”

He withdrew his hands in a second and shook his head.

“Do you think I’m stupid? I’m not daft, my dear. How could you be pregnant with my child when I took utmost caution at all times? If you need money, just tell me. Don’t ever try to fake something like this. I wouldn’t even take such in my grave.”

A voice in my head warned me to collect his money and leave him. He wasn’t ever going to accept responsibility for the pregnancy. But then I wanted to try harder. I wanted to see if I could win him over.

“Chi, I have never lied to you.” I quickly brought the death of my younger sister to mind. It was what I needed at this time to force tears out

of my eyes. "I love you with all my heart. And I have tried my best to do every of your bidding. You can't just abandon me and your baby now."

I reached for his shoulder. Slow, careful kneading. "Don't you think we should settle down now? Enough of childish play," I said.

He shot up from his seat. "You don't get it. We both know I'm not the one responsible for this thing you're carrying. You never allowed me without protection."

"Stop saying that. Anything could fail. You're the only man I'm seeing. I won't allow you joke with our baby or me. You had better sit and let's plan our wedding."

"What wedding? You must be joking." He scrolled through his phone and turned the screen to me. "See for yourself. The feminine voice you heard this morning was hers."

I stared at the picture of the woman on Chimobi's phone before he slid his finger on the screen to show me another picture. It was a picture of Chimobi with a laughing, heavily pregnant woman, in a pose that depicted an intimate relationship.

Pain shot through my nerves. But that wasn't enough. I hadn't seen anything yet. The next picture was almost the same except that it had two children in it. Two cute boys who had a striking resemblance with Chimobi. Then the next picture, the next, and the next. Pictures that shocked me to my bone marrow. No wonder Chimobi never told me the password to his phone. He never allowed me to search his phone. He had always said he had nothing to hide but simply disliked someone checking his phone.

He slugged the table. "Forget it, Amara. Marrying you is like a Christmas tree in Pluto. Impossible. If you need money to fix your mess, I can part with some. But I won't take responsibility for what isn't mine. I'm happily married," he said and returned his phone to his pocket.

Did I just hear happily married? It would have been okay if he had only said he was married. But what was 'happily' doing with the 'married'? Rage filled my veins.

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“You claimed you loved me. You said you were single. I still remember you told me countless times that your mum was pressuring you to bring me home. You said you wanted to wait for the right time.” My voice skyrocketed. “If you were happy, you wouldn’t stoop so low to fabricate such lies.”

“Open your eyes, girl. You’re in a city. I’m happy with my marriage. I just wanted to give my wife a break. That was why I resorted to making use of you in the meantime. I didn’t want my pregnant lovely wife worn out. Forget the love part. The truth is, we were both deceiving each other,” he said. He straightened his suit like he would leave any moment from now.

I wanted to run crazy but my brain didn’t cooperate. Not that I loved Chimobi. But I couldn’t stomach all the lies he’d told me. I thought I was his heartbeat. I couldn’t let him drag me in the mud like this. I stood and walked to face him.

“Excuse me, Mr Married. Who would even be pregnant for someone like you? You think you’re somebody?” I hissed. “I was only condescending to date you.”

He shook his head in a way that told me that my words had no effect on him. “No one will marry a slut, Amara. We know good women. You and your likes are only there to pass time,” he said. He pushed me out of the way and walked out.

What was he thinking? I stepped out of my office and bumped into one of the salesgirls, who was eavesdropping and whispering to another girl.

How Chimobi and I had talked aloud in anger flashed through my mind. No. Could it be that these girls had overheard all we had discussed?

Before I could say a word, the girl ran out. She knew too well to face my rage.

I turned and went back into the office. All I could do was cry. I was humiliated.

## CHAPTER THREE

*IT WAS TIME* to reason deeply. I couldn't put my life on the line and go see Dr Agwu with a negative answer without dragging the man responsible for this along.

I took a last look at the sheet of paper on my table. I had struck out Chimobi's name. His angle was a no-go area. Chimobi had blocked me on all social media platforms and barred my numbers. He'd turned his back. And I wasn't ready to go after him. To hell with him.

The pregnancy was John's. He was the culprit. I only wished it wasn't his. But now, there was no choice.

The doorbell rang. I jumped to my feet and rushed to the door, hoping it would be Adaora, my best friend.

"Hey, Amara. How're you?" John said, his voice crystal clear.

I stepped aside to allow him enter. "I'm fine."

We walked into the living room. I flumped onto the nearest sofa. And he took his seat opposite me.

"Amara, I'm hungry. Please get me something to eat. You can make me small semo and vegetable."

I subdued the urge to hiss. John hadn't given me a kobo in about three months. And he had the effrontery to request for food in my house. Food another man's money purchased. Mba. If I had been patient with him, it was because he had been generous in the past. And that was in the

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past. He couldn't expect me to bear with the financial challenges he was facing forever.

Calm down, Amara, I told myself, remembering the news I still had to share with him.

"I don't have semo in the house. If you wouldn't mind bread, I'll make you tea. I have butter and mayonnaise. State your preference."

"I've not tasted pepper in three days. Just prepare me anything I can take with soup."

I eyed him. "I don't have a drop of soup in the fridge. The fridge is actually empty. When last did you send me money for upkeep?"

"Amy. How many times do I have to tell you time is hard? Since I left QTD, I haven't recovered. I'm living on savings. I'm sure everything will be fine soon. I plan to travel to Abuja next week to see someone that promised to get me some contracts. Be patient with me, dear."

I squeezed my lips and shook my head. I was tired of his story. There was always a new story available on his lips. Although I knew he had lost his place at QTD where he had been a top staff and earned a fat salary, I wasn't pleased that he hadn't gotten another placement. After all, he claimed he was related to many senators in the country. All I got each time were stories.

If John hadn't paid a year's rent of my apartment in Lekki phase one, I would have ended our relationship. But not anymore, I was pregnant with his child.

"I've been trying, John. And you know it. You--"

"Get me the bread. And please, make the tea thick. I prefer liquid milk. I'll make do with the butter. Thank you," he said, interrupting me.

I saw hunger jog in his big, brown eyes. I eyed him. His wealth was gone, so was the candlelight love I had for him.

"Amara."

Reluctantly, I straightened. I left and returned with a tray in my hands. Sliced bread, a tin of Milo, a tin of milk, sugar, butter, a cup, and a spoon, and a bottle of water.

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He made himself tea. I watched him eat. He left a few slices of bread, gulped his remaining tea, and belched.

"I am pregnant," I said. He had just finished my food. I wanted to hear what he had to say.

"Is that a joke?" He moved the small table aside.

I rose to my feet and spun. "I'm serious. Isn't it evident?"

The truth was that from the minute I confirmed I was pregnant, it became obvious to me. Ignorance must have dulled my perception.

John stared at me, silent. I wished I could read his mind.

"Aren't you going to say anything?" I dropped on the sofa.

He scratched his beard. "Pregnancy is a good thing."

I waited to hear more. Nothing came.

"So?" I said with an arched eyebrow.

He moved to the edge of the sofa. "Dear, nothing will make me happier than watching my baby grow inside of you. I love you, Amara, there's no doubt about that."

His words were like a cup of chilled water. I relaxed and folded my arms. I wanted to know how he planned to pay for our wedding and raise our child.

"But this is not the right time. I can't afford to marry you now. I could barely take care of myself, let alone others."

Really? Was this not the same person who told me he had been called for contracts?

He continued talking. "You know how demanding Igbos can be. Where will I get money to pay your bride price? I don't want to—"

"You knew I was an Igbo before getting into this relationship. Didn't you? I won't have you talk down on my people. You should have impregnated someone of your tribe instead," I said. I was losing hold on my cool.

"Calm down. I'm not talking down on your people. Hear me out. I would love to take care of you and our baby, but not now. Let's do away with this. We can have another when we are ready. Once I finish executing

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the contracts, I'll go see your parents. We'll get married and have children. Give me till the end of next year, max."

My palms hit each other impulsively. This was just funny. From the look in his eyes, I knew he was only trying to have me abort the pregnancy. He was never going to be ready for marriage.

"I can't have an abortion," I said as if I meant it. I couldn't just give in like that.

"That is what is best for you right now. Think about it, am I fit to be a father now? I'm not trying to be selfish. Even you ain't fit to start mothering now. Do the needful. Let's drop this issue."

"Don't get on my nerves, John. You don't care about me. Do you want me dead?"

"Don't give me that. You know how it works. Will this be your first? Forget it and do the needful."

"I'm not doing anything. I'm having this baby. And you'd better get yourself ready to follow me to my parents."

"When is your rent due?" he said.

I blinked. "What does that have to do with what we're discussing?"

"Just answer my question."

"November."

"Good, that's four months away. Let's do this. You can have the baby if you choose to. When your rent is due, move your things back to the village. I trust your parents won't watch you suffer. They'll take care of you and the kid. After all, I heard Igbo parents own their grandchildren born out of wedlock. That makes it easy."

I shot up to my feet and charged at him, two of my fingers against my head. "John! Are you in your right senses? I should return to the village. How could you say that to me?"

"If you wouldn't listen to sound advice, sort yourself out." He pushed me out of the way and walked to the door. I staggered and fell on the chair.

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“And don’t ever try to reach me until that thing is gone out of the way. I thought you were smarter than this,” he said before using the door.

I was dumbfounded. At that point, I knew John was so much short of a man I could spend the rest of my life with. He wouldn’t even offer me money to get rid of the pregnancy.

I hissed.

I walked to my room and took my notepad. I struck out John’s name. The only one left was Ejike.

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### CHAPTER FOUR

*ADAORA DROPPED THE* glass of water in her hand and stared at me.

“Wow! That’s great news. Pregnancy is sure what I want to hear now,” she said, smiling.

“Are you kidding me?” I said, surprised at Adaora’s attitude.

“Kidding you? Why would I do that? Do you know how much I want you off the street?”

“Off the street. What does that even mean?”

“You shouldn’t be the one asking me that question. At thirty-three, are you supposed to still be wandering the street? You still think of yourself as a girl, don’t you?”

“Excuse me. I’m thirty-two years old, not thirty-three.”

“That was as at your last birthday. Months behind. Anyway, that’s not the bone of contention. My point is that you should be thinking of settling down now.”

“Who says I’m not?”

“Are you? You don’t seem to.”

“Just be patient until you hear the full story.”

“Alright. I’m listening.”

“No one wants to take responsibility for it. Chimobi and John already severed their relationship with me. The last—”

“Wait, who owns it?”

“John.”

“Have you told him about it?”

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"You should know I would have. I did. But he was telling me tales. He said he didn't have money for bride price."

"Are you serious? Has he met your parents to know what the bride price is?"

"Not at all. He said he wasn't ready for marriage and said some nasty things about Igbos."

"This is why I warned you about dating Ngbati Ngbati men. Why couldn't he pick a Yoruba lady, to begin with? He is sick to complain about bride price now."

"How about Chimobi? Is he not an Igbo? I thought he would fit, but he turned his back on me. That jerk is married with two children. He'd always been lying to me."

"Chineke taa ha ahuhu. God will deal with both of them."

"I'm the one being punished here, Ada."

"So what do you intend doing?"

"What else would I do? I'm getting rid of it."

"Get rid of what? Don't you dare! You'd better brace up and keep this for yourself. Don't allow those stupid men to end your life before time."

"Not even my ancestor can tell me to keep it. The reason I've not done it yet was that I was preparing myself for the procedure. Now, I'm ready."

"Enyi m. What do you mean?"

I didn't think I was wrong in any way. Adaora was married, I wasn't. I knew how glorious the welcoming of her first child was. It wasn't out of wedlock, after all. I was the one pregnant before marriage, not her. She wouldn't understand.

"Ada, I have no choice. It would be too shameful for me. How can I raise a child on my own? I can't even imagine myself going about heavily pregnant without being married. I would be carried out feet first instead."

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She clapped with an undertone. “Amara. What is wrong with you? Would you end your life simply because you don’t want to face criticism? Or what exactly are you trying to say?”

Adaora was my twin sister from another mother. I could tell her anything and everything. And her opinion mattered to me. But now that she was insisting on me keeping this pregnancy, I was no longer sure.

“I can’t keep this baby. Its empty-headed father wouldn’t even cast a second glance at me. How could I keep such a baby? I’m not sure you know the gravity of what you’re asking me to do. I can’t. I don’t have the gut.”

Adaora walked to me. She stared at me for a while before sitting beside me. She leaned towards me, her hand over my shoulder.

“You can do this. It’s nobody’s business that you’re pregnant. You’re not underage. Don’t ruin your chances of having a biological child.”

I shrugged. “I’d rather not have one than face utmost ridicule.”

“Worms must be feasting on your brain. You’d rather be childless than have one? What are you thinking? Do you think any man will accept that? My friend, think twice.”

Adaora was right. How Auntie Uche suffered endlessly in her husband’s house due to childlessness was still vivid in my mind. She ended up in her father’s compound, but not before her father returned her bride price to her husband. Her husband almost snuffed life out of her. And her in-laws. I’d rather not remember how wicked they were. God forbid my life being like Auntie Uche’s. She was still an occupant of a small room in her father’s house till date, living a life close to miserable.

“But—”

Adaora shook her head. “Don’t but me. I won’t be a part of this. If only for what I experienced the last time, I wouldn’t ever support abortion. I can’t run helter-skelter. Abeg.”

There was no point arguing. That was Adaora. Once she said her mind, she was done. Nothing would change it. I’d better keep my decision to myself.

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I nodded. "Alright. I understand. Thank you."

She searched my eyes. Probably to be sure if I was serious or not. I didn't care. I rose to my feet and left for the kitchen. I was boiling some rice for us to eat. I needed to check if it was ready.

Adaora dropped her phone in a rush as I emerged from the kitchen minutes later, a tray in my hands. I wouldn't have sensed anything if her expression didn't show she was hiding something.

I went to the dining table to drop the tray. I could sense she was stealing glances at me. What was Adaora up to? What was she thinking?

"Ada, come eat," I said.

She bobbed her head and smiled. "Thanks, dear."

She rose to her feet and approached me.

"Adaora, you're hiding something. What's on your mind?" I said. My curiosity had reached its limit.

"Hide? I have nothing to hide. I was chatting with hubby when you came out."

I shrugged. "Alright."

There was nothing to worry about. I would eventually find out whatever she was hiding.

We sat and ate in silence, thousands of thoughts running through my mind.

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## CHAPTER FIVE

*I PUSHED MY* cart to the cash point. After almost an hour of leisure walk in the supermarket, I was able to bring my shopping to a close. Supplies at home had dwindled to the last bit. The moment I couldn't find biscuit to munch at home, I knew my store was empty.

I leaned on the counter and watched a cashier package my goods. I didn't know I'd picked many things until the cashier finished and there were five shopping bags to carry.

"Eighty-four thousand, five hundred and twenty naira, ma," the cashier said.

What! I couldn't spend that much on shopping now.

I knew how important it was to save money. Dr Agwu would demand no less than two hundred thousand naira. I had spent double the last time to drag me far from death's door. The complications almost took my life. The procedure would be different now. Dr Agwu had said it was going to be a preterm delivery, so it shouldn't yield any complications. All the same, I was going to need money.

I needed to cut down on the goods. But then, how would the cashier view me? I was dressed up as a rich young woman. I didn't even bother to remove the leather label on the wrist of the McKumpton dress I wore. The cashier would probably look at me askance and hiss, thinking of how wretched I was for shopping more than I could afford.

I pretentiously searched my bag for a non-missing wallet, providing myself an ample time to think. I didn't want to do something I would regret later. But how I was perceived by others was more important to me. I wanted to be held in high regard.

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“Don’t worry, madam. Your goods have been paid for,” another cashier said, handing a debit card to the cashier who was attending to me. “Take this,” she said to her colleague.

I wasn’t sure I heard her right. “Are you talking to me?” I said in disbelief.

“Yes, ma. Someone has paid your bill.”

Delight bustled through me. Yes! This was the right time to get such gestures. But I had to feign posh. I couldn’t let myself down like that.

“I have my card here. And I have sufficient money to pay,” I said.

I took out my wallet, removed my debit card, and waved it in the lady’s face, praying in my heart that she wouldn’t be quick to collect it.

“The person insisted that your bill be deducted from his account,” she said.

I lowered my gaze in a way that implied I had no choice than to honour the gesture.

“Who is the person, please?”

The cashier pointed towards the door. “He just walked out the door. I’m sure he’s waiting outside. I still have his card to return,” she said.

She used the card and headed out.

“Please wait for me. I have to say a word of thanks to the fellow.”

She obeyed.

“My car is parked outside. Can I get someone to help with my bags?” I said to the other cashier.

“Of course.” She called an attendant who arranged the bags in a cart and followed me behind.

My eyelids fluttered. I was eager to meet the person who saved my face today. The cashier walked to a man and handed over the card. I took the cue that he was the one and approached him. His face was familiar. I ransacked my brain to bring to mind where exactly I had seen his face before.

Oh! He was the man who found my car key at the pharmacy carpark last week.

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I felt embarrassed. Despite how I had treated him. He still had enough kindness left to pay my bill. He didn't even seem he could afford half of what he'd just paid for me. He was dressed in a round-necked vest, brown chinos, matching face cap, and black sandals.

"Good afternoon," I said, my facial expression unable to hide my surprise.

"Hello," he said and smiled.

The smile perfected his look. He was handsome. The last time I took a good look at him was for report purpose. It was different now.

"I gave the store attendant my card but I was told you had paid my bill," I said, trying to sound composed. I wouldn't want him to think I didn't have enough money to begin with. "I insisted, but I guessed you had insisted before me. Anyway, I'm grateful."

"You're welcome. It's a pleasure."

"We've met before." It wasn't a statement nor a question.

This time, he grinned. I didn't know men could have brilliant white set of teeth as well. They sparkled in his mouth.

"Yes. At an exhibition and –"

I didn't remember meeting him before the pharmacy event. "What exhibition?"

"Art exhibition at Eko hotel, November, last year."

I rummaged my brain. Nothing popped up. I gave him a look that begged him to remind me. He was reluctant but I maintained the look. I wouldn't give in. I remembered the exhibition itself, I was there. But I didn't remember seeing him.

"I was the guy in a blue suit who tried to clean your dress."

He said no more than that. Images flashed in my brain. I had gone to the event, dressed in a white gown laced with fur. A guy pushed me from behind and made me spill coloured drink on the dress. I felt so bad. I was at the event on Ejike's invitation. I was so sure he wouldn't walk with a lady in a stained dress. A man dressed in a blue suit handed me a towel to mop the liquid before my dress got worse. I snapped it out of his hand and

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walked away. I didn't even thank him. I wanted to rush to where Ejike was to inform him of what had happened. When the man in blue suit showed up in my way again, I thought he was trying to flirt with me. If Ejike saw that, it could be the end of the event for me. I snubbed him and excused myself. If I had known Ejike would eventually send me home before the end of the event, I would have been nicer to him perhaps.

"Uh U-Uh." Words stuck to my throat. Twice I had met him and treated him badly.

"It's okay. You don't have to worry about it. How're you?"

"I'm fine. And I'm sorry."

"Please don't mention."

I remembered the attendant was waiting behind me. I took permission from the man and led the attendant to my car. He dropped the bags on the rear passenger seat and left. I shut the door and return to the man. He was still standing, staring.

"Uh- Thanks so much. I'm grateful."

"You're welcome."

I turned to leave. I wasn't in the mood for a long chat. I had already appreciated him. That was enough.

"What's your name?"

I turned my head. "Amara."

"I'm Christopher. I'm pleased to meet you again."

"The pleasure is mine."

"Sorry, would you mind if I asked for your number?"

Of course, I couldn't. He had just paid my bill. If at all I would block him from being able to reach me, I still had to do him the temporary honour of handing him my complimentary card.

I managed a smile and shook my head. I checked my bag and gave him my card.

"Thank you. I'll give you a call, Amarachi," he said.

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I blinked. Calling me Amarachi was only my mum's way of addressing me. Every other person called me Amara. I felt like my mum was reaching out to me. "Alright, Chris."

I walked to my car, my head straight.

Why did Chris pay my bill? Why did he want to call me? Didn't he notice I was pregnant?

It wasn't as if my belly was that protruded. It was of a size that could be mistaken for excessive fat accumulation, although keen eyes would know it wasn't. But Chris had seen the pregnancy test kit I bought at the pharmacy. Maybe he thought the result was negative. Or maybe he thought I got the kit for someone else.

I discarded my thoughts and sped off.

## CHAPTER SIX

*HOT WATER DISSOLVED* the thick mixture of chocolate and milk in my cup. I added two cubes of sugar and took the cup to the dining table. With the way I ate of recent, my savings wouldn't last six months. I was always hungry. Something to drink, something to munch. I just had to keep my mouth occupied most of the time.

My phone rang. It was on the table in the living room. I was unwilling to walk to the living room to pick it now. I would return the call of whoever was calling after I finished my meal.

The phone rang repeatedly, forcing me to abandon my meal halfway. Who could be calling at this time?

I slid my finger on the screen and raised the phone to my ear.

"Hello."

"Where did you drop your phone? I've been calling for over five minutes. Where have you been? How could you leave your phone untended? Isn't it ridiculous to call you over and over again without you answering the phone? I had--"

The number was strange but I didn't need to ask who was on the line. Only Ejike talked audaciously like that.

"I'm so sorry, sweetheart. I was laundering my clothes in the bathroom when you were calling. I was going to hang the clothes outside when I heard my phone ring. Please forgive me, darling. I'm on my knees," I said.

"You had better be."

"I'm sorry."

## LOVED

"It's okay."

"Thanks, Love."

"How're you?"

I exhaled loudly. "I'm healthy but I'm broke. I need money."

"You always need money. Anyway, I called to inform you I'll be coming to Lagos next week. I'm rounding up here."

What a delight! Ejike was returning home.

"Are you for real you're coming home? I can't wait to see you."

"I am. Flight already booked. I got you some things. I'm sure you'll like them."

"Hun uh. Thank you, my love. I have missed you."

He laughed. "Don't worry. I'll see you as soon as I'm back."

"Let me start getting ingredients for Oha, Ofe akwu, Nsala, Ugba, and all other delicacies you've missed."

He laughed. "I was just about saying that."

"Don't worry. I won't disappoint you. Trust me."

"Let me get going. I have a meeting now."

"Alright. I love you."

"Yeah. Bye," he said and hung up.

Ejike was returning home. What would I say happened to me while he was away? How would he feel if he met me pregnant? I couldn't let that happen. Never.

I needed to act fast. Tomorrow would be good. I was resolving it all tomorrow.

## CHAPTER SEVEN

*THIS TIME AROUND*, I didn't have to wait for long before seeing Dr Agwu.

I took my seat opposite him after exchanging pleasantries with him. He knew I was back with the answer of what he had told me to go think about.

"Dr Agwu," I said, lacing my voice with as much helplessness as I could. I needed him to show compassion and acceptance. I would need that to endure through the process I was about to go through.

"Circumstances have forbidden the nurture of this pregnancy. I have to get rid of it. Please understand me."

He fixed his gaze on me for a while before speaking. "No problem. If that's what you want, we'll have it done." He wrote in my file as usual.

"Thank you, brother."

"Please be here tomorrow at ten in the morning. I'll get things ready before you arrive."

"Why tomorrow? Can't we do it today and forget about it?"

"There are some booked cases I have to attend to today. And I still have to run a clinic. Tomorrow will be just fine."

I preferred today. I wanted to have it done and recover completely before Ejike returned. Now I had no choice than to wait.

"Okay. How about the bill?"

"You can deposit a hundred and fifty. Your balance will depend on what the process eventually required."

"Alright. No problem."

## LOVED

I wouldn't mind spending all of my savings on this. I was sure Ejike would lavish money on me when he returned. I had to sow a seed. "Thanks very much," I said.

"You're welcome."

I left Dr Agwu's office and walked to my car. Hope and relief fought for space in my head. Tomorrow was going to bring an end to my worries.

I drove to my shop. It was almost midday when I got there. A truck had developed a fault on the road and caused traffic.

I parked at my usual spot and ambled into the shop.

The salesgirls were seated talking.

"Good morning, ma," they chorused as I entered.

"You are seated gossiping instead of praying for customers. Are you in your right senses at all?" I glanced at the tallest of them. "You, bring me the records." I walked past them and went into my office. She brought the records and I took time to scrutinize them.

My phone rang. I glanced at the phone screen. Christopher. He hadn't stopped calling since our last meeting. He was always checking on me.

I ignored his call. I knew what a man like him would want. I've had friends with benefits in the past, and I knew they only use to dump. Love from them was never genuine. Love to them was only a word. A noun.

Christopher had better forget it. I was in no mood for a petty relationship. I needed to get out of the mess I was in, and focus on Ejike. Hopefully, Ejike would get serious and propose to me.

Christopher called again. I rejected his call. Couldn't he just let me alone?

I picked my phone and typed a message.

*"Hey, Chris. Can't talk now. Have a nice day."*

I sent the message to Chris. I wasn't going to entertain him any longer.

I straightened and went to plug my phone to an electric socket. The battery was almost flat.

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I calculated the sales recorded in the book. I had my way of monitoring sales and the records. I was aware of how much loss salesgirls could cause in a shop if not kept in close watch.

My phone rang again. I hissed. Didn't Christopher read my message? What was his problem? I was definitely going to block his number this time around. I stood and went to pick the phone. It stopped ringing before I reached it. I checked my call log. The number that called wasn't registered in my phone book.

I dialled the number. I wanted to know who the caller was. Probably an intending customer.

"Hello," I said as soon as the call was answered.

"Amara, come to the village right away. Your mother is clamouring to see you. She's dying."

The caller didn't introduce herself. And her voice wasn't familiar. "Who's on the line, please?" I said.

I doubted if she actually heard my question.

"You can't let your mother die without seeing you. Amara, come home," she said.

What? Whose mother? It couldn't be my esteemed mum.

"Kwa! What happened? I still spoke to my mum last week. Please, who am I speaking with?"

"This is Auntie Uzor."

"Good afternoon, Auntie. What happened to Nne m?"

"She is gravely sick. You'll have the details when you get here," she said and hung up.

My heart thumped. I couldn't imagine my mum dying. Not now. I wanted to see her.

All other things escaped my mind. Seeing my mum took priority.

I booked a flight for the next day. I was going to see my mum tomorrow.

# LOVED

## CHAPTER EIGHT

*AS SOON AS* my plane landed in Owerri, I wasted no time to board a car to Orlu. The car took over an hour to reach Orlu. I hated travelling. If the car had been in perfect condition, I would probably not have been so stressed.

Home was in Umuowa. I boarded another car home.

I alighted from the car and walked towards the house. Auntie Ezeoma, my aunt, was the first person I met.

I bobbed my head, smiling. "Auntie Eze. Good morning."

"What's good about the morning? She hissed and walked inside.

My jaw sagged. What went wrong? Was my mum dead already? But I came as fast as I could. And I didn't even dare come by road. What was my fault in this? I doubled my steps, my heart racing.

I walked into the living room. My mum, aunt, and my cousin were seated.

One glance at me, my mum was already on her feet, crying, and shouting. "So it is true. Aru emee! What have you done! Oh my goodness," she said. Her voice was crystal clear.

A dying person couldn't talk with so much vigour.

I was confused. What was happening here? The news I'd heard was that my mum was dying. But here she was, wailing as if I was the one dead. Perhaps it was my father who died. The caller probably made a mistake. But what was the abomination she was shouting about?

I stood still, dazed, thoughts running through my mind. My mum flumped on the floor, crying. Auntie Ezeoma, mum's younger sister, sat on

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the chair behind mum, her hands patting my mum's shoulder, trying to calm her down.

My eyes drifted. Ozioma, my cousin, was on the right, shaking her head and staring at me in disgust.

I did a quick self-examination. Was I not dressed right? I was dressed in a snugly fitting, off-shoulder Levis dress. And I wore my best wedge heels. What was I missing?

Uncle Umazi, my father's immediate, barged out of the adjoining room. The expression on his face was as stern as that of a hungry hyena.

"You're a disgrace to this family, Amara. I'm so disappointed in you. How dare you? I said how dare you? May heaven punish me if I do not ensure you suffer for this," he said.

Tears welled up my eyes. Not that I knew what I did. But his comments were overwhelming.

"What did I do? What's happening here?" I said. My eyes oscillated in their sockets.

My uncle dashed towards me and landed a slap on my face. I felt as if I was stung by a thousand wasps. Pain shot up my nerves and stars flashed in my eyes. I was aware Uncle Umazi had an anger problem, he could demolish his own house when angry. But why would he slap me? What did I do to him?

My mum jumped to her feet and came between my uncle and me. "Biko. Just leave her. Don't let her collapse," she said.

"So you have the effrontery to ask me what you did. A whole daughter of the highest chief of our land getting pregnant out of wedlock. Abomination!" Uncle Umazi said, livid.

My heart seemed to cease functioning. How did news get home? My brain whirred in my skull. I couldn't believe my ears. Who could have brought home the news?

How I wished I had known I was called for this. I wouldn't have moved an inch away from Lagos.

## LOVED

“Have you suddenly gone deaf? Can’t you defend yourself?” he said, glowering. I could see the desire to dish me more slaps on his face. My mum was his restraint.

Ozioma hissed long enough for the sound to permeate the atmosphere. “What will she say? Can’t we see the pregnancy? Look at her. Such a disgrace.”

She was two years older, if not, I could have projected my frustration on her. But not on the watch of my mum and the intruding relatives. I wonder why they couldn’t mind their own businesses.

My father emerged. He was as unruffled as a stream in the morning. “Enough argument here! Have your seat everyone,” he said with authority usual of him.

They obeyed instantly. No one ever disrespected my father. Many worshipped him. He was a high chief of Orlu.

He sat and leaned against the spine of the chair.

I wished I were dead. I frayed, my legs shaking under me. My left hand was still on my cheek.

He cast me a scrutinizing gaze. “And you, sit.”

I nodded and walked to the nearest chair, tail between my legs.

My father stared at me for a while before he spoke. “Adanna.”

That was how he addressed me. I was his first child and only daughter.

I parted my lips with difficulty. “Papa.” I stared at my feet. I couldn’t bring my eyes to meet his. There was too much fury in his big brown eyes.

“Is it true you’re pregnant?”

I dared not lie. If everyone could fathom I was pregnant from mere looking at me, I could no longer hide the truth. What if I lied and Papa took me to the hospital to confirm? I knew a sword too well to play with its blade.

I sighed, thinking of what answer to give.

“Don’t make me ask that question again. You’re not deaf,” my father said.

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“Yes, Papa.”

“Yes, you are pregnant?”

I could only nod. My lips were stuck.

He tapped his metal walking stick against the hard floor, his head bowed. I needed no one to tell me he was highly disappointed in me. I felt his sorrow. Tears poured from my eyes.

Auntie Ezeoma eyed me. “If she were with a child of the son of the soil, wouldn’t it be better? But no, our darling Adanna got impregnated by a Yoruba man who wouldn’t even take responsibility for the pregnancy. What a shame!” she said.

What! They knew this much! Who told them this? I wished someone could just shoot me. I wanted to die. I lifted my hands to cover my face. It dawned on me that was what Adaora was hiding. She must have shared the news with my parents. Adaora was the only one who could do this. She was the only one I disclosed the truth to. She had access to my family. We were from the same neighbourhood. She knew my parents just as I knew hers.

“That is what happens to a covetous woman. You have broken the family tradition. You have desecrated the altar. You have brought shame on our revered chief,” Ozioma said.

I wished they would all keep quiet. Their comments would only further infuriate my father.

Like a rain-beaten chicken, I sat, hoping this would be over and I would be on my way back to Lagos.

“We will have a family meeting. Until then, stay in the house. I will think of what to do to you,” Papa said.

He stood and left the living room. My uncle followed him.

I was done for. These people would ruin my chance of getting rid of the pregnancy in time before Ejike returned.

“Amarachi, how could you do this to me and your father? How could you do this to this household?” Mama said, still sobbing.

## LOVED

I understood her pain. I was her pride. My dad even treated me better than he treated my two younger brothers. They had every right to be furious with me.

When the morning episode ended. I sighed with relief. I dared not eat. Thank goodness, I dropped a pack of biscuit in my bag. I shut myself in a room and nibbled at the biscuit. I wouldn't even step outside.

When news reached me that the family meeting would hold in two weeks' time and I had to stay at home until then, I wept like a baby. I couldn't imagine bearing the scorn of everyone for two whole weeks.

Days rolled by slowly. I was served each meal with derogation sufficient to cause indigestion. The two weeks I spent at home was the most severe punishment I'd experienced.

After everyone had his or her fill treating me like an outcast for desecrating the family tradition, the family meeting ended.

A decision was reached. I was to face the music all by myself. I was to have the baby and raise it. The family would have nothing to do with me until I returned to my senses and present to them a responsible Igbo for marriage.

I endured all the unspeakable insults. My knees went sore from kneeling for a long time. I apologized as much as I could.

When morning came the following day, I wasted not even a minute before embarking on my journey to Lagos.

It was a huge relief leaving home.

## CHAPTER NINE

*THE DOORBELL RANG.* I rose from the chair and headed for the door.

I opened the door halfway and stared. It was the concierge.

“Good morning, sir,” I said, rubbing my eyes.

“We’re in the afternoon. Good afternoon.”

“Really?” I had lost track of time, sleeping.

“Madam, you are owing service charge. You have not paid—”

I wasn’t in the right state of mind to be asked for money. I was just recovering from my ordeal in the village, no one should add a headache to my plight.

“It’s not like I’ve been owing before. Just be patient with me. I’ll pay,” I said, frowning.

He widened his eyes and shook his head. “That’s what you’ve been saying for the past few months. Will patience buy diesel in the generator or get rid of your waste? I don’t understand why people are so callous. You’ve been enjoying twenty-four hours power supply and all the services provided, but to pay is a problem,” he said with a raised voice.

There was nothing I detested more than having people speak ill of me. If others heard what he was saying, they could lose their respect for me.

“Please don’t shout at me. I will pay.”

“I just came to inform you that your light and water supply will be cut off by the end of the week if you don’t pay up your service charge.

## LOVED

You're owing too much than a fool can be comfortable with. Have it in mind."

"I'm sorry. I'll pay."

He handed me a sheet of paper and stormed off.

I shut the door and walked in. I sat on the sofa and scanned through the words on the paper. What! Nine hundred thousand naira. How was I owing this much? I checked. I was owing five-month service charge, excluding the current month. It dawned on me Chimobi had paid the last service charge. And since then had been promising to pay. Time had developed wings. Five months was already gone.

There was no way I could pay the money except if I wanted to run out of business. I had more than the house to spend money on, after all. I threw the paper on the floor. They had better cut off the light. But how about water? How was I going to survive without it? I took my second phone and transferred one hundred and fifty thousand naira from my account to the agency in charge of the house. I would get reimbursement from Ejike, I thought. I was sure Ejike would pay off my debt when he arrived.

I sighed. I forced what my family members had said to the background. First thing tomorrow, I was going to the hospital to have an abortion. I would tell anyone who cared to ask that the baby died during delivery.

I couldn't lose Ejike too.

The doorbell rang. Who was it this time? It couldn't be Adaora. She wouldn't dare come to my house. She knew what she had done. I would tear her apart if she came.

Maybe the concierge forgot to mention something. Or could it be my neighbour? I had been away for two weeks. She could be wondering why I travelled without informing her.

I slouched to the door and opened it. Ejike walked in. I froze.

"You didn't tell me you were coming," I said, a look of bewilderment on my face.

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“Would you please tell me why your phone has been switched off since many days ago?” he said. Anger flashed in his eyes.

My iPhone battery had gone flat in the village because I had left the charger back at home. I had been in a rush when I was leaving. I never knew I would spend two weeks. So I had to rely on my second phone to communicate with whomever I wanted. Ejike didn’t have my second number.

“Uh U-uh. I travelled to visit my parents and left my phone charger at home. I just returned today.”

He scrutinized me and shook his head. My heart skittered. Had he observed I was pregnant as well? I hoped not. Men usually didn’t have keen eyes.

“I’ve repeatedly tried to reach you. How’re you doing? I missed you,” he said. He stepped forward and kissed my forehead.

I sighed with relief. He must be unaware. If he mentioned it, I was ready to lie the pregnancy was his. I was ready to say I didn’t tell him because I wanted it to be a surprise. I was ready to say the pregnancy was as old as the time he’d spent in Australia. I was ready to force it on him.

“I missed you, too. When did you arrive?”

“Some days ago.” He walked into the living room and I followed behind.

“Let’s go out,” he said a while after we had talked about everything that came to mind.

I didn’t want to. My body ached. And my joints still hurt, especially my knees. “Let’s do that on weekend,” I said with pleas written on my face.

“Please. I can’t afford not to take you out after spending so much time away from you. Please don’t say no. I promise to bring you back soon.”

I lost my voice against his own. I pulled myself together and went into my room to get dressed. I ensured I picked appropriate wear – a loose-fitting long dress – and a pair of low-heeled footwear. I applied makeup on my face and wore a wig.

## LOVED

Ejike and I walked out of the house. I scanned the parking space.

"Where's your car?" I asked him.

"My car? I didn't bring any car."

"How did you get here?"

"A friend brought me over. I had a new car shipped over before I travelled. It should be ready for collection in less than a week."

We had to use my car. I hurried back into the house to get my car key.

Ejike drove. He took me to one of the top clubs in town. We alighted from the car and went in. Ejike led us to the VVIP area. He pulled a chair for me to sit, a big smile on his face.

I ordered the most expensive dish. I always felt financially secured with Ejike around. I ate to my fill and enjoyed servings of expensive wine. I didn't deny myself good dessert.

Fresh air brushed against my skin. I felt relaxed. Ejike and I conversed. He reminded me of his love for me and spoke endlessly of how much he had missed me. I got carried away. I wished the evening would never end.

Shortly after, Ejike took permission to use the restroom. I slowly ate my dessert while he was away. By the time I was done, Ejike had not returned.

I waited for about ten minutes. I grew nervous. I straightened and went to check the restrooms. Nothing pertaining to Ejike was there.

I was heading to the door to check if he was outside when I was stopped by one of the attendants. I couldn't step out without paying the bill first. I explained I only wanted to check someone outside, but I was told it was against the club policy. Since the person I came with was not on seat, I couldn't go out unless I paid.

I dared not argue or ask for the bill. I returned to my seat, ordered a cup of wine, and awaited Ejike.

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I dialled Ejike's number. My calls were diverted to a voicemail box. I waited but he didn't show up. When I had waited almost an hour, I knew something wasn't right.

I requested for the bill and gave the attendant my debit card reluctantly. Two hundred and thirty thousand naira was bigger than I would willingly spend on food. If it were designer wear or shoes, I wouldn't mind.

I exited. My eyes drifted through the parking space. My car had been replaced by another where Ejike had parked it when we came. Could he have left? I checked around again. My car was missing, as well as Ejike.

How would I get home now? This wasn't funny. Why would Ejike do this to me?

It was getting dark. I trekked out of the gate and walked down the street, thinking of how to sort myself out. A black jeep honked. I wasn't in the driver's path. Why the honk?

He honked again. I turned my head in the direction of the car. The person seated behind the wheel was smiling. It was Christopher. I walked to the car. He signalled me in and I didn't attempt rejecting the offer.

"What are you doing here?" I said.

"I'm coming from a program. I had to drop someone off around here. How about you?"

"Uh. E-Er, I came to see someone around here as well," I said.

"Where's your car?"

"At the mechanic's workshop. It developed a minor fault." I grinned to corroborate my story.

"I'm sorry about that. So where are you headed?"

"Home."

He gave me a questioning look.

"Dumelo Estate," I said.

"Can I take you home?"

I smiled. "If you wish," I said as politely as I could. I couldn't miss out on such an offer at a time like this.

## LOVED

Christopher drove me home. I alighted from his car, thinking he would request to drop by. He told me to rest well as though he knew I was worn out. He bade me goodbye, reversed his car, and left.

I stood and watched him speed off. Maybe he wasn't after my nakedness after all.

I discarded my thought. Someone like him would already be married. He was good looking and seemed a gentleman. He was probably trying to fool me like the others. I've had enough.

I walked in, my eyes heavy with unshed tears.

## CHAPTER TEN

*I FLUTTERED MY* eyelids, wanting to be sure what I saw was real. I wiped my face time and again. Four babies were seated on the floor. They were more beautiful than any baby I'd ever seen. Nothing was short. Nothing was missing. Perfect was the right word to describe them.

I took my eyes off them and avoided their path. I tried to bypass them with so much care that I didn't notice what was ahead. I bumped into a shelf, tipping the bucket atop it over. The content poured on my head. And I was soaked in putrid, slimy, viscous, black liquid. Disgusting!

I was embarrassed and irritated. The babies burst into hysteric laughter. Nothing was more hilarious than this to them.

Tears gushed out of my eyes. Not only because I was in a mess, but for the babies' laughter that pierced my very soul.

I woke up. It was a nightmare. Sleep fled out of my reach. The more I tried to suppress the faces of the babies, the more they surfaced in my mind. I could still hear their laughter ring in my head.

I went to the bathroom and had my bath.

I checked my phone. Neither call nor text message from Ejike. Wouldn't he reach me to explain what happened the previous night?

It was just some minutes past six. He would call me when the sun is up, I assured myself.

I rolled endlessly in bed, strategizing in my head how I would address the issues on my hands.

## LOVED

My phone rang, snapping me out of my slumber. Before I could reach the phone, it stopped ringing. I swiped left on the screen. Nineteen missed calls. What! My eyes widened.

I clicked on call log. Ejike's number was absent. It was only the number of the phone I had dropped in my shop for the attendants to use in reaching customers or me that was displayed. What could be wrong? Were there customers waiting to see me?

The phone rang again.

"Hello."

"He-hello, madam," Antonia, one of the salesgirls said, her voice distressed.

"Hello. What's wrong?"

"Ah, madam. They don't close shop o."

My heart skittered. "Close shop? Which shop? For what reason? Who closed it?"

"Nah your oga come this morning. He carry plenty people follow body. They don't pack all the market way they for shop inside one big motor. He can't lock shop, send us comot and left."

"Are you in your senses? Which oga came to whose shop?"

"Na your oga come. Na for outside we dey now. He don't pursue us comot. I don't dey call you since sef."

I jumped to my feet. "Which oga?" I screamed.

"Ah, madam. Your oga wey tall and yellow. Your husband."

My brain seemed whacked. The only person my salesgirls addressed as my oga or husband was Ejike. How could he pack my goods and close down my shop? It had better be a joke.

Although he was the one who rented the shop and paid for the first stock, but that didn't give him the right to do such a thing. How could he just barge in and close down my shop?

"I'm coming." I hung up. My phone screen displayed 11:50 am. I had overslept.

I called Ejike. His line was switched off.

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I slipped into a blue kaftan, carried my bag, and left the house.

I got to the parking space before I remembered Ejike had taken my car the previous evening. My estate wasn't befitting for anyone without a personal vehicle. How would I get a ride?

I hissed and began to trek. The sun didn't make it easy on me. It just minded its own business, caring less about what its rays did to my supple skin.

I remembered I had the contact of a driver working with Hire Me Agency. I called him, requested for a cab, and told him my location. I waited at the next junction until the driver showed up. He drove me to my shop. I dropped from the car and paid him.

I rushed to my shop. It was locked with strange padlocks. A paper, which had 'closed' inscribed on it, was pasted on the door.

I questioned the girls. Their description matched Ejike's. I fumed, trying to reach him on the phone.

A thought of reporting him at the police station crossed my mind. But what would I say? Ejike wasn't a stranger. Millions of naira of his had gone into setting up the business.

Tears tugged at my eyes. Ejike had just taken a huge step at ruining my life.

"Madam," Fidelia, a salesgirl said, cutting through my troubled thoughts.

I glanced in her direction.

She genuflected. "Madam, abeg. No vex with wetin I wan talk. My papa dey sick, he dey for hospital. As month don end now, I wan ask say make you give me my money wey I go take buy melecine for my papa. I no wan make he die as my mama don die."

My blood boiled. How dare her ask me for salary when my shop was gone?

"Madam, see, nah my own pikin no well. Doctor say he go collect blood. Na the money I dey wait for," Rita, the eldest of them said before I could speak.

## LOVED

I sighed. It didn't matter how angry I was, the attendants had the right to ask for their wages.

I knew they could make a scene out of this and make every passer-by turn to ask what was happening. I didn't want any more disgrace than I already had.

I opened my bag. The money from sales I took home yesterday was still in it. I counted the money. Thirty-two thousand naira. I removed two thousand naira and handed Antonia the remaining.

"This is what I have on me presently. Share it equally amongst the four of you. You'll get your balance later. You can all see that the store is closed."

"Thank you, ma," Antonia said.

"How we go con collect our balance since shop don close?" Fidelia said.

I glowered. She wasn't even grateful I gave them something.

I hissed and walked away. I boarded a cab before I remembered I hadn't collected the two office phones from the attendants.

I immediately called the numbers and realized the phones were switched off.

I shook my head. I would deal with the attendants later. Now I had to handle Ejike first.

## CHAPTER ELEVEN

*AS IF MY* feet were impaled to the floor, I stood still under the shower, the tears pouring from my eyes undistinguishable from the water filtering on me through the shower strainer.

Everything seemed a dream. Where did I get it wrong? Was I at fault for loving and trusting Ejike so much? How could he stab me unawares? How could he not think twice before acting?

I probably wouldn't have been this disturbed if Ejike had told me what exactly I did to deserve all he had done to me. I just didn't understand.

I stepped out of the bathroom into the room, dripping.

My phone rang. I glanced at the direction where it was and hissed. I didn't have the energy to talk to anyone. I had called every of my friends and none of them gave any reasonable advice. I had nothing to say to anyone anymore.

I sank on the bed. The phone rang again and again. I reached for it on the bedside table. The caller was Ejike. My heart leapt. But I wasn't sure it was for joy.

The call ended before I could answer it. I prayed in my heart that he would call again. I scrolled through my call log. Ejike had called me twice. Other contacts were registered in the log as well.

I waited for Ejike's call. I didn't want to call him back in a rush. I wanted him to experience what being ignored felt like. I couldn't stand him thinking I was jumping at him.

## LOVED

Ten minutes turned twenty, thirty, forty, and rolled into an hour. Ejike didn't call. I picked the phone and dialled his number. It rang but no answer came.

Was he angry already? I muttered curses. Such an egoistic man. If not for my current situation, I would ditch him without looking over my shoulder.

I redialled his number. It rang repeatedly. I was almost giving up when a feminine voice came through the line.

"Hello, who's this?" the voice said.

Who picked Ejike's phone? Had Ejike deleted my number already? What was going on? My brain cells threw tantrums at deciphering what was happening.

"Who's on the line?" the voice said, louder than before.

This wasn't the time to get jealous, I warned myself.

"E-Er. Hello. Please, I want to speak with Ejike," I said as calmly as I could bring myself.

"Who are you?"

I swallowed, trying to keep my composure.

"I'm Amarachi. Could you please give the phone to Ejike?"

"Well, this is Obianuju. Ejike's wife. You can go ahead and tell me what you have to tell him."

Anger seeped into my blood. I wished I could land a thunderous slap on her cheek. It wasn't her fault. If Ejike hadn't given her access to his phone, she wouldn't be on the phone, saying rubbish.

"I'm sorry. I have to talk to Ejike. It's important," I said, rolling my eyeballs.

"Okay," she said.

I heard sound. She was whispering to someone around. Then a resounding laughter filled my ear. I removed the phone briefly and hissed before replacing it on my ear. I was unnerved.

"Hello," Ejike said.

ELIZABETH KAZEEM

I wondered which was better – to allow jealousy win and talk rashly to Ejike, or to beg him to come back to me. I wasn't sure I would survive without him. I had better choose the latter.

"Ihunanya m. What have I done wrong? I have been calling you for two days but you wouldn't answer the phone. Also about my shop, what happened? Why did you lock up the shop? And my car...." I sobbed. He always yielded to me whenever I sobbed. I hoped it would work this time. "Ejike, what have I done t-to deserve this. I have always loved you." I resumed sobbing, allowing him time to process what I'd said.

"Dear, are you there?" I said after some minutes of silence.

"Yes."

"You haven't responded to all I've said."

"Amara," he said, his voice clear but cold. "I'm not a baby. I know you're pregnant. I've been informed even before I came to see you. And it was evident."

"The pregnancy is yours, Ejike, I swear," I said before I realized it. "I was keeping it as a surprise for you. But if you don't want it yet, I can terminate it."

"Excuse me! Whose pregnancy? Have you forgotten the date I travelled? Am I that gullible? Or do you think I don't know you keep boyfriends?"

"Ejike, I swear. This baby is yours. It's over seven months. I just wanted us to settle. I was tired of being single. I know I'm wrong not to have told you before now, but I didn't mean it in a bad way. I can terminate it like the others if you don't want it. Please don't abandon me and your baby," I said.

I didn't know where the lies were coming from. But I was sure I would thank my brain later.

"Amara, liar. How about the guy you were seeing after I left? Can't you tell him the pregnancy is his?"

## LOVED

“Me? Seeing a man. Never. I never slept out of my house since you travelled. And I never allowed any man to visit my house. Why would I do that? For what reason? You’re the only one I have–”

“Save that rhyme for children. I’m not a fool.”

“Ejike, please believe me. I’m not lying. Just think about all I have been through for you. Think of how I almost lost my life the last time I terminated a pregnancy you were responsible for. Think of how long we’ve been together. And the fact that I’ve been faithful to you. You have to disregard every rumour now.”

“Please don’t bring that up. You could have prevented the last pregnancy. But since you didn’t, you had to bear the responsibility.”

“Really? Is that what you have to say? Anyway, that’s in the past. You can’t abandon me now.”

“Come to think of it, were you actually expecting me to marry you despite all we’ve done together? What do I have left to enjoy? And you probably even think I would bear with you if you couldn’t bear a child after all those abortions? Aww. Sorry. I was never going to settle with someone like you. That was why I took good care of you. I was paying for your services. I owe you nothing.”

It seemed my brain was hit by a sledgehammer. I’d never imagined Ejike could say such to me.

“And if you’re wondering why I took the car and closed the shop, well, they belong to me. You can as well sum up all the money I’ve given you and everything I’ve bought for you. I’m sure it’s already more than you deserve. As a matter of fact, I’m done with you, Amara. The car and shop are mine, and I’ve taken them. Don’t just try to get them back or you’ll find yourself in deeper water. You’re free to do whatever comes to your mind to your pregnancy. I owe you nothing. And I’ll never be responsible for that thing in your belly.”

I crashed on the floor. Reality of life dawned on me.

Me! Amara without a car, a job, and without her men. Tears dripped from my eyes in quick succession.

“Ejike, please.”

My ego deserted me. I must retain Ejike even if I had to clutch his trousers band.

“You can’t do this to me. You’re all I have. Ana m ariṣọ gị n’aha Chineke. P-l-e-a-s-e.”

“Amara, you know me. When I say I’m done, it’s over. You weren’t the first nor would be the last. It’s over. Good luck.”

“But—” I wanted to protest. He had no right to dump me after draining my sweetness.

“Are you deaf? He said he’s done. Get lost,” Obianuju said.

Burning tears flooded my eyes. I understood her. I had been there before. I had once answered Ejike’s phone and told his ex who called never to call him again. Excitement had filled my heart when Ejike glanced at me and smiled, nodding in approval of what I had said to the caller. Ejike had taken the phone from me and told his ex that I was his wife, warning her not to destroy his relationship. I never knew I would end up in the lady’s shoes.

Obianuju hung up.

I dropped the phone. My world had crashed upon me. It was over. Amara the ‘big girl’ was doomed.

I bit my lip until blood seeped from it. I couldn’t believe it. Ejike, whom I had risked my life for three times, had just thrown me off like a piece of rubbish.

Regret overwhelmed me. He wasn’t worth it. No man was worth it. How could I ruin my life without a second check? The pains of the abortions. The relentless trial to satisfy them. The risks I made myself vulnerable to. What did I gain but a load of loss and disappointments? All I’d gathered in a bid to feel among was gone.

How could Ejike, John, and Chimobi quickly forget their promises? Promises to give me a paradise and all that accompanied it. They were not different from the men long gone with my past. Or was I the one missing something?

## LOVED

How could I be so foolish? I had thought I was smart. I'd thought I was draining them of money and everything I could. But where had all I'd gotten from them gone?

I had thought I had everything, but I realized 'nothing' was a fitting name instead.

I wept. I wished I knew where death lived. I would have visited him and pleaded with him to host all the men who had contributed to my ruin.

Oh no! This couldn't be happening to me.

## CHAPTER TWELVE

*I LAY ON* the couch, famished, but too feeble to get on my feet. I pondered over how I got to this junction.

I had been a warm, loving, beautiful, young woman. All I had desired was a good life and deluxe things any woman would want.

One glance at my fast-protruding abdomen and anger would overwhelm me. This pregnancy was the cause of my woes. Or was it not?

Ejike had told me he was never going to settle with someone like me. Chimobi was married. And John would never be ready to marry me. Did that mean this pregnancy only opened my eyes to what I'd been blind to?

I sighed.

But my predicament wouldn't have been this worse if I weren't pregnant. I wished I could take out the baby from my womb myself. I hated it already. I couldn't afford Dr Agwu's bill now. Not when I had no one's support. And I couldn't go to unqualified practitioners who would hasten my journey to the land of the dead.

I could wait and have the baby, then abandon it somewhere. Different thoughts plagued my mind. I was at my wits' end.

My phone chimed. I swiped the screen. A new text message. I clicked the message icon. The message displayed was from Christopher. He was checking on me and begging me to answer his calls. He wanted to take me out on a date.

No way! I wasn't ready for that. I didn't want any more heartache. I was sure if I went out with him, he would notice my pregnancy and desert

## LOVED

me. Why would I set myself up for disappointment? Besides, seeing a man wasn't on the list of the things I wanted now.

I deleted the message and dumped the phone on the floor. I wasn't going to pick his call or have anything to do with him.

I slipped into reminiscence. It was all I could do right now.

The doorbell rang. I exhaled. I wasn't ready to see anyone. I was in a bad shape and I knew it. I hadn't even bathed since the day before.

The person at the door must have been resolute. The doorbell rang again and again.

"Who's there?" I shouted with the strength I had left.

No one answered but the doorbell kept ringing. Was it a ghost pressing the doorbell button?

I pulled myself up and slouched to the door. I turned the key in the keyhole and pulled the door open.

"Good afternoon, madam."

It was the concierge in charge of the house. I hissed. No wonder he didn't answer my question. If I'd known he was the one at the door, nothing would have brought me to open it.

"Good afternoon," I said with displeasure boldly written on my face.

He walked in uninvited. "I came to see you. There's something important I must tell you."

I shut the door and followed him into the living room against my will. The house was in a mess. If anyone could see it in this state, definitely not the concierge.

Well, it was none of his business how I used my apartment. I paid for it after all. And I wasn't complaining.

He pushed the clothes on the nearest sofa to a side and sat. I sat across him on the couch I'd been lying on before he came.

"Madam, how're you? I've been here many times but haven't been able to see you."

Would you just go straight to the point? I wanted to say before changing my mind. "I'm fine, thanks," I said instead.

ELIZABETH KAZEEM

He stared at me as if he was searching for something on my body.

"To what do I owe this pleasure?" I said, uncomfortable with the awkward silence.

"Yeah. I-I. As I said before, I've been trying to see you."

"Now you see me. What is the problem?"

"Take it easy, ma'am. I'm not here to fight. I only came to inform you that you've flouted the rules of the agreement you signed. You've not been paying service charge regularly and this has gotten beyond limit. I've been asked to inform you that if you did not pay up all you're owing before the week runs out, your remaining rent would be converted to service charge and you would be expected to vacate the apartment latest by the end of the month," he said.

He opened his bag and brought out a folded document. "Here you are, madam. The property manager and lawyer signed it."

I reluctantly collected the document, unfolded it, and ran my eyes through.

Quit notice. What! Mba. I shook my head and flung the paper across the table.

"I can't accept this. I have three months left before I'll have to renew my rent. How could you bring me a quit notice?" I frowned and looked at him askance.

"Madam, the money you're owing is as much as the three-month rent you have left. But you still have the grace to stay till month end. And you also have the option of paying up before the week runs out."

I raised my eyebrows in disgust. Did this man think I was manufacturing naira notes at home? Where was I supposed to get the money? I was just thinking of getting out of one situation and he came saying nonsense.

"Can I have the breakdown of what I have to pay?" I said, eyeing him.

He rummaged his bag and brought out a sheet of paper. "Here you are." He stretched out his hand.

## LOVED

I sat, staring and doing nothing. Probably that would send him a message that I didn't need no paper. I simply wanted him out of my apartment already.

He rose to his feet and dropped the paper on the table. "Please take a look at it when you're ready. I have to be on my way now."

"I was just wondering when you would say that," I said. I wasn't in the mood to hide my displeasure.

He walked out. I locked the door behind and returned to the couch.

I had to quit lazing around. It was time to act.

## CHAPTER THIRTEEN

*THE LIST I* made appeared good. I had outlined the steps I would take to pay the service charge. And how I would raise money to pay Dr Agwu. All I needed was time. I would bounce back to my feet.

I dialled Angela's number first. Angela had imposed friendship with her on me at the outset. It was time for her to pay the cost of friendship. She could be the hand I needed.

"Hello," I said. I sounded as calm as possible.

"Hey, Amy. What's up? How're you doing?" she said.

"I'm fine. I've been trying for some days to reach you. The connection had been always bad."

"Really? It must be a connection problem at your end. I've been receiving calls."

"Maybe. How have you been?"

"I'm good, thanks. I'm sorry I haven't stopped by your house. Work has been digesting the chunk of my time."

"No problem. I actually need your help, Angy. Please loan me six hundred."

"Six hundred naira?"

I rolled my eyes. What would I do with six hundred naira? God forbid a condition that would make be borrow such an amount.

"Six hundred K," I said.

"You mean six hundred thousand naira?"

"Yes. I will return it by month end, I promise. I need it to fix some things. I'm expecting some money before the month runs out."

## LOVED

I heard her muffle. But that didn't matter. I'd be grateful if she could lend me the money.

"Well, I'd have loved to give you the money but I don't have it," Angela said.

"Angy, please. I desperately need that money. I wouldn't mind less than six hundred. P-l-e-a-s-e."

"I can't lie to you, Amy. I have less than a hundred thousand naira in my account and I have mountains of bills to settle. I'm sorry I can't help you. Maybe next time."

"Angela!"

"Amara, I'm not lying. I don't have it. If I did, I wouldn't hesitate."

"Alright, thanks."

"You're welcome. Take care," Angela said and hung up before I could say another word.

I dropped on the chair. Something was wrong with the way Angela reacted. She was sounding unwelcoming and was so quick to disconnect.

I exhaled. There was no time to brood over Angela's attitude. I had to move on to the next line of action.

I called Teniola next. The phone rang severally before an answer came.

Teniola told me the tale of how she was grossly indebted over a wedding party of a friend she did a chief bridesmaid for. Bridesmaid at her age! It sounded stupid to me.

All my pleas fell on deaf ears. Teniola insisted she had to sort out her debt first before she could think of anything else. And she wasn't getting any money until the following month. She claimed she had collected the current month's salary in advance and spent it on the event.

I hung up, disappointed. Something told me she and Angela didn't want to help me. I knew Teniola could overspend over a party. But I didn't believe she was as indebted as she'd claimed.

**ELIZABETH KAZEEM**

What was the importance of having flocks of friends if they would turn their backs when they were needed most? No doubt, I had only been wasting my time with them.

# LOVED

## CHAPTER FOURTEEN

*I LAY IN* bed, weeping. All the people I had contacted for help had turned me down. Six of my friends, a few acquaintances and to my utmost surprise, many relatives of mine.

It couldn't be worse than that.

What I had left in my account wasn't up to half of what I was owing. Even if it were, I couldn't transfer it all to the agency. The money I had was just to take care of my personal needs, not wants, until I secured another source of income.

I shook my head. Time was fast running by. I had received three reminders in the past two weeks. I was almost out of time.

I stood from the bed and went to my closet. I spent the day sorting my shoes, bags, and clothes. The ones with label intact, I gathered separately. Those without labels but in great state made another pile. Fairly used ones made the last pile. The few I wanted to keep went back to my wardrobe and racks.

If no one was ready to loan me money, I could at least sell what I had.

I called an acquaintance and told him a friend in the UK sent me some goods and I would like him to help me sell them. Fortunately, he consented.

I dressed up and left the house to get cartons and tape with which I would package the goods.

I was about stepping out of the gate when I heard a voice behind me.

"Sister A."

ELIZABETH KAZEEM

I turned my head towards the sound of the voice. The voice was my neighbour's. She alighted from her car and approached me.

I wanted to flee, but I couldn't. My feet seemed impaled to the floor beneath.

If I wanted to be seen by anyone, it was definitely not by Mrs Kuwe. She was a gossip. She was the one who made me agree gossips could thrive anywhere, even in an estate.

"Good afternoon, Mrs Kuwe," I said with a façade of pleasure.

She grinned. "It's been long I saw you. How're you doing?"

"I'm doing just fine. Thank you. How're you, too, and the family?"

"We're fine. Did you travel?"

What was I supposed to say? Yes or No? Either one would draw more questions. I had better say yes.

"Uh, yes. I did."

"I was right then. I've not been seeing your car in the compound."

"Yeah. It's at the mechanic's workshop. I'll go pick it soon," I said.

"Oh. Okay. Hope the fault is minimal?"

Kwa! Would she just mind her business already?

I forced a smile. "Yes. My mechanic already told me to come for it. I've just been busy."

"Okay. That's good."

"Thank you." I summoned courage. "I have to go now," I said with a straight face.

"Not so fast, Sister A. I've been wanting to see you. I have something to discuss with you?"

Discuss with me? What unfinished business did I have with her?

"Really?"

"Yes. I wanted to ask if I offended you in any way."

"Me? Not at all." I shook my head.

"I was thinking I did."

"And why would you think such?"

## LOVED

"You didn't invite me for your wedding," she said and pointed to my belly.

Of course, even the blind would know I was pregnant now. I wished the ground would swallow me up temporarily.

"Uh. Er. I'm sorry," I said, unwilling to make any explanation.

"Alright, no problem. Is your husband here with us as well? I've not met him."

I shook my head. "No, he's not. He's abroad."

"Oh, okay. I still remember what being pregnant is like. It's not an easy task. I hope you're not lonely."

"No. Thank you."

"Alright, don't let me delay you. Enjoy your day."

"You too," I said. I turned around and heaved a sigh.

"Uh, Sister A,"

I shut my eyes transiently and squeezed my lips. With a mirthless laugh, I turned to face her.

"Yes?"

"The agent in charge of the house has been coming around more frequently. I heard your place is up for rent by the end of the week. The man in flat A already showed interest. He said his cousins would be moving in. I saw him making a payment arrangement with the agent. Is there any reason why you're leaving?"

My brain failed me. I opened my mouth but couldn't say a word. This woman probably had all the answers and knew I was lying. I shut my mouth. No lie came in handy. And I couldn't dare say the truth. I shook my head instead.

"Oh. Are you joining your husband abroad?" she said and laughed.

I shrugged and smiled, not minding the thorns her laughter set beneath my feet.

"I wish you all the best, Sister Amara." She roared with hysteric laughter.

I turned and walked towards the gate.

ELIZABETH KAZEEM

“Just in case you want to dispose of some of your things before you travel ‘abroad’, inform us. We might love to buy,” she said and resumed laughing.

I didn’t turn back. I exited the compound and walked down the street. Tears dripped from my eyes, although I wished I could control it.

Before I knew it, I had walked down two streets. I halted, took out my phone, and ordered for a cab. I could still afford that.

The following day, I was at Brother Segun’s fashion house. I had called him the day before. His salespersons took out the cartons from the cab that had brought me.

I sat at the reception while they examined the content of the cartons. After some time, Brother Segun beckoned on me. I moved closer and sat on a stool.

He told me most of the clothes were designer wear but many of them were no longer in vogue and wouldn’t sell for good prices, same for the shoes and bags. Only a few passed their standard quality test. He told me the rest would be taken to his second shop and sold cheaply.

I was displeased. I had never imagined things I had purchased at jaw-dropping prices would be sold cheaply. But I had no choice. I needed money.

I agreed with him. He transferred some money into my account and told me he would pay up after he had sold the stuffs.

I left and headed home.

## LOVED

### CHAPTER FIFTEEN

*I HAD FEW* days left to leave the estate. And no solution had yet popped up.

I knew I would definitely need a place to stay after leaving the house. After much thought, I dialled Adaora's number. It wasn't as if I had forgiven her for what she'd done to me, but this was no time to pamper old wounds.

"Hello, Ada."

"Amara. How're you?" she said in an upbeat tone.

"I'm alive. How're you, too?"

"I'm fine. Good to hear from you. How's the baby doing inside there?"

"Fine. That's what you want, isn't it? I'm only disappointed that you stooped so low to betray my trust. I didn't expect you to call home."

"I'm sorry. Forgive me. I didn't want you to hurt yourself. I had to tell your mum and plead with her to talk to you. That was all I did. I'm sorry if you were offended."

"It's okay. No offence was taken."

"Thank you."

"So why haven't you been keeping in touch. You just abandoned me," I said.

"I'm sorry. It is work and my husband. I'm always tending to either of them."

"Hmm. Married woman."

"Stop it, Amara."

ELIZABETH KAZEEM

“What? Was that abusive? I was only hailing you.”

“Thank you.”

“You’re welcome. Back to business. Ada, I have something to tell you.”

“Oh, really?”

“Yes. I’m thinking of coming over to your place. I’d like to stay with you for a while before returning home.”

I dared not tell her I would be evicted from my apartment and could be on the street tomorrow evening if she didn’t say yes. She might change her mind if she heard that. I wanted her to think I still had my own place and would return home soon. That was what could increase the possibility of Adaora granting my request.

“Aww. That would have been a great idea.”

That would have been. What did she mean by that?

“Yeah. I’ll be coming over in the morning,” I said, ignoring my doubts. I had to be more insistent.

“Amara, my mother-in-law is around. She’s staying in the guest room. There’s no way you can stay with her in the room. Hubby won’t like it. He prioritizes his mother’s comfort than mine in fact.”

I didn’t need to be told she was driving at a NO.

“I can stay in the third room, Ada,” I said defiantly.

I was aware she lived in a three-bedroom apartment with her husband. She couldn’t just throw me off like that. After all, she was one of the reasons I was in these shoes. If she hadn’t allowed her mouth to be leaky, I would have terminated this pregnancy before everyone knew. And things wouldn’t have taken a drastic downturn for me. Adaora had to bear her part of this.

“Uh. I forgot to mention that my brother-in-law had multiple fractures. He’s with us and stays in the third room. That’s why mama is around as well.”

“I thought people who had fractures stayed in the hospital.”

## LOVED

“He’s been to the hospital. He still keeps appointments with his doctor. His mother wanted him at home for proper care. You know there’s little influence I have in that. It’s none of my business.”

Enough of hide and seek. Perhaps if I told her the truth, she would be moved with mercy.

“Hmm.” I cleared my throat. “Ada, my rent is due and I’ve been ejected from the house.”

“What? Seriously?”

“Yes. I just need a place to rest for a short period while I get another accommodation.”

“I’m so sorry. You know I always love to have you around, but I can’t have you sleep in the living room. Aside from that, my husband and I have spent a lot of money on my brother-in-law. We’re currently struggling to make ends meet. I’m so sorry, Amara.”

“Please do something for me at least. You know, a friend in need is a friend indeed.”

“I know that line, dear. I wish I could help you. I think you should consider returning to the village. It’s not as if your parents don’t have a house there. You can’t be suffering here in Lagos when you have a place to stay in the village.”

I hissed. What was she saying? Was she not the reason my father banned me from home? Anger rose in my throat.

“I wish I hadn’t met you, Ada,” I said and hung up.

I burst into tears. Where was I supposed to go now? All my hopes had been dashed. No one was ready to help me. I was as a plague to many.

## CHAPTER SIXTEEN

*I PACKED MY* valuables into bags. I couldn't tell if the concierge would eject me tomorrow as threatened. I wanted to be ready to leave.

I could find a cheap hotel in town to lodge until I'd come up with something to do.

By the time I was done packing, it was evening. I stepped into the bathroom. I knew it was the last time I would be using the posh bathroom so I relished every second I spent in the Jacuzzi.

I walked out, dressed in a gown I had long abandoned for having been oversize. It was snugly fitting now and a bit uncomfortable. I knew I had to buy new clothes. Not the branded types I was used to. But something cheap and comfortable.

The truck I called showed up in time. The two men who came along stuffed the vehicle with my belongings.

I took a last look at the edifice. It was one of the best thing I had. I wondered how it slipped from my grip.

I left the compound and walked to the truck. I sat on the passenger seat, beside the window.

Tears filled my eyes as the driver started the engine and drove away. All I had gathered seemed nothing more than dust blown away by the wind.

I watched the truck leave the estate. I wept quietly, my face turned to the side.

I lodged at a hotel in Yaba. It was comfortable. I had to pay fifteen thousand naira per day for a room, meals included. Lucky me, I thought.

## LOVED

I wouldn't stay longer than a week. I intended getting another accommodation. A cheap one, this time around. I wanted nothing to do with Lekki and its environs. Living in an estate was far from my reach now.

I did a minor research online, got the number of a caretaker, and called. He promised to get me an accommodation. Three days later, he called me to come to check out an apartment.

I went with him. He took me to a self-contained apartment in Ikeja. I liked it and told him I would take it. I told him I needed a day or two to get the money across to him.

The traffic was bad. By the time I got to Yaba environs, it was late in the evening. I needed cash so I branched at the nearest bank to use an automated teller machine.

I inserted my debit card and input my pin and the amount I wanted to withdraw. I was waiting for the machine to dispense when I felt something prick my side. I turned.

"Madam, no shout o," a thick baritone said. A tall, sturdy, dark man stood behind me, holding a gun to my side.

I froze. I'd never seen a gun so closely. "If you shout, I go kill you. E no cost me anything. But if you cooperate, nothing go do you," he said.

All I could do was nod.

The machine had dispensed the five thousand naira I'd earlier requested and was asking me if I wanted to perform another transaction.

"Madam, pack the money," he barked.

I shivered. With trembling hands, I took the money.

"Na the money wey you need be that. Put am for your bag," he said.

I obeyed.

"Oya, press yes. Enter your pin. Check your balance...."

My brain went numb. All it could process was the man's commands. Like a robot, I followed his orders.

ELIZABETH KAZEEM

First withdrawal, second, third, fourth.... I lost count. The ATM dispensed forty thousand naira per withdrawal, most likely because the ATM I was using belonged to my bank.

The stranger steadied his gun at my side while I withdrew and piled the money on the machine.

“Insufficient fund!” the machine displayed.

He gave me a polythene bag and told me to stuff it with the money. I did and handed it over to him. He told me to face the machine and check my balance again. Before the machine displayed the balance, he disappeared.

My balance was three thousand, one hundred and seven naira, eighty kobo.

I removed my card, unsure of what to do. There was no point shouting, he was already gone.

I began to cry. I blamed myself for not having transferred money to the caretaker for the accommodation. I regretted branching at the bank at this time. I couldn't stop blaming myself.

I walked away from the machine and leaned against the wall, staring pointlessly into space.

How could this happen to me?

A thousand thoughts ran through my head. Occasions when I'd stolen, fleeced people, and done all sorts flooded my mind. I was no saint. But if at all I would get such reward, couldn't nature be patient until I was out of this situation?

I left the bank, weeping like a baby. It was over for me. Absolutely.

I branched at a shop. I told the attendant I needed a strong chemical to kill all the disturbing insects—that wouldn't budge to my previous numerous attempts—in my house.

He gave me the option of spray. I declined. I knew there was no way I could spray my gut with that. He brought out a white container and handed it to me. He told me how it killed mosquitoes and other insects faster than anything else did.

## LOVED

Thank goodness, the robber left me with the five thousand naira. I paid for the insecticide and told the shop attendant to keep the change. After all, I wouldn't be needing the change when I was gone.

I returned to the hotel, mentally drained. I was told what was available on the menu for dinner but I declined the offer. It wasn't the food I needed now.

I took my phone, typed 'Farewell', and sent it to my younger brother. He was innocent. Unlike the rest of my relations. I owed him that, I thought.

I took the insecticide, poured it into a cup, and lifted it to my lips.

My phone rang. It was probably my brother calling me. I dropped the cup and took the phone. The caller was Christopher.

Why was this man insistent? I hissed. I ended the call and dropped the phone. I took the cup and lifted it to my lips. The phone rang again.

*Get it done over with*, I heard something say to me. Or maybe it was a loud thought. Either way, it was right. I remembered someone had said there was no mourning in the land of the dead. I didn't need to waste time. Once I drank this, the pain, shame, lack, and loss would be all gone, left behind in the world for the living. Suicide was the fastest way to overcome woes, I'd heard. Or was it perhaps exaggerated thinking?

I sipped from the cup. I spat the fluid out. It tasted bad and triggered a burning sensation on my tongue. I spat again.

*You have to shut your eyes and gulp it at a go*. I knew it was either my mind or something else speaking again. Whichever was, it was right.

All I'd been through flashed in my mind – the shame, robbery, pain. I had better end it quick.

I opened the container and poured more of its content into the cup. I didn't want a situation whereby it would be insufficient to execute the assignment and leave me writhing in pain. It had to be all or nothing. I wanted it to snuff life out of me.

My phone chimed. Text messages poured in. *Let me have a last look before I pass on*, I thought.

ELIZABETH KAZEEM

*"It is well with you. I'm praying for you. Chris"*

I was taken aback. Praying for me? Did he have an inkling of what I was going through? I scrolled down.

*"Don't deprive yourself an opportunity at life! Chris."*

*"Love is life! I love you. Chris."*

It seemed a dream. I hadn't gone on a date with Chris. I had always refused him. Countless times, I had been rude to him. He hardly knew me yet he claimed he loved me.

Could Christopher's love be genuine? He must be like one of the men I'd been with. He would change his mind the moment he knew all I'd done with my life. If my present wasn't enough to set him on his heels, my past would be.

But why was he sending me these messages at this time?

*Do it now*, my mind told me. I remembered the cup on the table.

Even if Christopher's love was genuine. He didn't deserve someone like me – abused, abusive, spoilt, rotten, terrible me.

I dropped the phone. I took the cup in my two hands and shut my eyes. It was now or never. I raised the cup with determination in my heart.

The door flung open. A hotel attendant barged in. "Excuse me!"

The cup fell from my hands and shattered. A shard pierced my foot.

"Please, move out. Some rooms are on fire. We're to move everyone to safety," he said hurriedly.

I stood still. How could I not remember to lock the door? How could I waste this golden opportunity to end my misery?

The attendant approached me and pulled me. I picked my phone and followed him like a zombie.

The poison had spilled. I had to try again next time.

## LOVED

### CHAPTER SEVENTEEN

*I JOINED OTHERS* at the assembly point. We were asked our names and room numbers. The same was documented in a booklet with one of the attendants. I guessed they wanted to be sure that no one was missing.

Minutes later, fire service truck came. I waited for when the drama would be all over and I would return to my room. There was still some content left in the insecticide container.

My phone rang. It was Christopher calling. He kept calling till I had no choice than to answer.

"Why can't you just leave me alone? I'm pregnant. Stay away from me," I said and hung up.

I saw people stare at me askance and I realized I had shouted over the phone. I was embarrassed.

My phone began to ring again.

"Take it easy, Sis," the lady beside me said, wearing the brightest smile I'd ever seen.

I nodded and picked the call to prove to them I could speak calmly.

"Amara, where are you? Please just tell me," Chris said over the phone.

I glanced at the lady beside me. She was still smiling at me with expectation obvious on her face.

I sighed. "I'm at Yaba," I said as calmly as I could bring myself to.

"Where exactly?"

I wanted to bark at him and end the call, but the lady wouldn't stop looking at me. I mentioned the name of the hotel. Christopher hung up.

ELIZABETH KAZEEM

An attendant beckoned to me to come have a seat. I did. My legs were almost going numb from standing.

I asked if we would be allowed to sleep in our rooms and I was told there's a high probability for those whose rooms were not affected.

"Please, who is Amara here?" an attendant said aloud, a while later.

I turned my head. Was my room affected already or was she intending to tell me I could return to my room?

"I am," I said.

"Please come with me."

I followed her. She took me to the car park.

"What's happening?" I said out of curiosity.

"Nothing. You have a visitor."

Chris stepped out of his car and approached me.

I showered him with silence. I didn't know what to say. He opened the door to the passenger seat. I sat. He walked to the other side and sat behind the steering.

The light in his car was on. I stared at my abdomen as if to divert his attention there. But he just kept staring at my face.

"I went to your house. I was told you no longer reside there. What happened?" he said, ending the awkward silence.

My shoulder sagged. Opening my mouth would bring tears to my eyes, in large quantity.

I didn't want that. I wanted nobody to see me as vulnerable or weak. But I was. And I was tired of hiding. My heart was burdened. Couldn't I air my mind for once?

"Amara, I'm talking to you. What's going on?" He reached for my shoulder and kneaded it gently.

The nudge worked. My lips flung apart. "I I-I was ejected," I found myself saying. I exhaled loudly and tears trickled down my cheeks. I had never felt so battered. So lost. Empty.

"Would you need your bag? I could ask the attendant to get it for you," Chris said.

## LOVED

I didn't understand what he meant. There was nothing I needed in my bag than the remaining insecticide I planned drinking overnight. I couldn't imagine the attendant seeing it.

"No," I said.

He started the car and drove out. I was too weak to question him or protest.

## CHAPTER EIGHTEEN

*CHRISTOPHER DROVE INTO* his house and parked the car. I was fast asleep. The cold breeze blowing through the side window couldn't have had less effect. And Chris didn't speak to me after he started driving.

He tapped me. I opened my eyes and saw him standing beside me, his right hand on the car door. I stepped out of the car. He shut the door and secured it with the remote in his hand.

He walked me into his house. I had seen houses, but none as opulent as his. It was beyond what I could find words to describe. It was night, yet it seemed it was daytime in the living room. The illumination was just perfect. Everything was in the right place.

I sat in the living room, swirling my head around. Christopher walked in.

My heart raced. Fear trickled in. What if he was into ritualism and needed a pregnant woman? The desire to die in me went into hiding. If I would die, I should do it myself. I couldn't accept making someone else's life better by being used in a ritual.

I blamed myself for following a stranger to his house at this time of the day. Wait, I had slept in the car. I didn't even know where on earth we were. Even if I wanted to escape, how would I go about it?

I had better leave now that I could. I straightened and tiptoed towards the door.

I was trying to fathom how to open the glass door at the entrance, which had no handle, when Chris returned to the living room. Perhaps he had perceived my fears.

## LOVED

Wordlessly, he came to my side and pressed a button on a side of the glass. The door slid automatically to the side. I fluttered my eyelids, swallowing my embarrassment.

“Amara, you’re safe here. But if you want to leave, you can. I’ll drive you back if you want,” he said.

He stepped out, waiting for me to decide. He was ready to drive me back to the hotel. I stood still, wondering what to do.

It was evident Chris would never force his opinion on me. If he had an ulterior motive, he wouldn’t open the door. After all, no amount of screaming could have opened the door or brought anyone to my aid.

It was high time I stopped refusing this undeserved kindness.

“It’s cold outside,” I said and returned into the room. I was ready to face whatever lay ahead of me.

He should have sneered at my cowardice, but he didn’t. He came inside and locked the door.

He smiled. “I was going to tell you I had prepared the guest room for you. Please come with me.”

I followed him. He ushered me into a large room.

“All you need for the night is here. Toiletries, towel, and the like. Please have a warm bath before retiring to bed. I’ll make tea for you,” he said. He shut the door and left.

I stood in the room, dazed. It was the kind of room I would have worked endlessly to have to myself for a night. Yet, here it was at my disposal. Free of charge. The pains in my legs disappeared temporarily. The bed beckoned to me. Thick chenille bedcovers adorned the mattress. I collapsed on the bed. The pillows were soft, just as I liked them.

I went to the bathroom and showered. I dried my body and slipped into the pyjamas placed on a hanger in the closet. They smelled new. I wondered if he kept new pyjamas for every guest. I would ask him later.

He knocked on the door. I jittered. Was he ready to show his true colour now?

ELIZABETH KAZEEM

He opened the door, a tray in his hand. He placed the tray on a glass stool.

“I’m only a phone call away. In case you need anything, beep me. Have a beautiful night. See you in the morning.”

“Alright. Thanks.”

He opened the door and left. I glanced at the tray. It contained a cup of steaming tea, slices of bread, and a bottle of water. The baby inside my belly leapt. I smiled.

Maybe I was truly safe after all. I ate little and retired for the night.

I woke up, thinking I heard patters of someone approaching. My eyes drifted to the digital wall clock, 1:00 am. My heart thumped. Maybe he was coming to perpetrate his agenda. I sat up. I stared at the door, blanket clutched in my hands, waiting for him to open the door.

Maybe I was just overreacting. There was probably nothing out there. I sat until sleep won me over.

# LOVED

## CHAPTER NINETEEN

*SUNRAYS STREAMED INTO* the room through the window. My eyelids fluttered. I glanced at the wall clock. 10:35 am. Really! I could sleep that much?

I dashed into the bathroom and had a quick shower. I had brought no other cloth with me so I had to wear what I'd worn the previous day.

I stepped out of the room and ambled to the living room.

Chris left me a note on the table. He hadn't wanted to disturb me so he'd gone out quietly. He'd prepared me breakfast. The direction to the kitchen was also included in the note.

I was famished. I went to the kitchen, served myself yam and eggs, and ate to my fill. When I was done eating, I returned to the living room.

Chris called to check on me. He told me I could keep myself busy, watching movies. He assured me he would return soon.

Chris returned early as promised. He'd branched at the hotel and brought my bags. My rent at the hotel was due so he had no difficulty moving out my stuff. I only had to talk to one of the attendants over the phone.

"Amara, we need to talk," Chris said, a while after we were through with lunch.

I looked in his direction. I had many things to ask him. I wanted to know how come he was living alone in the big house. I wanted to know if he was married. I wanted to know many things. "Okay," I said.

He sat beside me, his gaze fixed on my face.

ELIZABETH KAZEEM

“Amara, I want to know what happened. What’s going on with you?” He nodded. “And, I would appreciate nothing but the truth.”

I knew this time would come someday. It was time to be thrown out. An end had come to my comfort. By the time I finished answering him, he would no longer have an iota of mercy for me. But there was no running away. Truth must be told.

I opened my mouth and spoke. I started by telling him the kind of lifestyle I had. I told him how I became pregnant and no one wanted it. I digressed to talk about all I’d done for Ejike. Then I went on to talk about how my family and friends had rejected me. I narrated my experience with the robber. And finally, how I had intended to end my life.

I told Chris everything that came to my mind. His facial expression remained same all the way except for love written in the lines on his forehead. He listened to me. It encouraged me. I dived deeper and emptied my soul to him. I told everything in truth.

“It is well. You’ll be fine,” he said and smiled.

Was that all he was going to say or would he throw me out the next minute? I wondered.

He straightened and went in the direction of his room. He returned with a book in his hand. He resumed his seat and opened the book. I stared. It was the Holy Bible. I also had a copy although I couldn’t remember when last I opened mine. I wasn’t even sure where mine.

I was born and bred in a Christian family. Christianity, to me, was a religion. Once we paid obeisance to the church doctrines, we go ahead and live our lives the way we wanted.

“Amara, I’d like to read to you from this Holy Book.”

I nodded.

He turned the pages. “Romans 3:23 says, *‘For all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God.’* We have sinned. We were born in it. Born in sin, we grew and couldn’t help meddling with sin. It was our nature. Our first line of defence.”

He searched my eyes. I sighed, listening with rapt attention.

## LOVED

“The plan of God for our redemption was fulfilled in Christ Jesus, Who came to die for our sins. John 3:16 tells us about the nature of God, love. It says, *‘For God so loved the world that He gave His only begotten Son, that whoever believes in Him should not perish but have everlasting life.’* You are precious to God. And He loves you deeply. Nothing less than an unequalled love would make Him yield His son for our transgressions....”

He talked on. I was familiar with those verses of the Bible. He was probably quoting them because I didn’t mention to him that I had been a chronic churchgoer at a point in my life. No one should ask me what my motive was. All that was important was that I attended programs as much as my comfort permitted. I tuned back in

“...It doesn’t matter how long you’ve supposedly known Christ, you have to be known of Him. You have to submit all at His feet sincerely. Genuine salvation is the minimum requirement for every believer. You can’t fake it. If it’s not genuine, it’s nothing. Romans 8:16 says, *‘The Spirit Himself bears witness with our spirit that we are the children of God.’* The confidence powered by the Holy Spirit must be present....”

I sighed. Maybe he was right. I wasn’t aware of the witness part.

“God loves us and cares about us. He wants us to enjoy Him. He calls us to freedom from our entanglement with the woes of the world. Matthew 11:28-30 says, *‘Come to Me, all you who labor and are heavy laden, and I will give you rest. Take My yoke upon you and learn of Me, for I am gentle and lowly in heart, and you will find rest for your souls. For My yoke is easy and My burden is light.’* If only you’ll bare yourself to God. He’ll receive you and wash you. He’ll bear your burdens and give you rest.”

My burden? Mine must be too much for Jesus to carry. I was dirty. I wasn’t sure the real salvation was for someone like me. After everything I had done. God couldn’t save someone like me.

As though he could perceive my thoughts. He flipped the pages of the Bible and read.

ELIZABETH KAZEEM

*“Isaiah 1:18 says, ‘Come now, and let us reason together, says the LORD, though your sins are like scarlet, they shall be as white as snow; though they are red like crimson, they shall be as wool.’”* He glanced at me. “God is able to cleanse all our sins and give us a new life in Him. It doesn’t matter what one’s past was. Hebrews 8:12 says, *‘For I will be merciful to their unrighteousness, and their sins and their lawless deeds I will remember no more.’* God’s love is strong enough to forgive our past if we genuinely submit. He will lead us by His spirit and make us His.”

My eyes grew misty. My soul yearned for God. I wanted Him. I wanted the life only He could give. I wanted a change.

He stared into my eyes in silence. I wept.

“Search deep into your heart, Amara. Are you ready to have this new life? Will you embrace the love only God can give? Are you ready and willing to turn your back on your past and follow God? Are you ready to be fathered by Him? Are you ready to cultivate a relationship with Him?” Christopher said in a cool, calm, loving voice.

I exhaled loudly and nodded. He dropped the Bible on his lap and held my hands. There and then, he prayed with me and led me to Christ.

I felt peace wash over me.

“I’m delighted to welcome you to God’s family, Amara. Now that you’ve accepted Jesus as your Lord and Saviour, you can no longer toy with sin or repeat your past deeds. You belong to God now. You must strive to be holy as He is holy. The Bible, in 2 Timothy 2:19, says, *‘Nevertheless the solid foundation of God stands, having this seal: The Lord knows those who are His, and let everyone who names the name of Christ depart from iniquity.’* I hope you understand,” Chris said, after the prayer session.

“Yes, I do.”

For the first time in a long time, I smiled—a deep, mirthful smile. I couldn’t explain what was responsible for the joy that filled my heart.

“Less I forget, there’s something I must tell you,” Chris said.

I bobbed my head.

## LOVED

“Go ahead.”

“I’d like to be your friend if you don’t mind. I mean no harm whatsoever. Just a friend.”

What else could I call someone like him but a true friend? I stared intently at him. I couldn’t help blaming myself for running from him for so long.

I smiled and nodded.

“It’s okay. We’re friends.” I took his hand and shook it.

He laughed, an infectious laughter that triggered mine.

## CHAPTER TWENTY

*THE FOLLOWING WEEK*, Chris took me to the apartment he rented for me. I couldn't thank him enough. He was the reason I wanted to keep my baby now. He'd encouraged me to study God's word. Now I knew how abominable abortion was to God. I knew I belonged to God now. I could no longer do anything that would grieve His Spirit in me.

I didn't care if anyone abused me or not. All I wanted was to please my Saviour.

Days rolled into weeks and weeks into months. I thought Christopher would get tired and abandon me eventually. But he never did.

Chris kept checking on me. He ensured I had all I needed and pressured me to register at a hospital. He wouldn't even allow me find a job. He insisted I would get a job after delivery. I was already close.

The D-day came. It was late in the night. I had just finished a plate of rice and stew when I began to feel strong cramps. I had been feeling uneasy since morning but I didn't know it would get this bad. My waist hurt and the pain radiated all over my belly and back. It was stronger than I'd had it during the day. There was no way I could endure it anymore. I picked my phone and called Chris.

I paced the room. The pain increased. I panted, rubbed my back, and used all the tactics I've heard people teach those in labour.

Tears welled up my eyes. I didn't know labour was this painful. I felt something slimy escape my private. Afterwards, a gush of fluid followed. I

## LOVED

moaned. I prayed for the quick arrival of Chris and told God to have His way.

Christopher knocked. I opened the door. One look at me, Chris knew exactly what was happening. I told him my water had broken. He assisted me to his car. On my instruction, he picked the bag I had my baby's stuffs in and dumped it in the rear seat.

He drove to the nearest hospital. I was assisted out of the car and wheeled to the delivery room.

The doctor must have assumed Chris was my husband. He asked if Chris would love to stay with me to provide me support. Instantly, Chris answered in the affirmative. It was surprising but relieving. I needed a hand to grasp at the peak of my contractions.

When it was time, I heeded the advice of the midwife. She taught me what pushing really was and I was quick to practice it. My body craved relief. If it required the baby going out, I would give my best aiding it.

The baby slipped out. The midwife placed it on my chest. It was a beautiful, big, baby girl. The baby's cry rent the air as she was tapped. The midwife severed the cord, lifted her off my chest, and handed her over to a nurse.

Chris followed the nurse to the machine I later knew was called a resuscitaire, opposite my bed.

I lifted my head and saw Chris muttering. I relaxed. I knew he was praying for the child. Relief washed over me like cold water. The midwife began to clean me up. The delivery was complete.

"What's the baby's surname?" the attending nurse asked as she filled the baby's card.

"Christopher," Chris said before I could say a word.

I smiled, deep, joyful smile. He'd given my baby a name no one was willing to give her. An identity she deserved. A father.

What a friend I've found in him!

## CHAPTER TWENTY-ONE

*PRECIOUS LAUGHED AS* the candlelight on her cake was snuffed out. Precious was the name Chris gave to my daughter. He'd told me every life was precious and wasn't anyone's right to cut off.

Today was Precious's first birthday. I only wondered why Chris didn't show up today.

He'd always been there, a friend like a twin. God had used him to fix the pieces of my life to a wholesome whole.

"Mi-mi," Precious said, pulling at my cloth. I glanced in her direction. She was a beautiful, innocent, better version of me. She was always smiling, her small brown eyes filled with joy.

I lifted her and planted a kiss on her forehead. My heart was filled with thanksgiving to God for showing up for me at the right time. I couldn't imagine having killed such an amazing child through an abortion or suicide. What a bundle of joy I would have lost forever!

I embraced her. She felt warm against my skin. She was a definition of hope and a reminder of restoration to me.

"Bring her," one of the guests at Precious's birthday said. I handed the child over and went into the kitchen to check on the two people who were to serve our guests.

I walked out to join the children party. Some children were lined up, holding cardboards. They were all smiles.

Surprised, I halted and read the words on the cardboards.

## LOVED

“To say ‘I love you’ would be a cheap expression of the pure, deep-seated, immeasurable affection branching from God’s very heart through me, to you.”

My eyes widened. What was this all about?

Few of the children returned to their seats and the rest unanimously turned their cardboards over, facing me. I read again.

“I love you with all of my heart, Amara. Let’s take the walk of life together.”

Who was behind this? The adults there were just giggling and staring at me. I wondered when one of them would tell me what was happening.

Precious walked towards me, staggering, falling and rising. She was wearing a new vest. I read the words printed on the vest.

“Marry me!”

My eyelids fluttered. Something was definitely going on. My daughter was wearing a different cloth just before I went into the kitchen.

Chris walked in with a small black box in his hand. He came close, fell on His knees, and opened the box. An engagement ring!

“Will you marry me?” he said in his usual calm voice.

I stood still, stunned. Tears trickled down my face. He deserved someone better. Not me.

“I want you,” he said as though he could read my mind.

I gasped. “Yes. Yes, I will.”

Applause rent the air as he slid the ring on my finger.

Overwhelming joy filled my heart as he wrapped me in a warm embrace. What a tremendous delight!

## EPILOGUE

*I AM AMARA* Nwaike. Here I stand, dressed in an exquisite, spotless, white, flowing dress, my hair neatly arranged and bespangled, and the bunch of flowers in my hands fresh and fragrant. I have never looked this beautiful.

I'm standing at the altar, a cleansed, renewed, and prepared bride of Chris. My past has lost its stand. My present is what is important.

I'm in love with the one that first loved me. The one that sacrificed a lot to see me safe and happy. The one whose love I had once rejected, thinking I was disqualified to have it. I'm in love with the one who loves me more. I'm smitten!

Here I stand, willing and ready to declare my vow to the one whose love for me is genuine, pure, and guileless.

Everyone seated seems happy for me. A smile is on most faces. My parents must be proud of me today. They are watching me with joy in their eyes.

I don't care if anyone is displeased with what I'm about to do. My mind is made up. I'm saying the final 'YES' to Chris. I am content with the one who chose me before I knew him. I am in love with Chris.

Chris has said his vows. It is my turn now.

"The world had nothing to offer me but pain despite all I gave it. I have nothing to offer God, yet He gives me everything, including you. I am blessed to be chosen by you. I vow to love you, today and always, with all of my heart, spirit, and soul. I will honour you with my body and all I have. I will stick to you in all circumstances and at all times. I will love you not only as long as I breathe, but also in death. I love you, Chris."

## LOVED

I hear people clap and make a joyful noise.

We exchange rings. Mine is absolutely perfect on my finger.

The priest smiles. "By the power vested in me, I now pronounce you husband and wife," he says.

The clapping continued. I embrace Chris.

Now, I am married to the one who cares for me, who forgave all my sins, and rid me of shame. Permanent bye to iniquity and its offers, I have been found by the true love of my life.

Indeed my song shall be 'I AM LOVED'.

## THE END

From the author's desk,  
Nigeria.

**Dear Readers,**

I want to express my profound gratitude to you for coming along with me on a journey through the pages of 'LOVED'.

I hope the story of Amara Nwaike has touched you just as it has done to me.

Nothing can accurately measure or be compared to the love God has for us through Jesus Christ, His Son. But this book, 'Loved', through the character of CHRISTOPHER tries to portray the love of Christ to us.

The Bible says, in Romans 5:8-9, "***But God demonstrates His own love toward us in that while we were yet sinners, Christ died for us. Much more then, having now been justified by His blood, we shall be saved from wrath through Him.***" We are loved.

It doesn't matter how you've lived your life until now or what you've done or been through, if you'd genuinely repent and forsake your sins, you'd enjoy undiluted love of God.

Jesus Christ, the Son of God, is the only true lover of your soul. God is calling you today. Do not ignore His call.

You can rededicate your life to Him, if you no longer have the witnessing of the Holy Spirit in your heart, assuring you that you are a child of God.

Whether for the first time or not, you can submit to Jesus Christ and say YES to God, today. Prepare your heart and talk to Him now! He will hear you.

You can pray this prayer,

*Almighty God, I thank You for Your love for me. Thank You for sending Your Son, Jesus, to die for my sins. I confess that I have sinned and fallen short of Your glory. I repent and forsake my sins. Please forgive me and cleanse me by the blood of Jesus. I believe in the death and resurrection of Jesus Christ. I surrender my body, spirit, and soul to You today. I accept Jesus Christ as my Lord and Saviour. Come reign and rule in my heart. Fill me with the Holy Spirit and help me live a life that brings You glory. Thank you, Father, amen.*

I congratulate and welcome you into God's family. You will not only experience God's love, but also have your name written in the book of life.

Find and join a Bible-believing church around you. Study the word of God, the Holy Bible, and cultivate a personal relationship with God.

Jeremiah 31:3 "***The Lord has appeared of old to me, saying: 'Yes, I have loved you with an everlasting love; Therefore with lovingkindness I have drawn you'***."

Indeed, you are loved!

Many of you write to me, and I read every word of every mail. What a tremendous delight to hear from you! Your prayers are a huge encouragement. Thank you so much.

Feel free to contact or connect with me. God bless you now and always.

In Christ's steadfast love,

Elizabeth Kazeem.

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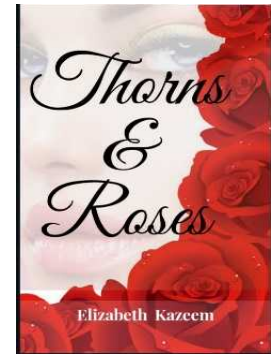
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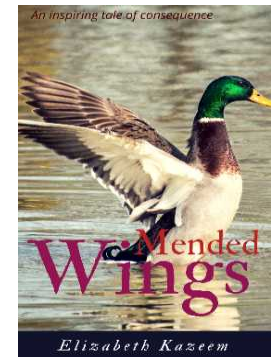
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### COMPLICATED TIES

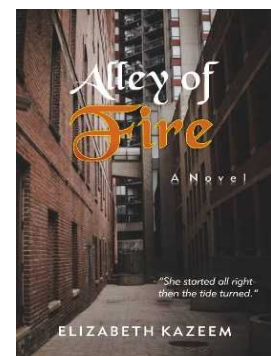
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