

There can only be one extinguisher

Burning Coles

(A Novel)



EMMANUELA MIKE-BAMILOYE

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Dedication

This book is dedicated to the Almighty God, the only One who is able to put out the flames burning in homes.

Acknowledgements

My heartfelt gratitude goes to God for inspiring me to write this book and giving the grace to release it.

I thank my husband, Damilola Mike-Bamiloye, for always encouraging and supporting me and for being my coach and consultant. I am truly grateful for all your input.

Goodness Adegbola, is the vessel God used to read through times without number and edit it. He was a huge source of encouragement. I say a big “thank you”.

For the beautiful cover design, thank you so much, Ariyo Omoyele (Ara Effect).

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SOME COMMENTS FROM THE BLOG

*This is a masterpiece! So immersive, So anointed,. So powerful.
I couldn't keep it down. The complexity of the story kept me on my feet. Plus, the characters were well-developed. I didn't want the story to end, but I was thoroughly blessed with the way it did. The after-taste, in my spirit is that of sweetness and strength. May God bless you and brighten your instrument more to reach more for Him.*

P.S: As someone who hasn't read fiction in a while, I am really grateful for this experience. Looking forward to reading more from you in the future

Kelechi A

I really enjoyed every parts of this wonderful story. Infact, I can't be more happy that I read this piece. It has transformed my life in various dimension. Thank you Ma, and

I hope we get more of related stories

Adeyemo O

This is a redefining piece. Thank you so much ma'am. The story overall teaches that God is with me always and so far I give him the opportunity to take over, He'll make all things right.

Oluwalayomi B.A

Wow I'm so blessed by this story . I could feel blood rushing through my veins when I get to high tension parts lol. You have done well my dear . May God continue to inspire you with more ideas in Jesus name . I love the character of Mrs Dedeke , that's just how we have to behave as believers

Katriel E

God is so good and gracious to everyone who put their trust in Him, He is so loving that He wouldn't reject anyone who comes to Him irregardless of what a mess they had turned themselves into, all He wants is for us to come with our weaknesses and He would be our strength, beautiful piece, I pray for more divine inspiration to write things that will draw men to God and turn lives around to glorify God in Jesus name amen

Anuola O.F

Chapter 01

“You must be out of your rotten mind!” Mr Cole bellowed.

“Me, I’m not out of my mind o” Mrs Cole replied, bunching up her husband’s grey T-shirt in her fist, she rocked from side to side, ready for a fight. “Have I asked too much? All I need is some money to take care of your children.” She shouted back at him almost shedding tears.

He chuckled sarcastically. “*Abi e ri obirin yi ni?* (can’t you see this woman?),” he clapped his hand in amazement. Then immediately, the sarcastic smile on his face turned into a frown. “Woman, listen to me and listen well. You have no right to tell me what I am to do for my children. Is that clear?” He spoke firmly with alcohol heavy on his breath.

“Don’t you have any shame Akin? Your children are in their rooms and can obviously hear you shouting at me” she told him as she released his T-shirt from her grip.

“There you go again, calling me shameless. Funke, I’m

shameless *abi?* (right?)” He asked, tapping his chest with his hand.

“You said it yourself, I didn't say anything.” She eyed him.

“*Wo, iwo obirin yi, waa rin nkan ti ma se si e leni* (look, you this woman, you will see what I will do to you today)” he said and rushed at her.

Funke was standing opposite him, the wooden centre table in the sitting room stood between the both of them. She ran in an anti-clockwise direction when she saw her husband coming towards her from the left.

“Where will you run to now, with that your sharp mouth?” He asked as he caught her by her left arm and raised his right hand, ready to hit her.

“Daddy please don't beat mummy again” Bolu, their seven-year-old cried as she stood some meters away from them.

They turned and saw their young, innocent daughter looking fearfully with tears rolling down her face. Mrs. Cole felt so sorry for her as she wondered how long she had been standing there and how much violence the poor child had witnessed not just at that moment but in her seven years of existence.

“Go back to your room now!” Mr. Cole shouted at her.

Bolu stood there crying.

“Are you deaf? I said go back to your room before I come and beat you!” He shouted louder still holding on to Mrs. Cole who

stood there helplessly as she watched her child scamper away.

“Let this be the last time this repeats itself” Mr. Cole warned his wife as he flung her arm out of his grip and she landed on the couch.

She quickly got up and moved a reasonable distance away from him before she said, “you need help, you need serious help, even your children are afraid of you.” She shook her head and walked away.

“You are the one that needs help, useless woman,” He retorted, panting and sweating. He plopped into his favorite seat opposite the TV and continued drinking his beer.

Mrs. Cole was fed up. Frustration and misery had become her acquaintances. She went into the house to check on her children, the only reason she was still in the marriage.

The Coles lived in a rented three-bedroom bungalow. Their three children: Seyi, Bayo and Bolu occupied two of the rooms while the third being the master bedroom was for Mr. Cole and his wife.

Mrs. Cole went first to Bayo's room. Immediately she opened the door, he jerked and hid something.

“What's that?” His mother asked him.

“Nothing mummy, I just wanted to...” he was trying to cook up a lie when she cut in.

“See, I don't have your time right now,” she was too tired both psychologically and physically to argue with him. “Dinner will be ready in 30 minutes.” She said and left the room.

Bayo was thirteen years old, the second child and only boy. He was in SSI and in recent times loved staying in his room. No one really knew what he spent most of his time doing behind closed doors. His room in itself was almost always a write off; it wasn't palatable enough to make one want to perpetually remain locked in it. Mrs. Cole couldn't fathom why he hardly came out. The windows were always shut making the room very stuffy. His dirty clothes littered the floor and the 'clean' ones were never folded or hung. His bed was never laid and his bathroom was an eyesore.

Mrs. Cole was tired of telling him to tidy up his room, these days, she'd just enter the room, say what she had to say and leave.

She went to check on her other two children, Seyi and Bolu who shared a room. Seyi was sixteen and the first child while Bolu was the baby of the house. If Seyi could have her way, she'd have wanted to have a room to herself but with the number of rooms in the house she had no choice but to share with her sister. She couldn't wait to leave the house. She had just finished secondary school at Federal Girls' College, Ipetumodu, an all-girls'

boarding school and she earnestly prayed she would get admitted into the higher institution that year. She desperately wanted to leave the house for anywhere more peaceful, even if it meant leaving on the street. She was fed up of the consistent rancour and fighting between her parents and couldn't stand it anymore.

Mrs. Cole opened the door that led into the girls' room. There were two beds which were positioned parallel to each other with Bolu's bed being closer to the door and Seyi's own farther away but closer to the window. Mrs. Cole found Bolu on her bed crying while Seyi sat on hers, backing her sister and whoever it was that cared to come into the room. Her ears were plugged with her ear phones as she faced the window and focused on her phone.

Mrs. Cole saw Bolu crying, went to her bed and sat beside her.

“Bolu, I'm sorry you had to see that again.” Mrs. Cole knew it wasn't the first time Bolu witnessed a physical fight between her parents and she doubted it would be the last. “It was just a misunderstanding between your dad and I,” she tried to explain to her.

Bolu hiccupped a sob, “mummy will it ever end?” She asked as tears rolled down her cheeks.

Her mother was silent. “Come here” she said and hugged her tightly. “I hope so, I really do.” Her eyes became moist with

tears, she fought back the tears. “We’ll be fine, you hear?”

Bolu nodded.

“But guess what” Mrs. Cole pulled Bolu away from her embrace and with a smile, looked at her.

“What?” Bolu asked less concerned.

“I’m preparing your best food,” she smiled and hoped that will cheer up her daughter.

Bolu's somber face broke into a smile. “Dodo? (fried plantain)” She asked hopeful.

“Oh, I thought it was beans,” Mrs. Cole teased, holding back her smile.

“Noooooo mummy I don't like beans.” Bolu folded her arms and looked away.

“How won't I know my baby's best food? Don't worry, I'll give you the largest portion but you must promise to eat your rice and not waste it this time around” she fondled with her nose.

“Okay I promise” she smiled.

“That's my baby” she stood up from her bed and walked towards Seyi who didn't seem interested in what was going on in the house any longer.

“Young lady” Mrs. Cole, standing some meters away from the foot of Seyi's bed, called out.

Seyi heard but didn't respond, she hid under the disguise

of her ears being plugged and continued fondling with her phone.

“Seyi, I know you can hear me, come to the kitchen and help me round off dinner” she told her.

“I’m not hungry” Seyi said without removing the ear phones or looking in her mother's direction.

“I don't care if you are or not and I'm not begging you to help me, it's an order.” Mrs. Cole's voice was raised. “You are getting very spoilt, my friend will you get to that kitchen right away and go and fry plantain” she pointed at the door.

Seyi reluctantly got up and stormed out of the room, murmuring as she passed by her mum, “you people will not kill me in this house”.

“Come back here. Who do you think you are talking to like that?” Mrs. Cole raised her hand to beat her.

Seyi stood there and didn't move. Her parent's beating had no effect on her anymore.

“My friend, get out of my sight” Mrs. Cole said and hissed.

Seyi grudgingly went to the kitchen and placed the frying pan containing oil on fire while she started slicing the plantain. She grumbled as she did it. She picked her phone to reply a chat and got carried away. She had her phone on her left hand and wanted to use the right one to pour the plantain into the oil but just as she was about to, she accidentally hit the handle of the pan

and the oil poured on her thighs.

“Argh!” she screamed at the top of her lungs.

Mrs. Cole immediately rushed into the kitchen.

“What is it? What happened?” she asked with fear and anxiety written all over her face.

“My leg! my leg!” Seyi, now was sitting on the floor, cried.

“Oh my God” Mrs. Cole exclaimed as she saw the oil stain on her daughter's sky-blue jean trousers. She quickly turned off the gas cooker and helped Seyi remove her trouser as she called out to her husband. Mr. Cole was still in the parlor and he heard his wife shout his name but he ignored her, slurping on his beer.

After the call became persistent, he lurched into the kitchen “what is it? Why you shouting my name like they are chasing you?” he asked, obviously drunk.

“Hot oil poured on your daughter's thighs and that's all you can say?” she asked as she poured cool water on Seyi's thighs.

“So what do you now want me to do? better take her to the hospital and don't disturb me” he turned around to leave.

“Ha it's that all you have to say?” Mrs. Cole was fed up of her husband's lackadaisical attitude. She lifted Seyi up from the floor and supported her as they walked out of the kitchen to the main door. “Bolu bring me a wrapper and the car keys. Bayo come out and open the gate for me.” She hollered.

Immediately, Bolu was out with one of her mother's wrappers and the key to their Toyota Camry, the only car they owned.

Mrs. Cole wrapped the clothe around Seyi and supported her to the car. "Where is that boy?" she asked and shouted "Baaayyyyoooo!"

"Mummy what happened to Sis Seyi?" Bolu's brows were tight with concern.

"Don't worry dear, she will be fine."

Bayo came out confused, wondering what happened to his sister "mummy what happened?"

"Just open the gate for me" she told him "I'm taking Seyi to the hospital" she opened the passenger's side of the car and gently placed Seyi on the seat then rushed to open the driver's side and sat down. She prayed that the car would not mess up like was its usual custom and thankfully, immediately she turned the ignition, the car started.

Bayo opened the gate and she drove out "take care of yourself and your sister till I get back, okay?"

"Okay ma" he answered and shut the gate.

On the way to the hospital, she wondered why all these were happening to her. As she went deeper in thoughts, tears flowed down her face. She had tried all she could to keep the family

together but the more she tried, the more the family seemed to be falling apart. She was getting exhausted with each passing day, her strength was failing. She was human after all, there was only so much that she could do.

When they got to the hospital, the wound was properly attended to. It was not a severe one and as a result, Seyi was not admitted that night but was allowed to go home on some analgesics.

They got back around 10pm, by that time Bayo and Bolu had slept. Bayo completed the frying of the plantain and served his sister and himself. They had rice and plantain and afterwards tried waiting up for their mum and Seyi but before long, sleep came and took over. Bolu slept off in her brother's room and he slept right beside her.

Mr. Cole on the other hand left the house shortly after Mrs. Cole took Seyi to the hospital. Since the car was not available, he decided to take a stroll to the nearby bar in the neighbourhood and had not yet returned. It had been his usual custom so neither his children nor his wife expected him to be home early. The earliest time he got back was 12 midnight and he was almost always drunk and wasted. That period was his “danger period”, the period when everyone had to be very careful around him so he does not unleash the whirl wolf in him.

Mrs. Cole recalled one occasion when he got back by 1AM. Seyi was the one that woke up to open the door for him. She was still sleepy when she dragged herself to the main door. The sleep quickly left her eyes when her father flared up and began to shout at her.

“Didn't you hear me knocking since?”

She got scared and felt the safest thing was to remain quiet.

“Can't you answer? Are you deaf?” he shouted louder and raised his hand to hit her.

“I was sleeping sir” she said, her voice trembling as she bent to dodge the hit.

“You were sleeping while I was waiting outside?” He hit her.

She started crying “I'm sorry sir.”

Mrs. Cole heard the sound and rushed out to where they were. “What's happening here?” she asked as she pulled Seyi behind her back like a mother hen would her chick.

“Like mother, like daughter” Mr Cole observed with a sneer. “Where were you when I was knocking?” he asked as he staggered into the house.

“You come at 1am and are asking where we were? We were cutting firewood in the bush” she answered sarcastically.

“Useless man” she hissed.

“That's it, woman I have had enough of your rubbish” he began to hit and kick her.

Seyi could not bear it anymore, she ran out of the house to the next compound and began to bang the gate “someone please help” she screamed.

Their neighbour, Pastor John rushed out “what is it Seyi?” he asked.

“It's my father again, he wants to kill my mum” she said in between tears.

“Okay I'm coming” he went back in and told his wife “Gbemi, I'll be back. I want to help sort out an issue with the Coles” he told her. “Please pray along, I need God's wisdom, you know that man can be a hand full.”

“Please be careful John, be very careful” Gbemi didn't want anything to happen to her husband. It was a good thing to be of help no doubt about that but she was worried about her husband's safety. She had heard screams and shouts from the Coles' house a number of times and she always prayed for the peace of God to reign in that home.

Pastor John followed Seyi “let's go” he told her.

As they got there, he was praying under his breath “Holy Spirit please take absolute control.” He drew closer to where the

fight was taking place, raised his hands in surrender and said in a calm tone “Mr Cole, please take it easy.”

Mr. Cole looked up at him and gave him the “who-called-you-into-this?” look.

“She is very sorry”, Pastor John quickly added, still standing some meters away.

“She needs to learn a lesson in this house. As a matter of fact, they all need to learn the lesson. Nobody can treat me just anyhow” Mr. Cole so badly wanted to make his point.

“I believe they have learnt that lesson now” Pastor John said gently.

“No! she hasn't” Mr Cole insisted “or have you?” he said looking at his wife who was curled up on the floor.

“Yes, I have, please I am sorry” she said with tears in her eyes.

Mr. Cole pointed at her “don't ever try that rubbish with me again, ever!” he then stepped over her and went inside.

Immediately Pastor John was sure Mr Cole had gone in, he rushed towards Mrs Cole “sorry ma, it is well with you in Jesus' name” he lifted her from the floor and supported her as she limped to the sitting room and placed her on the couch. “Run, get ice block if there is or cold water and a towel” he told Seyi. By now, Bolu and Bayo had woken up but were too scared to come out into the

sitting room, Bolu went to Bayo's room and locked themselves in his room.

Seyi rushed into the kitchen and got a frozen sachet of water and a small towel. Mr Aboderin put her through on how to gently apply cold compress on her mother's bruises.

“I'll come back in the morning to check on her” he didn't want to stay there too long, it was not safe for any of them, more so, he didn't want his wife to start getting worried.

“Thank you very much sir, God bless you” Seyi was deeply grateful.

Although that was the worst beating Seyi or her mother had ever received, things had still always been bad.

Mrs. Cole shook her head sadly as she remembered all those nasty incidents. When she returned home from the hospital with Seyi, she used the house key which was attached to the car key's bunch to open the gate and quietly drove in so as not to wake whoever might have been sleeping. She could bet a thousand dollars that her husband wasn't home, it was Bayo and Bolu she was concerned about. She turned off the engine and came down then opened the passenger's door and gently helped Seyi alight from the vehicle. She supported her as they walked to the entrance of the house. Mrs. Cole opened the main door with the keys in her hand and together they both entered the house. She lay Seyi down

on the three-seater sofa.

“*Pele* (Sorry) Seyi, how are you feeling?” she asked her, rubbing her face.

“My thighs are paining me” Seyi replied with a painful grimace on her face.

“Will you eat something so you can take your drugs? It will help with the pain” she told her.

Seyi nodded “just small” she added.

“Ok my dear, let me heat up the food. I’ll be back you hear?” she assured her.

After she left for the Kitchen, Seyi reached for her phone which her mom had helped her keep in her bag which was beside her. She saw there were a number of unread Whatsapp messages. Even though she was in pain, she still could not help keeping up with what was going on online plus she was having a very interesting conversation before her mother came to interrupt when she asked her to fry plantain.

She opened Whatsapp and scrolled straight to her chat with Goke, her newly made friend. She met him the previous week in the mall while hanging out with Sope, her best friend and she was fast becoming fond of him.

Sope was the first to take note of him that day in the mall. “That guy is fine” she said but made sure she didn’t point a finger at

the tall, slim, good looking, young dude standing an aisle away from them.

Seyi who was facing Sope and backing the guy, gradually turned around some 120 degrees to stylishly check him out. As she did, she saw herself making direct eye contact with the guy who by now was looking in their direction. At that point, she wished the ground could open up and swallow her. She was so shy she knew if she was a white lady, her face would have been beet red. She had no idea the guy was looking in their direction, if she did, she won't have looked. She was sure of that.

As if meeting with his gaze wasn't bad enough, he began to walk towards them. She initially thought it was in her mind, she was convinced her mind was playing games on her, she tried to tell herself it was not possible for a guy that fine to notice them let alone walk towards them.

“Hi” he said with a charming voice.

The word resonated in her ears, she knew the appropriate answer was either “hey”, “hi”, “hello” or something of that sort but for reasons beyond her, her mouth just couldn't seem to open to voice out a response.

Thankfully, Sope broke the silence. “Hello” she responded.

“How are you ladies doing?” he asked with swag.

“Fine thank you” Sope replied, trying to cover up for her friend who by now was as good as dumb.

“Does she speak?” he asked pointing to Seyi.

It was then the force holding her mouth let go. It was like the “play” button was pressed on the remote of her mouth. “Who? Me?” she stammered. “Em...hey..hi” she didn't know which one to say.

“I'm Goke”, he stretched his hand for a handshake first with Seyi then with Sope.

Ordinarily, Sope should have felt sidetracked because it was obvious Goke was interested in her friend and not her but he wasn't her type either. She liked older guys, the type that would spoil and pamper her.

“You are?” Goke asked Seyi, wanting to know her name.

“Oluwaseyifunmi but my friends call me Seyi” she told him a bit more composed.

“That's a nice name” he paid her compliment.

“Thank you” Seyi smiled.

“And I am Mosope, my friends call me Sope” she intentionally cut in. “My friend and I were just about leaving now” she said as she pulled Seyi by the hand and dragged her away. She didn't want her friend to appear so cheap and easy to get. It was obvious even to the blind that Seyi was falling head over heels for

the strange guy and Sope wasn't too comfortable with it.

“Ok at least, tell me your IG handle before you leave” Goke more or less begged.

“Seyi underscore love all in small letters, no space,” Seyi said as she was being dragged away by her friend like a cow to the slaughter slab in an abattoir.

“Alright, I'll search for you” Goke assured her.

When they got out, Sope let go of Seyi's hand and stood in her front “babe, don't you even know how to form? See how you were throwing yourself at the guy” she pointed out bluntly.

“What is it? What did I do? *Abeg* (please) Sope, leave me alone. Stop acting like you are my mother” Seyi finally regained full ability to speak and used it to the maximum. “I'm not a child anymore, for crying out loud, I'm on my way to the university” she told her as she pushed her away from her front and continued walking.

“And me I'm on my way to crèche *abi* (right)?” Sope asked sarcastically and tried to catch up with Seyi.

“I don't know for you” Seyi said with zero interest.

“I'm not saying that you cannot flirt or follow guys, I'm just saying you should form and prove hard to get not throw yourself in the guy's face” she tried to explain herself.

“Whatever, just leave me” Seyi waved the back of her hand

at her.

“Okay I'm sorry, I didn't mean to act like “I-know-all”, will you forgive me?” she smiled.

Seyi didn't respond.

“I'll tickle you oh, I don't care who is watching” she told her.

“Ok *beebee*, I've heard” Seyi had no choice but to comply, she was very ticklish and knew that Sope never made empty threats especially when it came to tickling her in the public.

When Seyi got home that evening, she picked her phone and checked if she had any new follower on Instagram. Lo and behold, there he was 'officialgokeup'. She smiled and took a comfortable position on her bed as she fed her eyes with his posts. They were mostly pictures of himself and a few with his friends. A particular lady's picture kept recurring and Seyi started wondering who she was. She tried to check if she was tagged but didn't get as much as her name. “*Who is this girl?*” she asked herself but before she could get a response, a direct message came in from none other but her new crush, Goke.

“Hi”

“Hello, I see you've found me” she replied.

“I told you I was going to search for you. I'm a man of my words.”

Seyi smiled. She liked the sound of that. “You have nice pictures” she paid him a compliment.

“I was just going to say that about you too. You are really beautiful” he told her.

He was the first person to ever tell her that. The secondary school she attended was an all-girl's school. That, together with the fact that she didn't really have male friends made all this very new to her. Her mom also was always too busy fighting with her father to ever tell her how beautiful she was. Every time she looked at her reflection in the mirror, all she saw was a regular face, nothing out of the ordinary so being told by a guy that she was really beautiful was new and definitely sparked up something in her for the guy.

“Thank you” she replied.

“You are welcome. I didn't see any guy in your pictures, does that mean you don't have a boyfriend?” he asked.

Seyi felt that with that question, he was being too forward but gave him the benefit of doubt “*he is probably an open person*” she told herself.

“No, I don't” she replied hoping that response didn't make her appear weird. She knew that it was the norm for ladies her age to have boyfriends and had always wondered if there was something wrong with her for not having one. She sometimes

wondered if she was ugly or unattractive. She had gone to the extent of wearing short and exposing clothes to get guys' attention but this only attracted good-for-nothing fellows who wanted to destroy her life and it earned her insults from her mother.

It was one day when her mum sent her to the market to get some things for the house and without her mum knowing, she wore a short skirt and tight off shoulder blouse. Right from the moment she stepped out of the gate till the time she got back, she received nasty comments from different guys. First it was the gateman at the estate's gate that told her he wanted to marry her then the Hausa meat seller at the market that called her “fresh meat” and the worst was a beggar by the road side that told her to follow him home. Did he even have a place he could call home? She was so disgusted and told herself that was the last time she was going to dress that way. As if all that was not enough, when she got home and her mum saw her, she pounced on her with insults.

“Seyi, is this what you wore to the market?” her mother asked with utmost surprise. She couldn't believe her eyes. She didn't wait for her response “is something wrong with you?”

Seyi knew what she did was wrong so didn't bother arguing or defending herself. She remained quiet all through the time her mother scolded her. She received the insult of her life that

day and didn't need a prophet to tell her never to repeat it again.

However, now meeting Goke, she felt there was something about him that was different from the other guys. He gave her the kind of attention she had been starved of from her father and guys in general. She was eager to know more about him.

She summoned courage to ask him if he had a girlfriend. “How about you, I saw a lady featuring in a number of your pictures. Is she your girlfriend?”

“Hehehehehe no o, she is my younger sister” he told her.

For some reason, that last message he sent brought her some relief.

They went on to exchange phone numbers and asked a couple of questions. She got to know he was a final year architecture student in Excellence University but was on holiday.

“That's the same university my father lectures in,” she informed him.

“Wow what a small world.”

They moved on to phone calls, that was the beginning of incessant chats and calls between the two of them. She became pretty addicted. Within an hour of not hearing from him, she'd either send him a message or call him. She didn't even notice she was the one initiating 90% of the conversation they had. All she knew was, she liked the feeling it brought. Her phone became her

best friend, she was not away from it for more than a maximum of 5 minutes except when she was asleep and it was the very first thing she searched for the moment she woke up. Now she had a reward for her little relationship with her phone: a scald on her thigh from hot oil.

Her mom brought her food and asked her to sit up to eat. She did but with her eyes glued to her phone. She had just opened her chat with Goke and realized all he said last was 'kk'. He had not checked up on her since then, she was greatly displeased.

“Drop your phone Seyi and eat your food” her mother instructed her.

She reluctantly placed the phone down, still wondering why Goke had not chatted her up for over 5 hours.

She ate her food and took her drug and after some minutes told her mum she was ready to go to her room.

“Okay dear” her mom said as she gradually lifted her up from the chair and supported her as she limped to her room.

After sorting out Seyi, Mrs. Cole entered Bayo's room and carried Bolu to her room. Then she went back to the sitting room and finally got the chance to rest her aching back. She didn't even realize she had not eaten since morning. The last and only meal she had had that day was bread and egg which was breakfast. She was too tired to eat anything now. She lay down on the three-seater

sofa and waited for her husband to come. Since that unpleasant incident when he beat her blue-back, she decided to make the sitting room her temporary room till he returned after which she'd go in to sleep.

He finally returned at 12:30AM. She opened the door for him. He reeled in as usual but didn't insult or abuse her as was his usual custom. Mrs. Cole was too exhausted to start a conversation about how he didn't care if Seyi was alright. She just locked the door behind him and went to bed.

Chapter 02

The next morning, before anyone, Mrs. Cole was up. She went first to the girls' room to check on Seyi and Bolu. She opened the door gently and tiptoed in order not to wake them up.

Bolu was initially lying down with her back towards door, when she heard the screeching of the hinges of the door. She had already woken up but chose to still remain in bed.

“My baby, did I wake you up?” Mrs Cole asked in a low tone as she continued tiptoeing into the room.

Bolu shook her head in between mild sniffs.

“You were awake? It's not even 5am yet. What's the problem? Why are you crying?” The concerned mum asked as she sat beside her.

Bolu sat up in bed, her mother's old wrapper which doubled as her cover cloth covered her from the waist downward. She fondled with the tip of the wrapper and found it hard to look at her mum straight in the face. She did that either when she had done something wrong or was scared.

Mrs. Cole knew something was wrong “did you have a bad

dream?” she asked with her eye brows furrowed as she racked her brain to find out what could possibly be wrong.

Bolu shook her head again.

“What's is the matter?” Mrs. Cole rubbed her daughter's cheeks.

Bolu sniffled.

“I know, it's your dad, right?” Mrs Cole looked at Bolu's face to try to know if that was it. Bolu burst into tears. Mrs. Cole hugged her tightly “I'm so sorry you have to see all these at such a tender age. You and your siblings are the only reason why I'm still in this marriage. You are too young to understand but one thing you must never do is marry a man like your father” she told her as she held back her own tears.

She looked at Bolu who had not stopped crying, she wiped her tears with the wrapper and sighed, “don't cry my baby, everything will be fine, you hear?” Mrs. Cole herself wasn't sure if that was true, she just had to remain strong for her children.

Despite all her mother did and said, Bolu still didn't stop crying, there had to be more to her tears than her father's hostile attitude.

“Mummy” she said sobbing.

“Yes dear” Mrs. Cole was all ears

“What of Uncle Gboyega?” Bolu asked still sobbing.

“What about your uncle?” Mrs Cole didn't understand

what her brother had to do with anything that was going on.

“Will he do it again?” Bolu asked.

“Do what again?” Mrs Cole adjusted her sitting position “do what Bolu? *Ba mi soro* (talk to me)” she could feel her heart racing.

Bolu uttered no word.

“Bolu, I’m your mother, you can tell me anything. What did he do to you?” she held her hand. “Did he touch you?” she asked praying the answer to that question was “no”.

Bolu burst into tears again “he said I must not tell anyone, especially you. He said what happened is normal” she said innocently.

“Ha!” Mrs Cole exclaimed not minding if her voice woke Seyi up. She threw her hands in the air, “Gboyega has killed me. He said what?!” She could not believe her ears. “Is it a crime to keep my children in the hands of my own brother?” She queried herself rhetorically.

“God, why are you so wicked to me?” She bit her index finger as she looked up to the ceiling. “That useless man that calls himself my husband is a drunkard now my brother? Ha! God why me? Bolu *jo* (please) tell me what happened” she begged the poor girl.

“The day you and daddy went out and left Uncle Gboyega with us” she sniffed repeatedly and tried to hold back her tears.

“*Beeni mo ranti* (yes, I remember). Gboyega spent a week here last month” she affirmed.

“Sister Seyi went to visit her friend, Sope. Uncle Gboyega now sent Brother Bayo to buy credit for him. So, it was only me and him in the house. He now started watching something on his laptop, the boy and girl in the movie were naked. He said I should also remove my clothes. I refused and instead ran into me and Sister Seyi’s room but he chased me” she cried.

“Ha! Gboyega, is this how you repay me?” Mrs. Cole was close to tears.

“As he was about to remove his trousers,” brother Bayo came back. Then he...”

Mrs Cole cut in “so he didn't touch you?” she asked, hoping her brother didn't rape her daughter.

“No, he didn't. Brother Bayo started calling his name to inform him that he had brought the credit. That was how he ran out and left me.”

“Thank God. God is good o” she rubbed her hand on her daughter's face and arms as one searching for scratches and bruises “thank God he didn't do anything to you.”

Bolu continued recounting the unpleasant incident “later, he told me never to tell anybody what happened that if I should tell you, you will beat me and report me to daddy. I'm sorry mummy please forgive me,” she cried. “Don't beat me”, she pleaded. She

innocently believed him and thought what had happened was her fault.

“Bolu none of what happened was your fault, as a matter of fact, thank you for opening up to me. It's all my fault, I shouldn't have left you in care of that fool, I should have taught you how you must not allow any man touch you. I thank God he didn't rape you.” She was indeed grateful that didn't happen.

“But mummy I am scared that if he comes again, he will do it again” Bolu expressed her fear.

“God forbid! That idiot will never step into this house again. Not him, not any man. Not when I'm alive. I will call him and tell him that if he ever comes close to this house again, he'll sleep in the police station. You hear? Don't cry again. Never allow any man touch you, okay?” She wiped her tears.

By this time, Seyi had woken up. Her mother was no longer whispering and so her voice woke her up. “Mummy what happened?” Seyi turned towards their direction with sleep still in her eyes.

“My dear, don't worry. Go back to bed. I just came to check on you both. How are your thighs?” Mrs. Cole stood up and walked towards Seyi.

“It's less painful” Seyi replied as she looked at the wound dressing on her thighs and patted it with care.

“Pele dear, when you want to have your bath, let me know

so I can assist you” Mrs. Cole told her.

“Mum?” The look Seyi gave her screamed, “I’m not a baby look.”

“*Wo* (look), I know you are not a baby but this one *oh*, I will help you. You children are my life. Is that clear?” She couldn’t afford to allow anything happen to them. The mother hen instinct had just been heightened; she was ready to protect her young even if it was at the expense of her life.

“Yes ma” Seyi answered reluctantly.

“Mummy, are we going to church today?” Bolu asked.

“Oh, that’s true, today is Sunday” Mrs. Cole didn’t even remember there was something called church.

“Yes mummy, it’s been like a month now. Sope even said her mum has been asking after you” Seyi informed her.

“You know it’s not my fault. Your father hasn’t allowed us to go to church all this while, let me talk to him again. Who knows what miracle God will do, he might just allow us.”

“I pray so oh. I’ll love to see Sope, it’s been a while” Seyi smiled and immediately started planning how she was going to arrange for Goke to come to her church so they will see.

“See your mouth like Sope, is Sope the reason you are going to church?” Her mum reprimanded her.

“No but...”

“No *but*s, don’t even *but* anything. God should be your

reason for going to church. You hear me?” Mrs. Cole placed her hand on the tip of her right ear.

“Yes ma, I've heard” Seyi murmured.

“Let me get going, I'll come back to check on you. If your father says we can go to church, I'll come and tell you so you can get ready” she informed them and left.

Seyi picked her phone to check if Goke had sent her a message. Still nothing. She felt disappointed. “This one cannot even check on someone,” she said and flung the phone on the bed then lay back to sleep. As soon as she did, her phone rang. She was eager to check if it was Goke but was more disappointed when she realized it was just her 5:00AM alarm. She had intentionally set the same ringtone for her alarm and her incoming calls so it would trick her into waking up. She snoozed the alarm and turned to continue sleeping then it occurred to her *“if the Mohammed would not go to the mountain, I can take the mountain to the Mohammed. Goke has probably not sent a message because he feels he doesn't want to disturb me.”* She decided to pick her phone and send him a message.

As she opened their chat on WhatsApp, she realized he was online. The mere sight of him being online, made butterflies rumble in her tummy. Excitement grew. She sent the message:

“Hello Goke”

She waited for a very long minute and saw he didn't reply. She opened the chat and realized he had read her message. This

made her upset “what is wrong with this guy?” She decided to call him.

The line was busy. She waited for some minutes and tried calling again, the line was still busy.

“*What could be going on?*” Seyi reasoned. She decided she wasn't going to try again. She instead decided to open Instagram and check what it had to offer. Some minutes after, her phone rang. It was Goke.

Her heart missed a beat. She picked the call “hello” she said eager to hear his charming voice.

“Hi dear. How are you?” he said and waited for her response.

“I'm fine, haven't heard from you in a while” Seyi could not hold it back, she had missed him.

“Yeah, I'm so sorry dear, I was just talking to my project supervisor. It's been taking so much of my time” he explained to her.

“Project supervisor at 5:30am? Isn't that pretty early?” she asked.

“Well yeah it is but he'll be traveling out of the country today and I needed to tidy up some things before he leaves”

“Oh okay” Seyi didn't ask any further question.

“So how have you been?” he asked.

Seyi smiled, “I've been okay except that I had a minor

domestic accident yesterday. Hot oil poured on my thighs but I'm better now" she told him hoping to receive some comforting words from him.

"Oh my goodness, I'm so sorry about that. How are you now?"

"I'm much better, thank you" Seyi smiled.

"Please take it easy, nothing must spoil that your fresh skin" he said.

Seyi couldn't help but smile when she heard his words "how do you know my skin is fresh?" she asked "all you've seen is my hands, legs and face." She knew her words were about to provoke something she didn't bargain for. She was heading towards an erotic dimension and she knew it.

Goke chuckled "I know, I don't have to see it. I imagine it every time" he told her.

"Hmmmmm really? You want to see more?" she asked, not sure exactly where she was heading with that question.

"You want to show me more?" he responded. Goke wasn't new to this but he knew Seyi was and so he decided to take things slow, didn't want to rush her.

"I don't know, I haven't done this before" she opened up to him and began to feel shy.

"No pressure dear" he told her. "When next are we going to see?" He asked her.

“It's not likely I'll be going out anytime soon because of my thighs but I was hoping you could come to my church so we'll see after service”

“HmMMM” Goke wasn't so comfortable with that arrangement. “How about I come pick you after you get back from church and we'll hang out together?” he suggested. “Will your parents be okay with that?”

“They don't have to know. I'll tell my mum Sope's dad's driver will be coming to pick me to take me to Sope's house. I'm sure she won't have a problem with that.” She conspired.

“Cool then, sounds like a plan”

“Yeah” she smiled. She was really looking forward to seeing Goke, despite the state of her thighs. She wanted nothing more than to spend time with him.

“Alright dear, take care of yourself. See you later today” he told her as he rounded off the conversation.

“Bye” she replied and ended the call. “Yes!” she exclaimed with excitement as she dropped the phone and jumped out of bed to dance. Immediately she stood, the sharp pain she felt in her thighs brought her back from fantasy to reality. “Ouch, ouch” she groaned and gently sat back on the bed.

“What I'm I going to wear, I have to look good for Goke?” She thought, searching her brain. “I'll have to wear a skirt because to this wound. She stood up and opened her wardrobe, brought out a

black and white polka dotted flare knee length skirt and a baby pink body con top.

Bolu turned towards her direction and asked “has mummy said we'll be going to church?” She wondered why her sister was already getting set.

“Does she have to say so before I get ready?” Seyi replied.

“Sis Seyi, who were you talking to on the phone?” Bolu was always inquisitive.

“What is your business?” Seyi ignored her.

“Hmmm you know mummy said we should not have boyfriend”

“Ehn, who now said I have a boyfriend? He is just my friend that is a boy. It's not the same thing” Seyi knew that was not entirely true. What she had with Goke was definitely more than 'just friendship'. “You are too young to understand” she told her.

Bolu, though young, was very sharp. She knew something fishy was going on but decided not to press further.

Mrs. Cole went to Bayo's room to check up on him. He was still fast asleep. She walked closer to his bed and noticed he was sweating. The fan was off and the room was quite stuffy. She decided to remove the blanket that was covering him and adding to the heat he was experiencing. As she removed it, she noticed he had no clothes on aside his T-shirt.

“When did this boy start sleeping without his boxers?”

Mrs. Cole wondered as she searched around for his boxers. “This place is just too stuffy” she walked towards the windows and opened them. “It's bad enough that he locks himself in, does he also have to close the windows?”

The time was 5:30, usually she would still have allowed him to sleep till 6am before waking him but she decided to wake him regardless.

“Bayo... Bayo” she tapped him. “Wake up”

Bayo tossed on the bed for some seconds.

She tapped him harder “wake up Bayo. It's morning. Where is your boxers?” she asked him.

The mention of the word 'boxers' rang an alarm in his head and jolted him from sleep. He immediately pulled the blanket over himself.

“Mum! Do you mind?” he asked, embarrassed.

“What is it? What are you hiding? Am I not your mother?” Mrs. Cole asked.

“Mummy now, can't I have some privacy again” he said feeling really embarrassed.

“Sorry oh, *sha* put on something. When did you start sleeping naked?” she asked him.

“I'm not naked, I must have removed it when I went to urinate in the night” he told her.

“*Iwo lomo* (suit yourself). Today is Sunday, I'll talk to your

father and ask him if we can go to church today. If he says 'yes', then you'll need to get ready. You know Sunday school is 7:30am." she informed him.

"Ok ma" he replied and turned to the other side to continue sleeping.

Mrs. Cole left the room and went back to her room which she shared with her husband. She prayed that as she asked him about their going to church, he would oblige.

She gently walked to his side of the bed and tapped him on his shoulder. "Daddy Seyi" she said in a hushed tone. 'Daddy Seyi' and 'Mummy Seyi' were the names they called each other on the best of days. When they have arguments, Mr. Cole mostly referred to her as "woman". Gone were the days when they used pet names like 'sweetheart', 'baby' and the likes.

After tapping him twice and calling his name once, she didn't get any response then decided to make another attempt. "Daddy Seyi, good morning" she said still with a hushed tone.

"Yes, what is it?" he said as if he was being bothered.

"I didn't mean to bother you, I just wanted to know if the children and I can go to church today?" Mrs. Cole said, hoping he would not flare up.

"You people should go and not disturb my life *jare*" he said and turned to the other side to continue sleeping.

"Thank you" Mrs. Cole was happy, she really desired to be

in church. There was this warm welcome she received from the members and Pastor George, a new pastor that was recently transferred to their branch. He'd call every time he noticed she wasn't around.

She went to her children's rooms and told them to prepare for church because their father had given the go ahead.

Mrs. Cole prepared breakfast for her husband and served it in a warmer on the dining table. She also served small portions for the children so no one would disturb her with tales of hunger pangs during or after service. By 7:15am, everyone was set and they left for church.

Bayo sat in front, while Seyi and Bolu sat at the back.

Some minutes into the trip, Seyi spoke up “mummy, Sope's dad's driver will be coming to pick me in the afternoon. He'll take me to Sope's house and bring me back in the evening” she lied, she had already crammed her lines and delivered them effortlessly.

“What are you going to do in her house again? Aren't you going to see her in church?” Mrs Cole asked.

Seyi definitely didn't see that coming. “I'm just going to say hi” she lied again, hoping her mum would not suspect foul play.

Bolu whispered to Seyi “I will tell mummy, you want to go and see your boyfriend.”

“Better shut up your mouth” Seyi replied in a whisper and

threatened to beat her if she said anything.

Mrs. Cole didn't seem comfortable with the whole idea of Seyi going to visit her friend "why are you always the one going to visit, has she ever come to visit you in your house?" That was the question typically asked by African parents.

"Mummy, it's because of daddy. I don't want Sope to know what goes on in our house. She has offered to come many times but I always had to find an excuse for her." That was the first thing Seyi had said that was true. In her defense, her house was in no way conducive to host any guest and they all knew it.

"Okay but don't stay out late, you know your thighs are just healing. Ideally, you should stay home to rest" Mrs. Cole told her as she turned into the church premise.

"Mummy pleeaasseeeee" she elongated her plea and hoped it would somehow convince her mum "I promise not to be late"

"We are already at the church, we'll talk about this on our way home" Mrs. Cole told her as she parked the car.

"Do you all have offering?" she asked them

"No" they all echoed.

"Bayo, pass my purse" she pointed to the silver purse she placed at the foot of the front passenger's seat. She always kept her bag under the car seat, Lagos was notorious for theft.

Bayo brought it out and gave her. She brought out three bills of hundred naira note and handed each to the three of them.

“Oya (quickly) come down and go to your different Sunday school classes. We’ll meet after church, enjoy service” she told them as they alighted from the car.

She was the last to get down. She adjusted her head tie and with the rearview mirror, gave her make up a touch up. She got down from the car, locked it and walked towards the building. She entered the building and observed the arrangement. The chairs were arranged in circles, there were about seven groups including that for the children and another for teenagers. She spotted the Sunday school group which she usually attended and walked towards it.

She sat down on one of the empty seats and was handed over a Sunday school outline by the group leader.

“You are welcome Mrs. Cole, we are looking at 'A believer's Reaction to Temptation' with Joseph and David as our examples from the Bible” Mrs. Dedeke, the Sunday school leader for her group explained. She always did that to anyone that joined in order to help the person catch up.

Mrs. Cole nodded and smiled. “Thank you” she mouthed as she looked at the paper in her hand.

“Alright, so as we were saying, what should a believer do when faced with temptation?” Mrs. Dedeke asked.

The man sitting to Mrs Cole's right lifted his hand.

“Alright sir”, Mrs Dedeke pointed at him.

“We are in the 21st century, we can't compare how things are now to how they were in David or Joseph's time. Even God, Himself, understands that body no be wood. Once a person gets saved, all his sins that is: past, present and future sins are forgiven so if something happens and the believer falls, all he needs to do is get up and keep going. After all, the Bible itself says 'though the righteous fall seven times, they rise again' So let's not be hard on ourselves” he said.

“Well, no one is talking about being hard on anyone,” Mrs. Dedeké responded. “It appears there a few wrong notions that need to be corrected. First, the Bible in the book of Roman chapter 6 verse 15 says 'what then? Shall we sin because we are not under the law but under grace? God forbid', there is no excuse for sin. The fact that we are in a sinful era only means grace abounds much more to say no to sin and to shine as light in this dark age according to Romans 5 verse 20 and Isaiah 60 verses 1 and 2. If Joseph was able to put his feet down and say 'no' to sin because he feared God, God expects no less from us”. She paused to make sure the young man was following her.

She continued “I keep hearing people say 'God understands', He may be a very understanding God but He is also a righteous and holy God. His standards are unbending. He says let everyone that names the name of the Lord depart from iniquity 2 Timothy 2 verse 19. Also don't forget that the temptation that we

are referring to here is not just sexual sin but it cuts across every area of our lives. Remember, Jesus too was tempted yet without sin. Do you understand?” she asked him.

He nodded.

“I hope we are all following?” she asked as she looked around at the remaining eight people in the group.

They all nodded.

“Now on the issue of our past, present and future sins been forgiven. It is true that God died for us and has cleansed us of all unrighteousness but it is not a license to sin. And if we fall, the Bible says God is faithful and just to forgive us of our sins and cleanse us all unrighteousness when we confess our sins 1 John 1verse 9. Let's not omit the “confession of sin” part. You just don't sin and 'move on', there must first be godly sorrow first which will then lead to repentance” she explained.

The young man jotted down some of the things she said in his jotter.

“Does anyone have any objection or contribution on the issue being discussed?” Mrs. Dedeke paused to make sure they were all on the same page.

They shook their heads.

She continued teaching for another 20 minutes and allowed people ask questions.

Mrs Cole really enjoyed the class.

Towards the end of Sunday school, Pastor George, the mounted the podium which was beautifully designed with flowers tucked into two lovely crafted vases positioned at each end. The lectern was made of glass and beside it was a 24' flat screen TV from which the pastor or anyone who stood behind the lectern read scriptures and had access to what was projected on the other two televisions facing the congregation. He announced that the teachers should begin to round off their classes. He then asked a person from each group to share what they had learnt. When it was the turn for Mrs. Cole's group, she saw him look at her. Just as she was about praying that he won't call her, the young man who sat beside her who had earlier made a contribution signaled that he had something to say.

“Alright, bro Tope”, Pastor George pointed at him. He was so good with names. He knew the names of almost everyone in the church.

Bro Tope shared with the church some of the issues Mrs. Dedeke had addressed.

Pastor George rounded off the Sunday school session with a short prayer afterwards, the chairs were rearranged and everyone took their seats.

After church ended, Bayo went to his mum and collected the car keys. His friend, Segun was with him.

“Come, I will show you. The game is in the car” Bayo told

Segun as he collected the key and they left.

Seyi was with Sope. "I'm going to see Goke this afternoon" she told her.

"And your mum will allow you?" Sope asked.

"Of course, not but don't worry, my mum is not even an issue, trust me. You know I have my ways" Seyi smiled as they walked towards Sope's mum's car.

"I trust you, is it not the Seyi I know" Sope responded and gave her a hi-five. "Anyway *sha*, gist me how it goes and greet the fine boy for me o".

As they approached the car, Seyi greeted Sope's mum who was also just approaching the car.

"How are you, Seyi?" she responded warmly. "What of your mum?" she asked.

"She is fine ma, she should still be inside the church auditorium" Seyi told her.

"Oh really? I didn't see her. My regards to her" she said as she entered the car.

"Alright ma, I'll convey." Seyi turned to Sope "I'll call you to give you the gist", she hugged her and waved at her as she entered the car.

As Seyi watch Sope's mum drive off, she suddenly remembered she had a baby sister she was meant to watch over. She quickly went to the children's church to get Bolu and

afterwards they went to the car to wait for their mum.

Mrs. Cole walked towards the exit of the auditorium and as she approached the door, she heard her name being called from behind. She turned and saw Pastor George approaching.

Chapter 03

“It’s so good to see you, Mrs Cole” he said as he walked closer and extended his hand for a handshake.

“Thank you, Pastor,” she replied as she shook his hand.

“How are you?” He asked.

“I’m fine, thank you.”

“No, I don’t want the cliché response everyone gives their pastor. How are you doing, really?” He repeated himself. This time around, in a more serious tone.

For a split second, Mrs. Cole was tempted to open up to him about all that was going on in her home. After all, he was her pastor but she quickly brushed the thought aside. She didn’t want him to see her or her home as a mess.

“Well, things have been quite challenging but I’m doing okay,” she told him.

“Hmm, ‘okay’ doesn’t seem good enough for me. You want to talk about it?” He offered.

Mrs. Cole thought about it for some seconds and replied,

“Nah, that won't be necessary. Thanks for the offer, sir. I'll be just fine. Do have a great week ahead.” She politely found a way to end the conversation and left without waiting for his response.

As she walked towards the car, she pondered on the offer the pastor had just made. She'd have loved to share her burden with someone but she didn't want to appear weak or vulnerable.

Mrs. Cole was a very beautiful woman in her early forties. She had always been the envy of many men. Despite being a mother of three, she had a lovely stature and always took good care of herself. It's a pity her husband never admired her and all the compliments she got were from strange men.

Back in her university days, she was the cynosure of all eyes. Although she never made her looks a priority, she still always appeared beautiful in whatever she wore especially when she went for lectures. She wasn't really an outgoing person and had only a few friends. It was never news to her when she was told by any of her friends that a particular guy liked her or showed interest. As a matter of fact, she always had the same response, “These guys should just leave me alone.”

“What do you mean they should leave you alone?” Racheal, her then best friend asked her on one occasion, while they remained seated in the lecture hall after an afternoon lecture.

“Racheal, but you of all people know how I need to focus

on my studies and have good grades. I'm the first child and my parents pay through their nose to send me to school. I cannot afford to ruin all this by hanging out with these guys," she explained.

As the conversation went on, one of their course mates walked up to where they sat and greeted her. It was obvious the greeting guy was there for her, he barely said a word to Racheal throughout the five minutes he spent blabbing. He went on speaking about himself, from his name, to where he was from, to his hobbies, his likes and dislikes and on and on he went until Funke stylishly cut him short and told him politely that she had somewhere to be. That was the excuse she used to escape his endless chattering.

She stood up and signaled to Racheal for them to leave.

"I can drop you off wherever you are going even if you want me to drop you in America, I will," the guy said, in a desperate last attempt at being witty. He was obviously distracted by the beauty and presence of the lady he had always admired; he didn't realize he wasn't making any sense and unfortunately for him, he would not have been anything close to Funke's type even if she had one.

Funke didn't find his half joke, half trash-talk funny at all. "Thanks, but we are fine. We already have an arrangement," she

told him and walked towards the door of the lecture hall.

As soon as they got out, Racheal who had been silent all along said, “*Na wa for that guy o; E no even get chill*. No comma; no full stop. He was just pouring like tap *wey no get control*.”

“*I dey tell you*, guys though. They are all the same,” Funke didn't seem interested one bit.

“Haba, why would you say that? Have you paused to take a look at the guys that like you? Have you ever thought of giving them a chance?” Racheal asked.

“Didn't you see that guy?” she pointed out.

“*Abeg*, leave Dotun alone *jare*, that one should go and park well. I'm talking of Arnold. That guy makes sense die,” Racheal tried to convince her. “You are lucky I am not you, Funke; these guys won't have suffered this much. You need to see how Arnold always calls and texts me up just to ask about you. That guy really likes you, Funke.” Racheal told her.

“See Racheal, the guy is not even a Christian; I'm not interested. Dotun oh, Arnold oh, I don't want,” Funke made it clear.

“But no one said you should marry any of them. Just give them a little attention that is all.” Racheal still tried convincing her.

“Nope, it's not happening.” Funke replied as she

continued walking, without giving more than a casual glance towards her companion.

“I've heard you o. So where is the arrangement you said we had? See how we are trekking like someone that is in search of employment” Racheal said.

“Ehn, let's keep walking. We will get a cab at the school gate. I'd rather take public transport than enter that guy's car,” she said without mincing words.

“That's exactly what I've been trying to tell you. See, listen to me!” Racheal tried resuming her speech with renewed enthusiasm. She tapped her shoulder as she further made her point, “We really don't have to suffer like this. You don't even have to date any of these guys just allow them to spoil you a little, then when you are satisfied, let them know you are not interested. Is that one hard?”

Funke paused and peered at Racheal strangely, “you are joking right?”

“I'm serious, Funke. It's really not that much of a big deal. You won't be the first lady to do it or do you think these guys are ready to get married and settle down? Look, all I'm asking you to do is use your beauty. Even the Bible says that wisdom is profitable to direct,” Racheal tried convincing her.

Funke continued walking and stated through gritted

teeth, “I’m no longer having this conversation, Racheal. If you want to date any of them, please feel free. My mind is made up.”

“It’s ok oh; I cannot force you,” Racheal replied and ended their discussion of the issue.

That was first semester 200 level. By second semester 400 level which was Funke's final year, things were still very much the same except that she was now more receptive to guys but still maintained her standards. She was determined not to settle for just any Tom, Dick or Harry.

She was a Christian and knew she couldn't date a guy who wasn't. That was her number one criterion. Others such as good looks, warm personality and so on followed closely on her 'list'. She was not really keen about him being wealthy; she wasn't going to turn a guy down just because he didn't have a car. She knew every guy had a potential to be rich on the long run and those that were rich could lose it in the twinkle of an eye.

She kept scrutinizing guys that came her way until she narrowed them down to one; Emeka. Emeka was three years ahead of her in school. He had graduated from engineering two years earlier but had never stopped liking her and showing her how much he cared for her. On many occasions, he'd buy her gifts and bring them to her on campus. He'd always call to check on her and she knew that he really liked her. The feelings were mutual

but she still wanted to be careful in making her choice.

After she graduated from school, she finally decided to say 'yes' to Emeka. She was so excited about her decision and after about two months decided to tell her parents the good news. But alas, she got the shock of her life from their response.

“Funke after all we did for you, this is how you choose to repay us?” Her mother started.

“Mummy what are talking about?” Funke couldn't fathom why her parents were displeased with the good news she had just delivered.

The atmosphere in the sitting room that afternoon was really tensed. Her father remained silent as he rhythmically tapped his right foot on the floor.

“Can someone please tell me what I have done wrong?” Funke asked. “I have lived my whole life to please you. I didn't have a boyfriend in school; I graduated with a good second class upper in accounting, I didn't get pregnant or anything like that. What else do you want from me?” She said not realizing she was beginning to raise her voice.

“Will you stop shouting at us, are we your mate?” Her mother snapped.

“I'm sorry, I didn't know my voice was raised,” she said, still upset.

“Funke,” her father finally broke his silence.

“Sir,” she replied.

“What is your full name?” He asked.

“Olufunke Owojiru,” she answered, wondering at the relevance of that question.

“An Owojiru can never and I repeat never marry someone from another town let alone state. Not to talk of tribe,” he informed her.

“What?!” Funke couldn't believe her ears. She felt a wave of heat flow right from her head to her feet and immediately, she began to sweat profusely. “Nobody ever mentioned it to me,” she told them as she stood to her feet.

“Now we are mentioning it,” her father told her and added “I don't know what or how you want to tell this Emeka or whatever his name is now but let this be the last time you mention him to us. Is that clear?”

Funke paced back and forth in the old, sparsely-furnished sitting room. She didn't respond.

“If you like don't hear, go ahead with the relationship and you cease to be our daughter”, her father stood up and went inside.

“What?!” Funke turned to him the moment he said it. “Ha daddy” she broke down in tears as she watched him leave. “Mummy” she turned to her mum who was still seated on the

tattered couch. “Mummy please help me beg daddy” she pleaded.

“Your father has spoken, you know he doesn't repeat himself. Don't make him do as he has said. You have younger ones who are looking up to you. You, of all people must lead by example,” her mother stood up and went inside too.

Funke remained in the sitting room and cried. Just then, her phone rang; she looked at the caller's ID and saw it was Emeka. The mere sight of his name made her cry even more. She didn't pick the call. He called two more times and left her a message which read thus:

“Baby, I'm already at the restaurant, what's going on? You usually get here before me. Hope you are okay? How did the meeting with your parents go? I can't wait to hear the full gist.”

She read the message but didn't reply. Instead, she turned off her phone. She didn't want more messages and texts from him. They only broke her down more.

Emeka tried calling her again and realized her phone was off. “What could be happening?” He wondered. “Maybe her phone battery went flat.” He told himself. He was always positive and optimistic in his thinking. He waited another 45minutes and when she didn't show up, he left. He called a few of her friends to ask if they had heard from her but got the same response. None of them had spoken to her and when it was getting embarrassing, he

stopped calling them.

Days went by and Emeka had still not heard anything from Funke. He could not take it anymore. He got her parent's home address from one of her friends and decided to find out if she was okay.

He parked his car outside the compound and knocked on the rusty gate which led into the compound that housed their small bungalow.

“Who is it?” A female voiced asked.

“My name is Emeka; please, I'm here to see Funke.” He replied.

There was silence.

Funke's father came out accompanied by her mother. He opened the gate and asked, “What did you say your name was?” There was evident hostility in his voice.

“Emeka, sir” he replied and greeted “good day sir”. He stretched out his hand for a handshake.

Funke's father looked at his hand and slowly looked at him from head to toe. “How can we help you?” he asked with an expressionless face.

“I'm looking for Funke; I was told this is where her parents live” he said, wondering the reason for the hostile response he got.

“Well, Funke doesn't want to see you. She said you should leave and never come back.” The elderly man in his early sixties said.

Emeka was dumbfounded. That was the last thing he expected to hear from them. He stood there speechless.

When the silence was getting too long, Funke's father made an attempt to shut the gate.

Then Emeka said, “I'll appreciate it if she comes out to tell me that herself.”

‘*Se cti eleyi di ni?* (Is this one deaf?)” Funke's father asked. “I said she cannot see you; you can leave now” he said.

A voice spoke from behind them spoke, “Daddy, please don't talk to him like that, he at least deserves some respect.” Funke said as she walked towards the gate. Her eyes were red; her hair was so unkempt. She wore an oversized dress.

“Funke, is this true?” Emeka asked still unable to believe his ears.

Funke's parents moved aside but stood close enough to hear whatever she was going to say.

Funke looked at Emeka and before she could say anything, hot tears rolled down her cheeks.

“No, no please, tell me this is not true, Funke.” Emeka's eyes were moist with tears.

“I really wish it wasn't true, Emeka. My hands are tied.” She cried.

“No, they aren't, Funke. You always have a choice and you know it.” He told her.

Funke couldn't say anything but cry.

“So you have made your choice?” He asked.

Funke tried to hold his hand “please try and understand Emeka.” She begged.

Emeka removed his hand from hers and turned his face away as a drop of tear fell from his eyes. “Have a great life, Funke.” He turned around and left.

“Emeka please don't go, please” she cried the more.

Her father hissed and went inside while her mother patted her on the back and said, “You did the right thing. Your very own, one from our home town, will come for you.”

Funke looked at her mother with disgust and brushed her hand off her back, “please leave me,” she said and went inside.

“*Gbo to ba fe gbo*; (listen if you want to listen) that is your cup of tea,” her mother said and also went inside.

“Mummy, I'm hungry.” Bolu's voice cut into Mrs. Cole's thoughts.

Mrs. Cole had been so lost in thought; her mind was miles

away. "Aren't we on the way home? You will eat when we get home." She told Bolu.

"I don't want to go home," Bolu said and folded her arms.

"What do you mean you don't want to go home? Will you rather live under the bridge? Better be thankful you have a place to call home" Mrs. Cole told her.

Bolu remained silent.

"But mummy, it is true." Seyi joined in. "None of us are eager to go home because we know what we are going to meet at home." She spoke up and didn't mince words in stating the truth just as it was.

"Why would you talk like that Seyi, did you keep a monster at home?" Mrs. Cole asked.

None of them responded. Their silence in itself screamed 'yes' to their mother's question.

"This is your father we are talking about, you know?"

"Please let's just branch somewhere and buy ice cream or something before we go back" Bayo said with pity written all over his face.

Mrs. Cole couldn't argue with them anymore. She knew they were telling the truth. "Okay, we'll buy ice cream but we won't stay long so that your father won't..."

Seyi cut in, "our point exactly."

“Hmmm, it is well.” Mrs. Cole sighed, she had no other argument.

She took the next turn to the right and drove into a filling station.

“Yeeeeeeey, thank you mummy.” Bolu, enthused from the back of the car.

Mrs. Cole smiled “what if it is fuel I want to buy?”

“After buying the fuel, you will stop at the eatery and buy our snacks too.” Bolu was so smart and always had a way of getting to their mum's heart.

“You seemed so sure, 'B baby” That was the pet name Mrs. Cole gave Bolu.

“Yes mummy, I'm sure.” Bolu said beaming with smiles as she watched her mum pack the car in front of the eatery.

Mrs. Cole chuckled, “okay, come down everyone; we won't stay long o.”

Before she could finish her sentence, Bayo and Bolu had flung their doors opened and were out.

Full of excitement, Bayo said, “Mummy I heard they make really nice chicken pie here. Can I have chicken pie pleaseeeee?” He clapped his hand together and made an innocent face that he knew his mum couldn't resist.

“Okay, okay, I've heard. What do you want?” She turned

to the ladies.

Bolu, jumping with so much excitement said, “mummy, me I want scotch egg with my chicken pie.”

“See your mouth B baby, who said you were having chicken pie in the first instance?” Mrs. Cole smiled.

“How about you?” Mrs. Cole turned to Seyi who had been quiet all along.

“Anything,” she said uninterested about what was going on.

“What's with the nonchalant attitude, young lady?” Mrs. Cole asked her.

“Nothing,” she replied with a straight face.

Mrs. Cole was not ready to have her cheerful countenance altered by one adolescent's mood swings, so she didn't pursue it further.

“Let's go in,” she told Bayo and Bolu, leaving Seyi crawling behind like a turtle.

The eatery was fully air-conditioned. The smell of freshly baked pastries welcomed them and to the left were some chairs and table with a few people seated.

Mrs. Cole didn't pay attention to any other detail but walked straight to the counter and greeted the young man wearing a red T-shirt and face cap with a name tag which she used

to identify him as Daniel.

“Good afternoon,” the attendant greeted. “What can I get for you? He asked politely with a smile.

“Ummmmm,” Mrs. Cole browsed through the snacks in the show glass. “Do you have chicken pie?” She asked.

“Yes we do; it is 380 naira”, the young man said.

“Yes!” Bayo exclaimed.

“How about scotch eggs?” Mrs Cole asked.

“Yes, 150 naira ma.”

“Mummy wait, ask about sausage” Bolu pointed to the sausages.

“Better make up your mind” Mrs. Cole told her. Turning to the attendant, “how much are your sausages?”

“150 naira”

“So which one do you want?” Mrs. Cole asked Bolu.

“Mummy do it like this, buy scotch egg for me and sausage for Bayo, so that he'll give me half of his own and I will give him half of my own” Bolu said without even consulting Bayo to know what he wanted.

“Who told you I am to give you out of my own” Bayo asked Bolu with a frown.

Mrs. Cole interrupted their drama “please can I have four chicken pies, two with scotch egg and the remaining two with

sausage.”

“Okay ma. Are you eating here or taking it away?” He asked.

“Take away, please” she replied.

“What drinks?”

“5-Alive pulpy”

“Alright ma'am,” he turned around to dish the snacks while Mrs. Cole reached into her bag to bring out her wallet.

Just as she did, she heard a familiar voice call her by her first name, “Funke,” she turned around and couldn't believe her eyes.

Emeka was right behind her.

Chapter 04

“You don't say!” The man in his mid-forties exclaimed.

“Emeka!” She screamed his name, her face flushed with a pleasant surprise. That was the last person she expected to see. “It's so good to see you,” she said as she hugged him warmly.

“It sure is,” he responded as he hugged her. “I was sitting right there when you walked in,” he pointed to the table at the corner. “I kept arguing with myself that it wasn't you but someone that looked like you.”

“It is me oh,” she replied, her voice bubbling with delight.

“You look good as always; who would have thought that aging will look this pretty on you?” He complimented her.

“It's been what... twenty years?” Mrs. Cole asked still amazed at who was standing in front of her.

“Eighteen years actually,” Emeka corrected.

“Oh wow! You remember the exact period.”

“How could I have forgotten such a life changing experience, Funke?” His facial expression revealed some hurt.

Mrs. Cole read it and immediately knew what he was talking about, as her own mind journeyed down memory lane.

“Mummy, the snacks and drinks are ready,” Bolu tapped her mum, snapping her out of her thoughts.

“Is this your daughter?” Emeka asked, smiling down at the young girl who was already showing the promise of becoming a stunner like her mother.

“Yes,” Mrs. Cole replied smiling as she ruffled Bolu's curls. “This is Bolu, the youngest; this is Bayo, the second and...” Turning to the right where she expected her eldest daughter to be, “Where is your sister?” she asked.

“She went to use the toilet,” Bolu replied.

“You have lovely children; there is no doubt where they got their looks from,” Emeka said.

Mrs. Cole couldn't help but smile; then turning to them said, “Won't you greet?”

“Good afternoon sir,” they chorused.

“One minute, please?” Mrs. Cole, with her right index finger daintily raised, asked to be excused. She turned to the attendant, “How much is my bill?”

“2,920 naira,” he responded

Mrs. Cole brought out her debit card to pay.

Emeka immediately brought out his wallet and said,

“Funke please let me handle it.” He stretched his hand forward to give his debit card to the attendant and told him, “Add it to my bill.”

“Thank you, Emeka. You really didn't have to.” Mrs. Cole said with a smile.

“Oh please, it's the least I could do for such a dear friend I have not seen in almost two decades.

“I really appreciate it,” Mrs. Cole said as she picked up the snacks and handed the paper bags containing them over to Bayo. “Bolu, go and call your sister; I don't know if she's delivering a baby in the toilet,” she said to Bolu as she turned to leave.

“So are you here on a visit or what?” Mrs. Cole wanted to know.

“Not exactly. My family and I moved to Lagos about two years ago. I got transferred from Abuja.” He told her as they walked towards the exit.

“Your family?” Mrs. Cole didn't realize she wasn't the only one with a family.

“Yeah, my wife and two sons live at Ikoyi,” he told her as he held the door for Bayo and her to exit the building while he followed behind.

“That's really nice,” Mrs. Cole said as she fought thoughts of jealousy that were beginning to creep into her mind.

“I could pay you a visit one of these days,” Emeka said as he brought out his complementary card and handed it over to her. “Let’s keep in touch,” he said.

“I sure will. Thank you once again.” Mrs. Cole collected the card and smiled.

“Alright take care, my regards to your husband” he said, then left.

“Husband!” That word made Mrs. Cole's heart ache especially when she realized that the tall ruggedly handsome man, exuding so much charm and confidence, walking towards the parking lot and entering a black SUV was the man who should have been bearing that title.

She entered into her car and waited for Seyi and Bolu.

“Mummy, who was that man?” Bayo asked.

“An old friend,” she said. “Where are your sisters?” she asked, changing the subject quickly.

“There they are,” Bayo pointed at the door as they came out. “I wonder what took them so long,” he said.

“I wonder too.”

Seyi and Bolu approached arguing.

“Bolu, you never mind your business,” Seyi snapped at her younger sister.

“Everything is my business. You too, why can't you let me

check your phone?" Bolu asked.

"Because it's my phone not yours."

"Both of you should enter the car and stop fighting like cat and dog, I don't have all the time in the world." Mrs. Cole told them as she turned on the ignition of the car.

"We need to get home in time so your daddy doesn't get upset," she told them.

"Mummy, please can I go to Sope's house later this afternoon?" Seyi asked again. She had still not gotten a convincing response.

"So it's because of Sope's house you are giving everybody that cold attitude, right?" Mrs. Cole asked. "I was talking to you the other time and you were barely responding. Now that you want my permission, you are now behaving as if all is well."

"Mummy, it's not like that." Seyi tried to defend herself.

"It's like what?" Mrs. Cole asked as she reversed out of the car park.

"I'm having menstrual pain," Seyi said.

"So, you decided to suffer in silence because you are the first person to have menstrual pain. Better eat and take paracetamol when we get home. Is it with menstrual pain you want to visit Sope?" Mrs Cole asked.

"No ma, when I take the paracetamol, I'll be fine." Seyi

quickly said.

“Two lomo (suit yourself),” Mrs Cole told her.

“Mummy, please may we take our snacks now?” Bolu asked eager to dig into hers.

“Wo (look) do whatever you want,” she snapped. She was beginning to get cranky, transferring her disappointment and frustration on the innocent children. She knew that it all stemmed from seeing Emeka again.

As she drove home, she started thinking about her life: what it was and what it could have been if her parents didn't ruin it by not allowing her marry the one person she truly desired to marry. *“At over forty, he still looks so good. See his car, he works with a multinational oil and gas firm. I'm sure he probably lives in a mansion. Oh, how I wish it was Emeka I got married to and not that idiot that calls himself a husband.”* She didn't know when she started entertaining negative envious thoughts, comparing her husband with Emeka. She hated the state in which she had found herself. *“Why me? Why did all this happen to me? God knows, if I could reverse the hand of time, I wouldn't have listened to my parents. In the end, did I still marry someone from our village? When a rich influential man from Lagos told my parents his son was interested in me, they stupidly and greedily didn't object just because of money. I was foolish to think they cared about me. Where is the money now? The useless husband spends all he has on alcohol and my parents are not here to suffer with*

me,” she went on and on with thoughts of regret and bitterness until she got to the gate of the house.

“Do you need a prophet to tell you to come down and open the gate?” She snapped at Bayo.

Neither Bayo nor his siblings could grasp what was going on with their mother.

Bayo got down and opened the gate.

Mrs. Cole drove into the compound and parked the car.

“Seyi, carry my bag and the remaining snacks inside for me,” Mrs. Cole told Seyi as she turned off the car and released a deep sigh without even realizing it.

“Mummy are you okay?” Bolu asked.

“What kind of question is that? My friend come down from the car and go inside!” She barked. Her mood was sour and she hated it.

They all got down and went inside. Mr. Cole was seated in the sitting room, watching TV.

“Good afternoon sir,” the children greeted him.

He looked towards their direction and continued watching TV, ignoring them.

They left the sitting room and went to their rooms.

“Daddy Seyi, good afternoon,” Mrs. Cole said after the children had gone.

“What is good about the afternoon?” He asked, angry.
“What is the time?”

Mrs. Cole looked at her wrist watch “12:45”, she replied.

“Is there a reason you are just coming back at this time?” he asked, raising his voice.

Mrs. Cole didn't respond.

“Oh, so now you have decided to give me the silent treatment?”

“No, it's not that. The children...” she tried to explain.

“The children what!” He cut in sharply. “The children what?” he repeated.

“Listen to me and listen well, let this be the last time you would take forever before returning home from church. Am I clear?”

“Yes,” Mrs. Cole mumbled. She was so upset and deep down wished she could strangle the man to death. The only thing that kept her in this marriage was her three children. She angrily walked out of the sitting room and went to her room.

As she got to her room, she sat on the bed and cast her mind back to when she met Emeka at the eatery. She remembered he had given her his card. She reached for her bag which Seyi dropped on her bed together with her snacks and drink. She found Emeka's card and kept stirring at it.

Thoughts of regret began to linger again this time around, causing her intense sadness. She didn't know when tears welled up in her eyes and began to drop.

She brought out her phone from her bag and saved his number. She felt if at all she was going to call him, it was too early to do so.

She dropped her phone on the bed and stood up to change her church attire into a long free dress. As she was doing that, her phone rang. She looked at the caller's ID, it was a strange number. She wasn't expecting any call. She picked the call and said, "Hello".

"Hello, good afternoon," a male voice replied.

"Good afternoon," she said, wondering who it was.

"I'm sure you are wondering who this is," the voice said with a chuckle.

"Yes, I am," she said bluntly, she wasn't in the mood for games.

"That's fine. This is Pastor George." He replied.

"Oh, Pastor George, good afternoon sir," she said with a smile. "I'm sorry, I don't have this number saved on my phone."

"No problem. Something happened to the other line and I lost my contacts. I got yours today from someone in church. I hope you don't mind?" He asked.

"No problem at all sir."

“It's just that I've been having this really strong burden for you and I still feel we should see to talk and pray.” He told her.

“Thank you, for your concern sir” Mrs. Cole sincerely appreciated it.

“We could meet in church sometime during the week,” she suggested.

Okay that's fine. How is Tuesday, before Bible study?” He asked.

“Let's make it 3pm; I'll need to get home early. I won't be attending Bible study.” She explained.

“Can I ask why?”

“It's complicated sir,” she knew the simple answer is because her husband won't allow her. Permitting them go for Sunday service is the best he did.

“Okay, 3pm it is then.”

“Alright sir, take care sir.”

“Bye” He ended the call.

She dropped the phone and continued changing her dress then heard a knock on the door.

“Who is it?” She asked.

“Mummy, it's me,” the feminine voice replied.

“Come in,” she replied her, pretty sure it was Seyi.

She opened the door and came in. “Mummy,” she paused

as if to get her mum's attention.

“Yes, what is it?” Mrs. Cole wasn't even looking in her direction, all that was on her mind was preparing lunch in time so Mr. Cole won't start another fuss.

“You haven't still said anything about if I can go to Sope's house,” Seyi told her mum, this time around, her tone was low and so polite.

“That's because I have not made up my mind” Mrs. Cole said, as she removed her jewelries and placed them on the dressing table.

“When will you make up your mind please?” Seyi was so gentle and calm.

Mrs. Cole looked at her, “so, it's because you want something from me that you are acting like someone stole your money?”

Seyi smiled a little, “please mummy, please.”

“That's how she will be begging me like I have something that belongs to her. How are your thighs?” She asked.

“A lot better,” Seyi replied promptly.

“Okay. I want you to join me in preparing lunch. Once it's ready, you can leave.” Mrs. Cole said as she picked a hanger from the wardrobe.

“Thank you, thank you mummy; you are the best,” she

jumped in excitement then felt some pain in her thigh. “Ouch” she groaned.

“What is that?” Mrs. Cole turned around to ask.

“Nothing ma,” she quickly replied. “What's for lunch? Let me go and start.” Seyi was eager to get it over with.

“Parboil seven cups of rice, bring out the chicken and the bowl of blended pepper from the freezer; I will join you soon.”

“Okay ma”, she said as she turned around to leave.

“*Jo sanu mi* (please have mercy on me), be careful with fire and hot water o, don't let what happened yesterday repeat itself.” She warned her.

“Okay ma, I will be very careful.” Seyi said as she exited the room. On her way to the kitchen, she sent a WhatsApp message to Goke; “My mum has given me permission to go to Sope's house. I'll let you know when I am almost ready so you can start coming.”

She waited awhile for his reply as she entered the kitchen but didn't get any so decided to drop the phone and start up with the cooking before her mum came.

Just after bringing the bowls of chicken and pepper out of the freezer, she heard a message notification tone. She dropped the bowls and quickly picked her phone to check what message it was. Goke had just replied; “Okay great, I'm ready when you are.”

Seyi smiled and dropped the phone then continued what

she was doing. She felt a prick in her conscience and a thought crossed her mind, *“Is this right?”*

She ignored it and continued washing the seven cups of rice she had measured.

Again, she felt uneasy and that question popped again, *“Is what you are doing right?”*

“There is nothing wrong in going to see a friend” She replied, ready to argue.

“Was that what you told your mum?” Her conscience interrogated her further.

“Both Sope and Goke are my friends.” She replied.

“Your mum doesn't know about Goke.”

“Leave me alone!” She snapped aloud, obviously distressed by the thoughts.

She started singing to avoid hearing anymore of what her mind had to tell her. Even though the thoughts stopped, the uneasiness and lack of peace persisted.

Some minutes later, her mum came to join her in the kitchen. She saw that Seyi had started parboiling the rice as she had instructed and she praised her, *“Kuse (well done), let me prepare the sauce for the jollof rice.”*

“Okay ma,” Seyi said and began to bring out the ingredients she knew her mother would need.

“That reminds me Seyi” her mum started, “there is something that has been on my mind to talk to you about.”

Seyi turned to her and listened with rapt attention. Her mother and her hardly had discussions. Aside the regular “mummy good morning”, “mummy I need this or that”; they never really had that mother-daughter intimacy. This was partly because Seyi as much as possible locked herself out of the affairs of the home, no thanks to her father's unruly nature.

When Seyi was much younger, things were a lot better. Quarrels between her parents were less frequent. Her home then was a home but ever since her father gave in to drunkenness, she detested her home and always sought every opportunity to be as far from home as possible and unfortunately for her mum and her, they gradually drifted apart.

“Okay ma,” Seyi said wondering what it could be that her mother wanted to talk to her about.

“You know you are no longer a child. You are done with secondary school and the next phase of your life is going to the higher institution.” Mrs. Cole said as she poured oil into the pot on fire.

Seyi listened, still not sure where her mum was headed.

“This is the period of your life when boys will be hovering round you like flies. They'll claim to love you; some will tell you

they can't do without you and tell you all sort of lies just to manipulate you into falling for them,” she reduced the heat under the pot and gave Seyi her full attention. “This is not the time for all that. You can have male friends but please don't let it go beyond that I beg you, keep yourself pure.”

Seyi stood there speechless, her mind in overdrive as several thoughts chased themselves through it. “*Does my mum know about Goke? Has she gone through my phone? That couldn't be, she doesn't know my password*”, she tried convincing herself. Her mum had never given her the “boy talk” before. “*Whynowofalltimes?*” She wondered.

“Do you understand what I'm saying?” Mrs. Cole asked still facing Seyi.

“Yes ma, I understand.” Seyi had no choice but to say that she understood. She didn't want more talk from her mum.

Mrs. Cole turned back, increased the heat under the pot and continued cooking.

Seyi's phone beeped with a WhatsApp message notification. She picked it and checked the message. It was a message from Goke.

“Hi dear, what time should I come and pick you up?”

Seyi read the message and didn't know how to respond.

“Was that Sope? I know she'd be expecting you.” Mrs. Cole said.

“Erm.. no not Sope...Yes she would.” Seyi was not happy lying to her mum but just didn't know how to stop.

“You shouldn't go late to her place; I guess you could call her to send her dad's driver.” Mrs. Cole said.

Seyi didn't know how to respond anymore. The initial excitement she had had disappeared. She knew what she was doing was wrong; she felt she was repaying her mum's good with evil. “Okay ma, I'll do that.” She said and began to compose a message to Goke.

“Does that mean you won't eat till you get back?” Mrs. Cole asked, concerned as she diced onions into the oil on fire.

“I already had snacks and a drink; I'm not really hungry” Seyi told her mum then sent a message to Goke:

“You can start coming. Let me know when you are at the gate leading into the estate, I'll meet you there.”

“Mummy I want to go and get ready.” She told her mum.

“Okay” Mrs. Cole said as she continued cooking.

Seyi went into her room. Bolu was sleeping. She stood in front of the rectangular mirror hanging behind the door leading into their room and looked at her reflection. As she did so, she realized she didn't know what she was doing anymore. “*What have I gotten myself into*” she reasoned? “*Well, it's not like I am doing anything bad; I'm just going to hang out with a friend*” She tried convincing herself.

She took her small makeup purse containing her brown powder, eyeshadow, eyeliner and some lipsticks and began to touch up her face. She didn't want to look too made up so she just used brown powder and a little lipstick.

As she was brushing her hair, Bolu woke up.

“Where are you going, sister Seyi?” she asked.

“Out” She didn't even look at her sister.

“To see who?”

“None of your business.” Seyi styled her hair and was more or less set. She didn't bother changing the clothe she wore to church since Goke was the reason she wore that clothe in the first instance.

“I will tell mummy,” Bolu threatened thinking that will make Seyi give her more information.

“Bye bye go and tell her” Seyi said and picked her phone to dial Goke's number. “I officially have the most annoying sister in the world” she said under her breath as she placed the phone to her ear and waited for him to pick up.

“Hey Seyi” he said immediately he picked the call.

“Hi Go...” she quickly cut and didn't mention his name so that Bolu won't know who she was talking to. “Where are you now?”

“I'm close to your estate. You can start walking towards

the gate.” He told her.

“Alright, I’ll do that. See you soon.” She ended the call.

“Hmmmmm... boyfriend is not good o, boyfriend is not now o, boyfriend, boyfriend” Bolu began to sing.

Bolu had not been more annoying. She pissed Seyi off so much that she felt like slapping her but had to control herself and leave the room before she did what she’d regret and will definitely prevent her from going out to see anybody.

When she got to the kitchen, she told her mummy she was ready to go.

Mrs Cole looked at her and asked, “Where is the driver?”

“He is at the entrance to the estate. That where I agreed to meet him.” Seyi explained.

“Any reason in particular?” Mrs Cole asked.

“No, nothing.”

“Okay then, *maape* (don’t stay out late),” her mum told her. It would be better you pass the kitchen door out so your father doesn’t see you leaving and start asking questions or stop you from going out.” Mrs. Cole knew her husband very well. He was so unpredictable yet she knew with the mood she met him in after church, Seyi won’t be allowed to go anywhere.

“Thank you mummy,” Seyi said very grateful and pleased with her mum. She passed the back door and off she went.

The gate leading into the estate was only a stone's throw away as their house was the fifth on the street. When she got to the gate, she looked around but didn't see any car parked. It was then she realized, she had seen Goke just once and she had no idea what kind of car he drove. She waited for a few minutes and dialed his number again.

“Hello Goke, where are you?” She asked, gradually running out of patience.

“I'm so sorry dear; I was held up in traffic. I'll be there soon.” He explained.

“Okay, what car are you driving?” She asked and added, “so I'll easily spot you when you come.”

“A blue Kia, don't worry I'll call you as soon as I get there,” he told her.

It was sunny so Seyi went under the gate man's shed and sat there waiting for him.

After another five minutes of waiting, she saw a navy-blue car drive towards the estate and gradually come to a halt. She watched as the driver of the car parked it and picked his phone. It was when her phone started ringing, she left the shed where she had been waiting and walked towards the car.

Goke spotted her and came down to meet her. He wore a pair of sun shades which he removed when he saw her. He had on a

matching mint green Guinea top and trousers. He was a 5 feet 11", dark complexioned, good looking young man in his early twenties.

He walked towards Seyi and hugged her, "I'm so sorry for keeping you waiting. That's not my usual nature, I had a little issue locating this place. That, together with the traffic is the reason for the delay. I'm sorry," he apologized.

"It's okay," Seyi said. She took in the sweet fragrance of his perfume. "You smell nice," she paid him a compliment and smiled.

"Thanks dear, you look amazing too. I had no idea I had been chatting with someone this beautiful," he said as he motioned for them to walk towards the car.

"But you have seen me before and I've sent you my pictures a couple of times," Seyi reminded him.

"True that, but you are much more beautiful today than ever before," Goke said as he opened the passenger side door for her. He was full of sweet words that could sweep any lady off her feet.

"Thank you," she said both for the compliment and the gentlemanly gesture.

Goke closed the door for her and quickly, passing the front of the car, entered through the driver's side of the car.

"So how were you able to pull this off, your parents allowing you to see me?" he asked.

Seyi chuckled, "It's a long story; let's just say I pulled some strings and here I am" she shrugged her shoulders and gave a shy smile.

"Oh, how are your thighs? I was so carried away by your beauty; I totally forgot" he said.

"They are better; thanks for asking" she smiled.

"So where are we headed this beautiful afternoon?" He asked. "I was hoping you had somewhere in mind," he added as he started the car.

"I don't really go out, I believe you'll be in a better position to suggest a place. Preferably, somewhere not too far because I have to be back before 6pm."

"Okay then, in that case, should we go to the eatery I saw when I was coming, not so far from here?" He asked.

"That's probably the one we stopped at after church when I went into the toilet to call you. I had to tell my mum I was having menstrual pain when she asked me why I stayed that long in the toilet and my annoying sister won't let me have peace in that house. I'm so glad to be out of that place." Seyi said.

Goke chuckled, "Is it really that bad?"

"My house? Yes oh, it is, trust me." Seyi said.

"Really? Don't worry you'll tell me about it. Can we go there then?" He asked.

“Yeah I guess,” she replied.

“Okay then.”

There was a brief silence then Goke spoke, “I’m guessing this is your first time”

“What is my first time?” Seyi wasn’t sure she knew what he was referring to.

“Hanging out with a guy,” he said.

“Well, I don’t really have male friends. My dad and brother are the only two guys in my life and those ones *sef* are not really in my life. So, I guess to answer your question, yes it is” she replied then added, “Why did you ask?”

“Nothing, just wanted to know. I must take care of you so you will know how good we guys could be” He turned to her with a gleam in his eyes.

Seyi smiled back, a bit shy.

“I’m sure it’s not news that I really like you, Seyi” He said to her, careful to look into her eyes and make her feel the intensity of his words.

Seyi could feel her heart beat faster. She didn’t know how to respond. His gaze pierced through her soul.

Goke went on, “And there is something about guys I should let you know” he said as he gradually parked the car beside the road.

They had not gotten to their destination. Seyi wondered why he was stopping. They were still within the residential area. No other car was on the road.

He needed her full attention and as much privacy as he could get. There probably won't be such in the fast-food restaurant they were going to.

“When a guy likes a lady especially the way I like you,” he started, fully focused on her “he can do anything for her. Absolutely anything.” He stressed. He held her hand and looked straight into her eyes, “Seyi, I really like you and I will want you to be my girlfriend. I want you to give me a chance to show you how much I care for you.”

There was silence in the car. Seyi didn't see it coming, she knew they were not just friends but she had no idea Goke had such intentions. She was speechless.

“Say something Seyi,” he said, almost begging her.

“I really don't know what to say; I'm quite overwhelmed. Your girlfriend? I wasn't expecting it,” she said.

“I hope I wasn't too forward. I'm not even sure how you feel about me,” he said seemingly concerned.

“No, no it's not that. I like you too; it's just that I'm new to all these.” Seyi said.

“Don't worry; I will take care of you. I promise. Nothing

will happen to you.” He assured her.

“But I don't really know you; I'm just getting to know you”
Seyi opened up.

“That's the more reason why we need this, so we can get to know ourselves better”

Seyi immediately began to remember her mum's warning and all she said about guys hovering round her like flies. So many thoughts began to flood her mind, *“Is he one of the guys Mummy was referring to? Am I ready for a relationship? I'm just getting to know him. If I have a boyfriend, perhaps people will stop looking at me like a small girl more so, he has promised to take care of me”*.

As these thoughts kept running through her mind, she noticed Goke moving closer to her. She wasn't sure what was going on. His face gradually came close to hers and she realized he was about to kiss her.

Chapter 05

She quickly turned her face away “Goke, please stop it. I need time. I’ll have to think about this and get back to you” she told him.

He moved away and sat back in his seat “I totally understand. I’m sorry if I rushed you. It’s not my nature, I just really like you and was expressing my feelings that’s all” he explained.

Seyi remained quiet. She was beginning to wonder if sneaking out and lying to her mum so she could see Goke was worth it. She began to feel so uneasy and uncomfortable. She didn’t feel free around him anymore. Deep down, she wanted to go back home but didn’t know how to tell him. “*What have I gotten myself into?*” she asked herself.

Just as the thoughts were running through her mind, she began to feel her tummy churn. “Goke I’m not feeling too good” she told him. “I think I need to use the toilet, my tummy is rumbling”

she placed her hand on her tummy and began to retch bending over ready to vomit.

“What is the problem?” he asked with so much concern. “Will you use the toilet at the eatery?” he placed his hand on her shoulder.

“No. I think I'll just go back home. I won't be able to make it to the eatery. Please can you take me back home?” she asked looking so unwell.

“Okay if that's the only choice we have, then let me drop you” he started the car and quickly turned around. He drove pretty fast, looking at her from time to time to ensure she was okay.

When he got to the gate leading to her estate, he asked “where is your house?”

Seyi pointed straight “just keep going”.

He drove a few meters.

“You can stop now, thank you” she said still holding her tummy and bending over. “I'm sorry, I spoilt our plans, we will have to reschedule. I'm really sorry” she explained as she came down.

“It's okay, I'm glad I was able to see you again. Please think about all I said, take care of yourself.”

“Okay bye” she shut the door and rushed towards the gate. Thankfully, she had a copy of the key to the gate and didn't need to

wait for anyone to open the gate for her. She ran through the kitchen door and went straight to the toilet. It was in between her room and Bayo's room. The two rooms shared a toilet and bathroom. Everyone but Mr. Cole, who was in the sitting room watching TV, were in their rooms.

When she was done using the toilet, she went to her room.

“Sister Seyi, what happened?” Bolu asked. “I thought you went out.”

“I'm back” Seyi said as she dropped her bag on the floor and threw herself on the bed.

“What happened?” Bolu was both curious and inquisitive.

“I wasn't feeling too good” Seyi answered hoping that was sufficient enough to quench Bolu's thirst for information.

“Sorry, how are you feeling now?” she asked with concern.

“Much better, strangely” Seyi herself couldn't explain what just happened. One moment she was fine, the next moment she was so uneasy so much so her tummy began to rumble.

She thought of either calling or sending a text to Goke but as she brought her phone out of her bag, she got disinterested and instead flung it on the bed.

“What did you eat?” Seyi asked Bolu. Hunger pangs were beginning to set in. The feeling of excitement had masked the hunger all along.

“Jollof rice and chicken. Mummy left yours in the warmer” Bolu told her.

Seyi stood up to change her cloth before going to the kitchen. As she was about walking out of the room, she took a closer look at Bolu. “Is that makeup on your face?”

Bolu giggled.

“It's not funny Bolu, what are you doing with my make up?”

“It was mummy's own, not your own” Bolu immediately became defensive. “Is it only you that has make up?”

“That's your business, just don't touch my things. Did mummy allow you use her make up?”

“She is sleeping” Bolu said and stuck out her tongue.

“I pity you, let her catch you. How old are you that you are using make up?” Seyi hissed and left the room.

“Leave me alone” Bolu said rudely.

Seyi went to the kitchen and found the warmer on the tiled kitchen counter beside the microwave. She dished the rice into a ceramic plate and took a piece of chicken from the pot then went to the dining to devour the meal.

As she took the first spoon, her phone rang, it was Goke. She picked it after the second ring.

“Hi Goke” she said.

“Hello Seyi, how are you feeling?”

“I'm better, I'm really sorry I messed everything up” she told him.

“*Haba*, it's okay. I'm glad you are better now. We can always meet some other time. Make sure you rest well” he sounded very caring.

“Thank you, I will”

“You are welcome, dear”

There was silence.

“I love you” Goke said without mincing words.

Seyi didn't know what to say. She didn't feel it was right to tell him she loved him too when they were not dating. More so, she believed “love” was a strong word to use just anyhow and she wondered if what she felt for him was love of something else. She felt a strange and entirely new feeling she had never experienced before. She was both excited and uneasy at the same time. She wasn't just settled deep within her.

“Thank you” she mumbled and immediately ended the call. Her appetite was gone, she managed to finish the food.

She couldn't keep it to herself any more. She needed to talk to someone and the only person that came to her mind was Sope. She sent a WhatsApp message to her but noticed it didn't deliver.

“What could be wrong?” she wondered. “I hope my data has not finished?” she said as she quickly checked her data balance. “Oh no, the useless thing didn't even last two weeks” she was annoyed as she took her plate to the kitchen, washed it and went to her room.

On her way to her room, she decided to check on Bayo. His room was directly opposite hers. As she tried opening the door, she realized it was locked.

She knocked “Bayo open the door” she said and waited for his response.

“I'm coming.”

“Why are you always locking your door, only God knows what you are always doing” Seyi was getting tired of waiting.

“Didn't I say I'm coming?” Bayo repeated himself as he opened the door.

“Sorry sir, I didn't know we had to have special IV before we can enter your room now” Seyi said sarcastically as she walked into his room.

“Sorry, that's not what I meant” Bayo apologized.

As Seyi walked into the room, she spotted their mother's internet modem on the bed. “What is mummy's modem doing here? You know she mustn't know, she has warned you not to use it because it's for her work” Seyi was referred to as 'small Police'.

Bayo hated when she snooped around looking for loop holes with which she threatened him and Bolu.

“It was just this afternoon I took it, I wanted to watch something on YouTube, please don't tell mummy,” he begged.

“On one condition” Seyi said with a mischievous smile as she sat on the bed.

“What condition?” Bayo asked already nervous.

“Share Hot spot with me, my data just finished” Seyi was smart and always had a way of making her younger siblings do whatever she wanted.

“But mine isn't much, that was why I took mummy's modem” he told her hoping she'll understand.

“Then mummy will know you took her modem” Seyi said cunningly.

“Fine, only little.”

“Deal” Seyi replied. “Where is your phone?” She asked.

“Beside you” he said reluctantly.

Seyi turned to her right and saw his phone close to the pillow. She picked it and handed it over to him “type your password.”

Bayo did and quickly closed the YouTube app.

“Is it on?” she asked.

“Is what on?” Bayo was distracted by the app he was

closing.

“The Hot spot of course, what else?”

“Oh,” he turned it on “it's on. I'll have to put my password on your phone” he informed her.

“This is not the first time I'm using your wi-fi, I don't need the password,” Seyi was so confident of that.

“Well you do because I changed it” Bayo smirked, glad to have faulted her smart mouth. He stretched his hand to collect her phone then he typed the password. Immediately he did, a WhatsApp message from Goke entered her phone. Bayo wasn't the inquisitive type but for reasons, he clicked the notification and opened the chat. “Who is Goke?” he asked, still looking through her phone.

“Give me my phone” Seyi struggled with Bayo to collect it.

“Chill I know him” Bayo said as he enlarged his profile picture. “This is Feyikemi's boyfriend” Bayo said still stirring at the picture.

“What? Who is Feyikemi?” Seyi was dumbfounded.

“Sijuade's senior sister” Bayo replied and added “how do you know him? I heard he is a very bad guy. He knows how to get any girl, as in he is that bad” Bayo emphasized.

“Who told you all these things? Who is Sijuade?” Seyi could not believe her ears.

“My classmate. We just started talking some weeks ago. She was even telling me how she is so concerned about her sister because of the guy she is dating and that she is always with him” Bayo told her.

“Are you sure about this, Bayo?” Seyi's head was spinning.

“Very serious.”

“I swear guys are useless” Seyi said, stood up and walked towards the door still shocked about the news she had just heard. She was so lost in thoughts, she forgot her phone.

“Your phone” Bayo picked her phone and stretched it to her.

Seyi turned back and collected it.

“Do you still need the Hot Spot?” Bayo asked.

Seyi continued walking out of the room without even realizing Bayo was talking to her.

“That's weird” Bayo said wondering what was wrong with his sister. “Let me quickly return mummy's modem before she wakes up” he turned it off and went to his mum's room to return it, praying and hoping she was still sleeping.

Alas, as he opened the door leading to her, he saw her wide awake. She was sitting up in bed wearing her glasses about opening her bag. He froze.

“What is it?” Mrs. Cole asked wondering why he looked

so dazed.

“Nothing ma” he said, his response obviously contrasting his fearful appearance.

“Is your sister back?” Mrs. Cole asked. She wasn't ready for Bayo's drama.

“Yes ma, I think she is in her room” he said. “Should I call her for you?” He added, trying to get out of the room as soon as possible.

“No don't worry” she said as she opened her bag searching for something. “Where is this modem again?” She asked already getting upset.

“Your modem?” Bayo asked.

“Yes I can't find it and I want to use it”. She said without looking up as she kept searching the bag.

“Wait, I think I saw it on the dining table” Bayo lied, let me go and check. He left the room without waiting for a response from his mum.

He lingered in front of the door for some minutes and knocked on the door.

“Come in” Mrs. Cole said.

Bayo opened the door “this is it” he stretched it to her.

“Mrs Cole collected it “why is it hot?” she asked him, looking at him above her glasses.

Bayo had been caught red handed and he knew it. “Em...em” he stammered. “I’m sorry ma” he apologized.

“That’s what you always say. I know what I’ll do to you. When you don’t have money to buy anything tomorrow during break time in school and when you don’t have and money for credit and data, you will know you are sorry.” His mum meant every single word she had just uttered.

“Mummy please it won’t happen again, I promise” he begged.

“My friend will you get out of my room” she shouted at him. “What you did is called stealing and lying, in case you didn’t know.” she hissed.

Bayo left the room feeling bad.

Mrs. Cole brought out her laptop to work. She turned it on and waited for it to boot. As she did, her mind went to Emeka again. “*What is wrong with me? Emeka and I are both married. The past is in the past*” she tried convincing herself.

She picked the complementary card he gave her and looked at it again. “He must be well to do” she said as she replayed in her mind the 15 minutes she had with him some hours ago. “Who says I cannot call him? It wasn’t like I asked for the card, he gave me” she told herself as she picked her phone and before any opposing thought came, she was already dialing his number.

Unfortunately, he didn't pick the call.

Mrs. Cole dropped the phone, disappointed. “*I don't know what I was thinking. Am I a child?*” She reasoned.

She decided to focus on her work, she had a presentation the next day at work and had not finished preparing the PowerPoint slides. As soon as she opened the document she was about to work on, her phone rang. It was Emeka. Her heart began to race, her fingers trembled as she reached for the phone and picked the call.

“Hello” the male voice which brought back old memories said.

She was speechless.

“Hello?” he repeated himself this time around in a questioning tone. “Please who is on the line?” he asked politely.

“Hi, it's Funke” she managed to gather some words. “Is this Emeka?” she asked even though she could bet her next month's salary, it was him.

“Hey Funke, so good to hear from you. You won't believe it, I was just thinking about you. I was saying to myself “why didn't I collect your number?” I'm so glad you called” he sounded excited.

“Really? That's interesting. I was hoping my call wasn't too early” Mrs Cole confessed.

“Early? Of course not. The timing was just perfect” he said.

“So how are you doing?”

Mrs. Cole knew that her life took a down turn when she made that decision that day in her father's house. She wished more than anything that she was Mrs. Nwafor not Mrs. Cole.

“Fine, I guess” she told him.

“Hmm the Funke I know is not doing too fine from that voice” he said.

Mrs. Cole began to remember the love and care Emeka once had for her. He knew her so well. He knew when she meant 'yes' even if the words coming from her mouth was 'no'.

She chuckled “I'll be fine, thanks” she didn't want them going down that lane.

“You know it won't be a bad idea for us to see again, say to discuss what's up with us and the likes. What sayest thou?” he asked.

Mrs. Cole remembered the funny way he always spoke, composing his sentence after the pattern of the Old Kings James version of the Bible. “So you have not changed this your way of speaking?” she chuckled.

“No my lord, thy servant changest not his way” they both burst into laughter.

“In that case, they handmaiden shall be so delighted to honour thine invitation” she said.

“That's good, I've always known you to be a good learner” he complimented her.

“Thanks dear” she had said 'dear' before she realized it. She covered her mouth wishing she could take it back. Although *dear* these days was a general term used to refer to friends and meant nothing, she hoped it wasn't going to bring back memories because it was one of the pet names they used for each other.

“We could meet at Evelyn's Kitchen. I hear the food there is really nice. It's not too far from where we met. Is that okay” he asked.

“Oh I know the place, haven't been there before though. I guess we could try it out.”

“Okay great, is tomorrow okay?” he asked.

“Yes, what time?”

“You'll be the one to decide that, my work is very flexible as a matter of fact, I work from home most times” he told her.

“Okay, I usually leave the office by 4pm but I could leave earlier. I usually pick the children around 4:30 so let's work towards 2pm. That should be fine” she said.

“Okay cool. Tomorrow 2pm it is then.”

“Yes” she smiled.

“Thanks for the call, you made my day” Emeka told her.

“Well, it was actually you that called” Mrs. Cole said.

He laughed “oh that's true, anyway it was so good hearing from you again. Take care of yourself. See you tomorrow” he told her.

“You too, bye” she gradually dropped the phone, smiling as it dawned on her that she was going to see Emeka the next day. She was so excited and really looking forward to it.

As she was basking in the joy of the moment, Mr. Cole opened the door leading to their room and barely acknowledging her, walked straight to the wardrobe, put on a T-shirt, changed his shorts into a pair of jeans, “I'm going to the bar” he told her and left.

Mrs. Cole watched him but didn't say a word. The mere sight of the man, dampened her countenance. When he left, she resumed working on her laptop.

After about 2 hours, she was tired and decided to suspend the work. She saved it and shut down then laptop then went to the kitchen to fix dinner for the family.

She was in a good mood that night, she decided to make pancakes, she knew all her children liked it. Bolu came to join her in the kitchen.

“Where are your siblings?” she asked her.

“Sis Seyi is sleeping, bro Bayo is in his room” Bolu replied.

“That boy is always in his room and I'm sure the door is locked as usual” Mrs Cole said as she measured out the flour.

“Guess what's for dinner” Mrs Cole asked, excited. She always liked the beam on Bolu's face every time she smiled.

“What mummy? What?” Bolu jumped with excitement.

“Pancakes!” Mrs Cole smiled.

“Yeeeeeeey thank you mummy. You're the best” Bolu said and hugged her mum.

Mrs. Cole was moved by her daughter's gestures. As Bolu held on to her, she remembered why she was still in this marriage. She knew her children were worth all the sacrifices.

“Why don't you go and call your brother so the cooking can be faster” Mrs Cole told her.

“Okay mummy” Bolu said and zoomed off to call Bayo.

As was her usual custom, she barged into the room without knocking or being told to come in. Bayo, on the other hand, wasn't prepared. His door wasn't locked this time around.

“Bro Bayo, mummy said...” she froze immediately she opened the door. Her hand glued to the door knob and her words stuck in her mouth. The innocent girl was traumatized by what she saw, it was the last thing she expected to see when she opened the door to her brother's room.

“What's your problem, Bolu? Don't you know how to knock?” Bayo asked, angry and ashamed at the same time. He had been caught red handed and there was no hiding this time around.

He quickly put on his trousers and a T Shirt “I said you should get out of my room” he shouted at his sister who was still in shock. Her innocent mind could not comprehend what she had just seen: her brother masturbating. As he kept shouting at her, she transitioned from shock to fear. What she had just seen, nothing or no one could ever wipe off her memory. “*What could be worse?*” She wondered. She felt like a terrible sinner. She began to blame herself, tears immediately began to well up in her eyes.

“What is it? Why are you now crying?” Bayo asked, wondering the reason for the tears.

The tears began to flow and she began to sob. Bayo walked up to her and began to pat her but as he did, she cried more. He didn't want their mum to hear so he began to beg her to stop crying. This only made things worse. “Bolu please I'm begging you, stop crying” he pleaded.

Mrs. Cole heard Bolu's voice and from the kitchen shouted “What is going on there?”

Bayo pleaded harder “Bolu please don't let mummy come and see you crying. I will buy you sweet” he tried to bribe her.

Nothing he did or said pacified her.

Mrs. Cole couldn't take it anymore. She left what she was doing in the kitchen and went to check up on Bolu. “Bolu what is it? What happened? Why are you crying?” she asked as she

squatted to the level of her height.

Bolu couldn't speak. No words could come out even if she tried. She looked petrified. She threw her hands around her mother's neck.

Mrs. Cole hugged her "It's alright my dear" she said softly as she looked up to Bayo who was standing in front of her and asked "what happened?"

Bayo shrugged his shoulders. "Mummy I don't know, she just got to my room and started crying. Maybe a bee stung her or something" he lied but unfortunately for him, he was terrible at lying.

"A bee? From where would it have come? Won't there have been a bite mark on her body?" Mrs Cole asked, not convinced with his reply. She patted Bolu on the back, "Sorry my baby, stop crying, mummy is here now you hear?" she consoled Bolu who gradually stopped crying and managed to gather the strength to whisper in her mum's ears "mummy I'm scared".

Mrs Cole couldn't fathom what could have made Bolu scared all of a sudden. She wondered if it had anything to do with what she opened up to her about her uncle, Gboyega earlier that day. "Don't worry my baby, uncle Gboyega will never step into this house again" she assured her.

Bolu stopped crying but remained quiet.

Mrs. Cole stood up wondering what could have triggered the panic she just witnessed Bolu have. It was a drastic contrast to the excited Bolu that had just left the kitchen. “Come, I’ll put the TV on Cartoon network for you” she told her as she held her hand and walked towards the sitting room.

“Bayo, join me in the kitchen, I’m preparing pancakes” Mrs. Cole told Bayo.

“Okay ma” Bayo followed them behind, his heart racing as he prayed within him that Bolu would keep her mouth shut about what she had just seen.

Mrs Cole turned on the TV while Bolu sat on the couch opposite it watching *Peppa pig*.

She returned to the kitchen and with Bayo's assistance, prepared dinner. As the last pancake slice was being fried, Seyi who had just woken up and was very hungry walked into the kitchen.

“*Ope o* (Thank God) pancakes. I'm so hungry” she said as she cut a little from the fried slices.

“Sleeping beauty is awake” Mrs Cole said smiling at Seyi

“And she is hungry” Seyi said. “What inspired pancakes?”

“What can I say? I was in a good mood and I felt like making them, it has been a while.”

“Yes it has” Seyi agreed “where is Bolu?” it was unusual not

seeing her in the kitchen when her mum was preparing any food she liked.

“She is watching TV in the sitting room” Mrs Cole told her.

“That's unlike her” Seyi said. “I hope she is okay”

“Bayo, go and check on your sister?” Mrs. Cole instructed him.

“Who? Me?” he asked, almost stammering.

“No, your twin brother in Japan” she said sarcastically and hissed. “How many people are bearing Bayo here?”

“Don't worry mummy, I'll go and check on her” Seyi said and left the kitchen. When she got to the sitting room, she met Bolu sleeping. She took the remote control and reduced the volume of the TV.

“I better wake her up, dinner is ready” Seyi thought. She tapped her gently “Bolu...Bolu” she called her name in a soft tone.

Bolu woke up and initially looking around wondering where she was “where is mummy?” she asked Seyi, with sleep still in her eyes.

“She is in the kitchen. Food is ready” Seyi told her.

Bolu got up and went straight to the kitchen.

“B Baby, how are you?” her mum asked her with a smile.

“Fine.” She usually didn't say much whenever she just

woke up.

Mrs. Cole served two slices of pancake in a plastic plate and offered Bolu. “Is two okay for you?”

Bolu nodded then collected the plate and went to the dining.

“How many can you finish, Seyi?” Her mum asked as she took a plate ready to serve her.

“Four for now” she smiled.

Mrs. Cole served four slices in a plate and gave Seyi. “Pour out juice for yourself and your siblings.”

“What of you?” Seyi asked “don't you want juice too?”

“And for me too. That's how I always forget myself”, she shook her head.

Seyi took three glasses and a plastic cup then poured out the chilled *chivita* she took from the fridge.

“How about you Bayo?” Mrs Cole asked.

“Me?” Bayo seemed disoriented and agitated.

“Bayo what exactly is wrong with you tonight? Why have you been shaky and jittery? How many slices can you finish?” Mrs Cole asked, holding a plate for him.

“Four...four is okay ma” he stammered.

She served his food and handed it over to him. “Go and sit with your sister on the dining table” she told him.

“Mummy please can I go to my room?” he asked.

“No! Go and stay with your sister. When did that rubbish start? Don't let me get angry with you this night” she snapped at him.

“I'm sorry ma” he apologized and took his food to the dining.

The dining table was wooden and oval shaped, it was surrounded with six chairs. Bayo sat three chairs away from Bolu while Seyi sat right beside her.

Mrs. Cole came to join them at the table. “Bayo when you are done eating, go and iron you and Bolu's uniform for school tomorrow. Okay?”

“Okay ma” he answered.

“Seyi, I know you are tired of staying at home. Are you sure you don't want to start considering A-levels?” Mrs Cole asked her.

Seyi knew her mum was right. It had been five months since she finished from school and the universities she had applied to study Law didn't seem forthcoming. “I'm beginning to consider it, mummy. I'll get more information about the good ones available” she told her mum. Seyi wanted nothing more than to be out of the house.

Bayo was the first to finish his food, “mummy thank you” he said as he stood up and took his plate to the kitchen. He washed it and went to his room.

“Mummy thank you for the meal” Seyi said. “I think I'm ready for bed, it appears I'll be sleeping early tonight” she told her mum.

“Alright dear” Mrs. Cole said then quickly added “before I forget, how was Sope's place? Hope you enjoyed yourself.”

“Sope's place?” Seyi wondered what her mum was referring to.

“Is that how fast you have forgotten how you were begging me that you wanted to go to Sope's house?” Mrs. Cole juggled her memory a bit.

“Oh, Sope's place. It was fine. I didn't stay long, I wasn't feeling too well so I asked the driver to drop” Seyi lied again. It's true what they say, 'you always use one lie to cover up another.'

“Really? Hope you are fine now” Mrs. Cole asked.

“Yes mummy, much better. Thank you.”

“That's fine. Take your sister inside. Both of you should go and sleep. I'll wait for your daddy to come back” that was Mrs. Cole's daily burden.

“Goodnight mummy” Seyi said as she held Bolu's hand “let's go and sleep”, she told her baby sister.

“Goodnight mummy” Bolu said as she followed her sister.

“Goodnight dear” Mrs Cole said as she watched them go inside.

Chapter 06

Mrs. Cole lay down on the three-seater sofa in the sitting room, waiting for her husband to return. She slept off watching TV.

Mr. Cole came back around 2:00am, banging on the door.

She went to open the door for him. He staggered into the house with the stench of alcohol and cigarette cloaking him like a heavy robe. There was nothing new about that but she noticed something different about him.

“What's this all over your face?” She asked him looking at the red and purple streaks of lipstick, on his face.

“What is it?” He asked with disdain written all over his face.

“Akin, these are lipstick marks on your face. Not just from one person but at least two.” She said furiously.

“And so? Woman, move away. I need to sleep.” He sneered and jostled her out of his path.

“Akin, how dare you? It's bad enough you don't cater for the needs of your family. You go out every night and drink to stupor, now women? Really?” She was infuriated. Everything about the man disgusted her. At that moment, she didn't care if he beat her up or killed her; she had had enough and needed to let out her hurt. “You are such an ingrate Akin; I regret ever meeting you.”

“What!” He turned around sharply, his sudden movements inconsistent with his drunken state. He, clearly, had been snapped out of his stupor by her biting words.

“Are you out of your mind?” He began, as he swayed menacingly towards her, eyes flashing like red pointers and fists out stretched. He was ready to teach her some lessons.

Mrs. Cole saw him coming close; she knew he was going to pounce on her at any moment if she didn't act fast. She took a calculated turn around and bolted for the kitchen, slamming the door and locking it safely behind her. She slid wearily to the floor with her back against the door, panting heavily and silently congratulating herself on her timely escape from the clutches of blows.

Mr. Cole pounded noisily at the door. “Useless woman, why did you run away? You should have stayed so that I'll beat the living day lights out of you” he staggered as he made his way towards their bedroom.

Mrs. Cole sat behind the door, listening and waiting till she heard him leave. When she could barely hear his receding footsteps, she lay on the kitchen floor and bawled like a baby, “Oh God, why? Why am I going through all these? Why is life so unfair to me?” Hot tears rolled down her face uncontrollably. She cried until no strength was left in her then she stood up and went back to the sitting room. The thought of going to her room and lying on the same bed with her husband disgusted her. She turned off all the lights and slept on the three-seater.

The next morning, she was up by 5am. She said a short prayer committing the day into God's hand and got up. The thought of the fight between her husband and her and what led to it flashed through her mind and with it came an overwhelming feeling of sadness. She told herself that she wasn't going to start her day that way so she brushed the thought away but the feeling lingered. She went first to the kitchen to heat up water the children will use to have their bath. Then she went to their rooms to wake them up.

Bayo's room was a mess as usual; the windows were shut and the whole place, stuffy. “Why is this boy always closing all his windows?” She asked herself as she opened them. “Bayo, Bayo wake up” she tapped him “get up and get ready so you won't be late for school”.

Bayo was always the most difficult to handle when it came to waking up so Mrs Cole usually went to his room first. He tossed in bed for half a minute while his mum persisted in tapping him, making each tap more painful than the previous, all in an attempt to get sleep off his eyes. He finally responded “hmmm”, first rubbing his eyes and then stretching. After about a minute, he was fully awake. He realized what was going on and quickly pulled his top sheet to himself as if he was hiding something.

“What is it, Bayo?”

“Nothing mummy. Good morning.” He said hoping she would press no further.

“Good morning my foot,” she pulled the cloth away from him. “What is it you are hiding?” She thought he hid something under the cloth little did she know that the ‘something’ was his nakedness.

“Bayo what exactly is wrong with you? Why have you been sleeping naked these days?” She asked.

Bayo used one hand to cover himself and the other hand was stretched to retrieve the cloth from his mum. “I’ve not been sleeping naked.” He told her. “I woke up to use the toilet in the night and...” He started his usual lines again but his mum cut him short.

“Which useless toilet? Is it toilet that said you should not

wear your boxer when you were done?” She had a hunch that there was more to what he was saying. “Bayo, you had better stop lying; you know I’ll get to the bottom of this and something tells me that when I do, you will be so sorry.” She pointed her right index finger at him in a warning gesture. “Get up and get ready for school. Go to the kitchen to get hot water. I must not come back and meet you on the bed; is that clear?” She spoke sternly.

“Yes ma,” he said.

Mrs. Cole left his room, went to the ladies’ room to wake Bolu up then she went to her room. She saw her husband fast asleep and snoring. She shook her head, quietly closed the door and went back to the kitchen to prepare breakfast for the family.

By 7am, Mrs. Cole, Bayo and Bolu were all set. Seyi was up, had brushed her teeth but not yet had her bath because she wasn’t going out. She had breakfast with them. Mr. Cole hadn’t come out of his room. His food was in the warmer. He was a part-time lecturer at Excellence University. He ran a very flexible schedule and got to work around 10am every day.

“Seyi take care of the house. Make sure you are security conscious and use your time wisely. Call if anything arises.” Those were the same instructions she gave her every morning.

“Okay mummy,” Seyi responded and rolled her eyes.

Mrs. Cole saw her saucy attitude. “*Ejo e ko* (it’s not your

fault).” She told her and hissed. She turned to Bayo and Bolu, “Eyin omo (children), let's go.” she carried her bag and stood up.

Seyi followed them out of the house and helped open the gate, she waved as her mum drove off.

She went back into the house and tidied up the kitchen and dining where they had just eaten then she went to her room. She lay on the bed looking straight at the ceiling trying to paint a mental picture of her plan for the day. Gradually her eyes began to close and then off to dream land she went.

It was the sound of her phone ringing that woke her up. She looked at the caller's ID. It was Sope. “This girl will have my head; I haven't given her the gist of how yesterday went.” She said as she picked the call.

“Hi Sope!” She said hoping her friend won't pounce on her.

“You know you are not serious?” Sope didn't disappoint her.

“I'm sorry Sope; my data was exhausted.” She tried to give an excuse.

“And you couldn't call?” The tone of her voice revealed her annoyance.

“I didn't have airtime too” She hoped her explanations would suffice.

“Whatever!”

“Sope, I said I'm sorry.” She knew her friend. She never stayed angry with her for more than a minute.

“Do you now want me to beg you before you give me the gist?” Sope was no longer angry but was eager to hear all Seyi had to say.

Seyi chuckled, “I knew you'll forgive me. The gist is not exactly what you're expecting. The guy is a bastard.” She started.

“Ha! What happened?” Sope was in shock.

Seyi hissed, “He asked me out; I wasn't even expecting it.”

“So is that why he is a bastard, Seyi?” Sope asked.

“No *nah*, wait till you hear the full gist. He tried kissing me. I mean who does that?”

“Well guys could be like that, *sha*.” Sope explained to her.

“Oh please, spare me! That's not even the problem. Can you imagine that idiot has a girlfriend?”

“Wait! What? It's a lie.” Sope couldn't believe her ears.

“I swear! My brother saw his picture and recognized him as his friend's older sister's boyfriend. Can you imagine?” Seyi was boiling.

“This guy *na* big fool!” Sope was even more upset than Seyi.

“I'm telling you. You *sef* look at it o, he hasn't called me since yesterday evening. Is that how someone who claims to care would behave? I'm sure he'll have one useless excuse.”

“We don't even want his call. He should keep his call to himself.” Sope said.

“Hold on Sope, a call is coming in” Seyi said as she checked who it was. “He is the one calling.”

“What does he want? *Abeg* he should leave you alone o.” Sope already disliked him.

“I don't even want to hear his voice. Anyway, how are you? What are you doing today?” Seyi asked, changing the subject of discussion.

“I followed my mum to her office; I'm tired of staying at home.”

“I know right; it's frustrating.” She looked at her phone and placed it back to her ear. “Can you imagine? He is still calling o.” She informed Sope.

“You know what? Pick the call and hear what he has to say; we'll talk later.”

“Alright dear, take care.”

“Bye.”

Seyi ended the call and picked Goke's call, “hello” her tone was flat.

“Hi love!” Goke said.

Seyi was pissed to hear him refer to her as “love”. “*What right does he have to call me that?*” she thought. She didn't reply.

“How are you?” He asked when he didn't get a reply.

“I'm busy.” That was the only response she could think of. She wished she could sound harsher, perhaps raise her voice at him and tell him never to call her again. She just didn't want to speak to him ever again.

“Oh, I'm sorry; I'll call you later then?” Goke wanted to know if that would be better.

Seyi ended the call without giving him a reply or allowing him to say another word. She knew he'd be surprised at her action but didn't care. Instead, she hoped it would drive home the message that she was not interested anymore.

Immediately the call ended, she heard a knock on the door. She knew it was no one else but her father.

“Yes?” she sat up in bed wondering what he wanted.

Mr. Cole opened the door and came in. He was wearing a white singlet and a short

“Good afternoon...sorry morning sir.” His presence alone made her nervous.

“Do you know where the iron is?” He asked.

“I think it's in Bayo's room. Let me check.” Seyi got up from the bed.

“Okay” he said as he stepped out of the room and waited at the entrance of Bayo's room.

Seyi went into Bayo's room and immediately came out with the pressing iron, "Here it is sir" She said, handing it over to him.

Mr. Cole collected it from her and asked, "What did your mum prepare for breakfast?"

"Yam and fried egg sir," she replied hoping that was all. She wasn't free or comfortable around her dad.

"Okay" Mr Cole said and went back to his room.

Seyi released her breath, she didn't even realize she had been holding it, as she walked to her room.

Mrs. Cole had gotten to work but she hadn't forgotten her 2 O'clock appointment with Emeka and so began work early so she could have completed all her tasks before 2:00pm.

She couldn't stop thinking about him. She really looked forward to seeing Emeka again. There was this excitement she felt when she thought about him, a feeling she hadn't had in a long time.

As she worked on her laptop, tidying up her PowerPoint presentation which she was to make by 11am, she tried to focus and not allow thoughts of Emeka flood her mind.

She heard a knock on the door, "Come in", she said as she looked up to see who it was.

A young lady came in with a document in her hand. She was the MD's secretary. "Good morning ma," she greeted as she approached.

"Good morning Miss Adeoti, how are you?"

"I'm fine ma. Mr. Ogunrinade asked me to give you this," she handed the document over to her.

"Okay, thank you," Mrs. Cole collected it wondering what it was.

"You are welcome ma," Miss Adeoti replied and left.

"An internal memorandum" Mrs Cole started reading it, "What? No, this can't be. Why will my presentation be postponed to 2:00pm? What's the meaning of this rubbish?" She removed her glasses and flung it on the table. "I don't like this." She was upset; her plans had obviously been ruined.

She hissed as she picked up her phone, "I'll have to inform Emeka and perhaps reschedule." She said to herself as she dialed his number.

"Hello Funke, Good morning," he picked up almost immediately.

"Hi Emeka, Good morning." It felt good to hear his voice again. She couldn't believe she was calling to cancel their appointment.

"What's the problem? You sound dull." He could tell

something was wrong.

“I just got a message from the MD that my presentation which was meant to be by 11:00am is now by 2:00pm.” She told him.

“Wow, that's when we were meant to meet.” He sounded disappointed. “That's not a problem; don't let it bother you,” he tried to encourage her. “Maybe we should reschedule for another time. Although I was really looking forward to seeing you today.”

“Well, it's a 20 minutes presentation. What if we fix our meeting for 3:00pm?” She suggested. Emeka wasn't the only one that wanted to see her; she was equally looking forward to seeing him.

“Oh, is that possible? I hope it won't be too inconveniencing?” He said with concern.

“No, not at all, I'll leave immediately I'm done.” She told him.

“That's great then, 3:00pm it is.”

Mrs Cole smiled, “Yes, see you later today.”

“Bye dear,” he ended the call.

Mrs. Cole couldn't contain her joy. She smiled as she dropped the phone.

Bayo was in Math's class but wasn't paying attention to

Mr Adeyemi, his Mathematics teacher. Instead, he was focused on his phone, chatting with Sijuade who was in a different arm. She was in Art class while he was in Science class. Mr Adeyemi noticed Bayo wasn't paying attention.

“What was my last statement?” He asked him.

Bayo, not knowing the question was directed at him, continued with his phone.

“Bayo, stand up!”

Bayo was shocked. He quickly kept his phone in his pocket as he pointed to himself, “me?” He asked.

“No, me.” Mr Adeyemi answered sarcastically. “My friend, will you get up? You've not heard anything I've said today.”

Bayo slowly stood up. He was embarrassed but knew his teacher was right.

A few of his classmates giggled and made jest of him.

“You'll remain standing till the end of the class.” Mr Adeyemi continued teaching.

Bayo didn't bring out his phone because he knew it would be seized. He consoled himself with the fact that the class was almost over and afterwards was break time.

After about ten minutes, the bell was rung and the class ended. He sat down and like he had been dying to, he brought out his phone and checked it for message notifications. Sijuade had

sent him messages, he replied them and told her he'll join her in her class and from there, they'll go for break together.

When he got to her class, he found her at the back of the class, talking with a friend. She saw him and signaled to him to give her a minute.

While Bayo waited for her outside by the window, he could hear her talking to the other person about Jesus being the only solution for what she was going through.

“Jesus is the way, truth and the life”, she said. “Even in your academics, He can help you. Just ask for His help, you'll be surprised.”

“Thank you, Siju.” The friend told her.

“Don't mention. I have to go now, Bayo is waiting for me outside.”

She came out and met Bayo where he waited by the window. “Sorry for keeping you waiting, Bayo.” She apologized.

Bayo, who was leaning against the window frame, eavesdropping on Sijuade's conversation, was startled by her but put up an act. “No problem at all.” He turned to her and stood up straight. “How are you?” They walked towards the kiosk where they usually bought snacks and drinks during break.

“I'm okay,” the pretty girl in her perfectly laundered uniform said. She was the same age with Bayo and about an inch

shorter. "So, your sister knows Goke?" She asked.

"Yes o, I don't know if they are close though. I just saw his picture and I recognized him immediately." He told her.

"Interesting. Sister Feyikemi wasn't really happy yesterday."

"Why?" Bayo asked.

"When I asked her, she said nothing but when I asked her how Goke was, she said he wasn't feeling too well and was at home throughout" Sijuade told him.

"So, she wasn't happy because Goke wasn't feeling fine?" Bayo wanted to understand.

"That, coupled with the fact that their plans to hang out was cancelled."

"Eeya! I hope she is fine now?" Bayo asked.

"They spoke in the night; I guess she is." They arrived at the kiosk. "What are you buying?" She asked as she brought out 200 naira from her pocket ready to place her order.

"Em... most likely meat pie and a drink." Bayo said as he put his hand in his pocket to bring out his money. He had forgotten that his mum didn't give him any money, his punishment for taking her modem without her permission and also lying to cover up his act of theft. "Actually, I'm not really hungry. I had a heavy breakfast. Just buy yours." He told her, hoping she wouldn't figure

out he didn't have money.

“Are you sure?” She asked.

“Of course, go ahead and buy your snacks. I'm okay,” he told her.

“Alright, if you say so,” she said then bought two sausages and a bottle of coke.

They sat down on a bench and continued talking, after 20 minutes, the bell was rung and they had to return to their classes.

Mrs. Cole was set for her presentation. By 1:45pm, the projector had been set, everything was in order. She sat in the board room waiting for 2:00pm when everyone would have been seated.

Her colleagues gradually assembled and by 2:00pm, she began her presentation. She was done by 2:15pm after which she entertained some questions and the meeting was brought to an end. Without wasting time, she went to her office, packed her bags and off she went.

While on her way to meet Emeka, she called him. She was about 30 minutes away from Evelyn's Kitchen, where they had planned to meet but she just needed to be sure he was also on his way or at least about to leave home or wherever he was. He picked on the first ring.

“Hello Funke!”

“Hi Emeka, I'm already on my way.” She told him.

“Oh, that's great. How did the presentation go?” He was always very thoughtful.

“It went well, thanks. Where are you?” She asked.

“I just left home; I'm on my way too.” He told her.

“Ok great, see you soon.”

“You too dear.” He replied.

Mrs. Cole ended the call and dropped her phone. She began to ask herself the purpose of the meeting. Was it just catching up on old times or was there more? She tried to suppress the feeling of excitement that arose at the thought of her seeing Emeka.

She got to the place at 2:55pm. When she parked her car, she checked for Emeka's car but didn't see it. “He's not yet here.” She said to herself as she came down and entered the restaurant. As she was trying to decide which table to choose, she saw someone wave at her. She looked and saw it was Emeka. An uncontrollable smile broke out on her face as she walked to meet him.

He stood up to hug her and said, “I'm glad you made it in time.” He wore a white shirt and a navy-blue pair of trousers. His

first button was undone.

“I didn't know you were around, didn't see your car outside.” Mrs. Cole hugged him and took in the fragrance of his cologne. He smelt like a million boxes.

“Yeah, I took another one. My wife drove the SUV.” He explained.

For some reason, the mention of the word 'wife' suddenly made Mrs. Cole's smile disappear.

“Are you okay, did I say or do something wrong?” Emeka asked wondering the cause of the sudden fall in her countenance.

“No nothing,” she forced a smile. “So how are you?” She asked.

“I don't know about you but I'm hungry.” He said and burst into laughter.

“I am too; I haven't eaten since breakfast.” She told him.

“What will you like to have?” He picked up the menu on the table and opened it, scanning through.

She picked hers but instead of looking through it; she studied Emeka and took in his charming looks. Age had favoured him; he looked even more handsome than he did those many years ago. The sparse gray hair strands that lined his jaw and neatly shaved beards, made him look even more attractive. She knew if she kept staring, he would catch her. “Rice will do. How about

you?" The Emeka she knew almost two decades ago was a rice lover.

"Rice" He smiled. That smile. Still irresistible as ever.

Mrs Cole smiled. He didn't seem to have changed much.

"Why did you smile?" Emeka asked still smiling.

"I was almost sure you'll say rice. I still remember how much you loved rice." She was right about that. Emeka could eat rice three times a day for weeks without getting tired.

He chuckled. "That's very true." He signaled to one of the waiters who came and took their orders.

"So how have you been, Olufunke?" He asked with a broad smile, looking straight into her eyes.

The sound of her name being mentioned by him sent chills through her spine. She always loved when he called her first name in full. She could not resist his good looks which was magnified when he smiled neither could she deny the fact that feelings she had buried years ago were gradually resurrecting. She however didn't know if this was mutual or just in her head alone.

"Hmm... how have I been?" She repeated his question, this time around looking down and avoiding his gaze.

He lifted up her chin gently, his eyes locked with hers, "Funke, I know it's been so many years, so many things have happened to us but I want you to know that I still care today as I

did then. You have absolutely nothing to worry about.”

The atmosphere was so intense. Mrs. Cole could feel her heart beat faster. At that moment, she was oblivious of happenings around her. All she could see and hear was Emeka. He not only filled her vision but also saturated her mind.

“Does he really understand the gravity of this? There is so much to worry about. We are both married; we both have children and live entirely different lives. He couldn't possible have meant what he just said about nothing to worry about.” So many thoughts ran through her mind.

“Why are you quiet all of a sudden?” Emeka asked as he gently placed his hand on hers.

Mrs. Cole looked at his hand on hers and lifted her head to look at him, “Emeka” she gathered strength to mutter. She knew the words she wanted to say but she didn't have the boldness and confidence to let them out. She wanted to tell him that what he was doing was risky and not safe for both of them; she wanted to remind him that as Christians, it was sinful to engage in lustful acts. She however struggled with her flesh. She enjoyed the feeling being with Emeka brought and she feared that if she spoke out, it might all come to an end.

“Yes dear,” Emeka answered her. “What is on your mind?” He asked fiddling with her hand.

“Nothing much,” she lied. She decided to keep all her

thoughts to herself and bask in the euphoria of the moment

“Are you sure? You look a bit worried.” He told her.

“I'm fine.” She smiled.

There was silence as they both stared into each other's eyes.

The waiter broke the silence, “Here we go” he said as he placed their plates of rice in front of them.

Emeka detached his hand from hers in order to give room for the waiter to do his job. “Thank you,” he politely told the waiter as he unwrapped his cutlery from the beautifully embroidered orange napkin that was beside his plate. “This smells good.” He smiled.

“I hope it tastes as good” Mrs. Cole said as she unwrapped her cutlery and watched Emeka take the first spoon. “How is it?” She asked.

“Taste it yourself and see.” He covered his mouth with his right hand holding his knife.

Mrs Cole tasted the rice and a smile immediately broke out on her face. “This is really good.” She affirmed.

“I told you so.”

“You did? When? All I remember you saying was you heard the food here is really nice.” she took a sip from the orange juice in her glass.

“Well, I was the one that suggested the place.”

“And did that add money to your bank account?” She teased.

“Nice one.” He smiled.

They finished their meal and Emeka paid for the food then they got up to leave.

As they exited the building, he walked her to her car. “Thank you for today, I had a great time.”

“I should be the one thanking you. You made me remember what it feels like to be cared for.” She had finished speaking before she realized how much information she had divulged.

“Funke,” he held her hand. “Trust me, I am still willing to give you all the care and love you need.” He told her looking straight into her eyes.

“Emeka, so much has changed. We are both married now.” She detached her hand.

“What matters most is your happiness, Funke. Are you happy?” Emeka no longer saw the spark he once saw in her eyes. “I want you to be happy, I really do.”

Mrs. Cole looked at him, she didn't know what to say or do. She knew he was right about her not being happy, as a matter of fact she was far from happy. She had logical reasons to allow

Emeka back into her life; he was the only man she had ever truly loved and now the man she called husband had frustrated her with his alcoholism and now womanizing.

“I appreciate all this, really, I do. It's just that I...we have to be careful. I don't want us to do something we'll regret.” She searched his eyes to see if he was in agreement. He wasn't.

“Regret? Funke, the only thing I regretted doing was not getting married to you. Every day, I wish I could go back in time to change the decision you made that day.” His eyes were full of pain and hurt.

Funke had the same regret. She wished more than anything that she hadn't listened to her parents. She wished she stood her ground and damned the consequences. She knew she was paying hard for that choice she made. As she heard Emeka open up to her, she could almost palpate his hurt. Hers too was even now intensified. Knowing he was also hurting, brought her more pain. She fought back the tears that were beginning to gather in her eyes.

“I still love you, Funke and I always will” Emeka still held her gaze, his voice trembling as he spoke.

She couldn't fathom why her life was so messed up. “*Could things get more complicated?*” she wondered. She couldn't deny the fact that she never stopped loving him; she just didn't know what

to do or say. She tried to speak but the words weren't just there.

“Say something please,” he begged, holding her hand.

“I don't know what to say Emeka. I have to go now” she couldn't hold back the tears any longer. She knew if she stayed one more moment, she'd do something she'll regret.

“Okay no problem. I will call you” he stepped back and allowed her enter her car, shutting the door after her. “Take care of yourself.” He took a step backward to allow her reverse properly.

“I will. It was nice seeing you again.” She wiped her tears. “Bye” she reversed the car and waved at him as she drove away.

He waved back and watched her drive off.

On her way to pick her children from school, she couldn't help thinking about Emeka. She fought more tears from pouring down as she wished she had never broken up with him in the first instance. If there was one mistake she had made in her life, it was not marrying Emeka and the second would have been getting married to Akin Cole. The life she was living was hell compared with the life she imagined she'd have been living with Emeka. But the deed had been done. She had entertained thoughts of a divorce many times but she quickly shook it off when she remembered her children. What would be the fate of her three children? It wasn't their fault she made the mistakes she did. She struggled with the feelings she still had for Emeka which were quickly getting

reawakened. She didn't know what to do and she didn't really have any close friend. Even if she did, she generally didn't like talking to people about her personal issues. She was in a fix and needed to act fast.

She got to Bolu's school, glancing at her wrist watch as she drove into the compound. It was 4:20pm, she was right on time. Bolu was in Primary 3 and her class room was on the first floor of the two-storey building while Bayo's class was in the next compound. Though the same school, the primary and secondary schools were in different compounds. Mrs. Cole always picked Bolu before going to pick Bayo.

Bolu, through the window of her classroom upstairs, spotted the car as her mum drove in. "My mum is around" she told her friends who were also waiting for their parents. She picked her bag and ran downstairs.

Mrs. Cole smiled as she approached. "How are you, my baby?"

"I'm fine mummy," she crossed over to the passenger's side and asked "how are you too?" She opened the front door and sat majestically like a princess.

"I'm fine, my darling. You know your brother will like to sit in front right?" Mrs. Cole smiled and gave her a pat on her back.

"Every time he makes me sit at the back. I like the front

seat too you know?” Bolu folded her arms and squeezed her face as if she had just tasted a sour grape.

“Oh well, that's why he is your older brother. Anyway, I'll just act as if I'm not here.” Mrs. Cole started the car and went to Bayo's school.

As expected, the first thing Bayo said when he got to the car after “mummy good afternoon” was “Bolu, that's my seat.”

Mrs. Cole kept her word, she didn't say a thing.

“But you sit in front every time.” Bolu confronted him.

“Exactly, because everyone knows it's my seat.” He opened the door waiting for her to come down.

“It's not fair. I also like the front seat.” Bolu murmured as she came down and went to the back. “One day I'll have my car and I'll seat in front.”

“Of course, my dear you will. Do you know how privileged you are to be seating there?” Mrs. Cole looked back and asked.

Bolu folded her arms and looked out of the car. She wasn't interested in whatever anyone had to say.

“Sweetheart, that place you are sitting is called the owner's corner. When you own your car and your driver is driving the car, you don't struggle for front seat but you seat comfortably and majestically at the owner's corner and give your orders.” Mrs. Cole tried to cheer her up.

Bolu was not in the mood to be cheered up.

“You too from time to time, allow your sister sit in front, just do *egbon* for her (play the elder one)” Mrs Cole whispered to Bayo as she started the car and drove out of the school compound.

“Okay mummy, I've heard.”

“How was your day?” Mrs Cole asked him, her tone no longer hushed.

“Ha mummy I'm hungry” Bayo exclaimed and held his tummy.

“Didn't you have anything during break?” She asked sarcastically.

“When you didn't give me break money” he frowned at her.

“And why was that?” Her face was expressionless.

“Because I took your modem yesterday without your permission and I lied about it.” Bayo understood the gravity of what he did and was sorry about it.

“And what do you have to say about that?” Mrs. Cole took a left turn. She looked at the road all through the conversation.

“I'm sorry?”

“Are you asking or telling me?”

“I'm sorry ma.”

“That's more like it.” A smile broke out from the corner of

her face. "I'm glad you learnt your lesson and I believe it won't repeat itself." She briefly gave him a sideways glance.

"Don't worry, we will soon be home. Seyi would have prepared lunch, okay?"

"But before we get home, can..."

"Nope, not today my dear." She cut in

"You'll have to wait for us to get home." She told him point blank.

The rest of the trip home was largely filled with silence.

Chapter 07

When they got home, Seyi had prepared lunch. She opened the gate and welcomed them as Mrs Cole drove into the compound.

“How was your day, mummy?” She helped her mum carry her handbag and laptop bag.

“It was good, thanks. How are you?” She unhooked her seatbelt and came down from the car.

Bayo and Bolu were already out and on their way into the house.

“I’m fine.” Seyi hung the bags on her two shoulders.

“What did you cook?” Mrs Cole locked the car and followed Seyi behind as they went into the house.

“*Eba and Okra*” She dropped the bags in the sitting room. “Are you ready to eat now?” she asked her mum.

“I’ll eat later but I’m sure your siblings are starving.” Mrs Cole threw her body on the couch and removed her shoes and

jacket. “Please turn on the fan, I'm feeling hot” she told Seyi.

“Okay ma” she turned it on then went to the kitchen to serve her siblings” food.

Bayo had already gone to the kitchen to see what his sister cooked. He was happy when he saw the pot of soup and the warmer containing hot *eba*. He quickly ran to his room to change out of his uniform into a homely cloth. Bolu did the same. Their mother had made a rule “No eating in Uniform.”

Mrs. Cole raised her voice and asked Seyi, who was in the kitchen dishing out the food for herself and her siblings, “Has your dad come back?”

“No ma” Seyi replied.

Mrs. Cole wasn't surprised. Most times, he went straight to the bar from work and didn't return home till late at night. However, occasionally, he came straight home. The children barely knew their father because he was hardly ever around and whenever he was, they weren't free with him. They preferred his absence. Their mother had filled the void as much as she could.

Mrs. Cole stood up, took her bags and went into her room. She felt tired, needed to rest and get the day's stress which was largely emotional off her shoulders.

Bayo and Bolu collected their food from Seyi in the kitchen and went to the dining table where Seyi joined them. She had

waited for them to return before eating.

“So did you see that your friend today?” She asked Bayo.

“Which one?” Bayo asked as he devoured the food like a hungry lion.

“The one whose sister is Goke's girlfriend.” Seyi couldn't remember her name.

“Yes, I saw her, why?” Bayo wondered how that was of any importance to Seyi.

“Nothing, just asking” she continued eating. After a minute, she asked, “Did she say anything about her sister or Goke?” She hoped she didn't appear too nosy.

“Yeah, she said he told her sister that he wasn't feeling well throughout yesterday and so they could not hang out. They spoke last night and I think he is now better” Bayo was more interested in his food than the summary he gave.

“Hmm... interesting. He wasn't feeling fine?” Seyi looked straight into space, her fork toying with her food. “It's that sickness that will kill him.” She hissed.

Bayo and Bolu immediately turned to her, surprised.

“Ha, sister Seyi! Why will you say that?” Bayo asked.

“If you like your friend or her sister, better tell them that that idiot is a cheat. He wasn't sick yesterday.” Seyi told Bayo point blank pointing her fork at him.

“How did you know? Bayo asked. He had now paused his meal and was more interested in what was going on.

Seyi didn't want to expose her secrets about how she didn't go to Sope's house the day before and how she had had a crush on Goke. “He was with my friend yesterday. He even asked her out.” She hid her identity by adding a twist to the story and using a lie to cover up.

“Ha!” Bayo exclaimed. “Siju has to hear this.” He resumed his food. He was in a hurry to finish eating and call Sijuade. He'd have done so right away if his phone had been with him. He was charging it in his room.

“Sister Seyi, what that man did is not good o.” Bolu said as she struggled to finish her food.

“That is why you have to be very careful of boys.” Seyi said still looking straight in space then turned to Bolu who was sitting to her right. “They are a wicked species.”

“It's not true *jo*; it's not all guys. I'm not wicked.” Bayo argued as he took a bite of his meat.

“What do you know? You are still a small boy.” Seyi was convinced all guy were the same- evil.

“That's why mummy said we should not have boyfriends.” Bolu innocently pointed out.

Seyi became defensive, “Who is talking about having

boyfriend now? We are saying guys are wicked; you are talking about not having boyfriend. That's why we don't like saying adult gist in front of you." She eyed her sister and hissed.

"I'm sorry" Bolu apologized.

Seyi felt guilty. She knew her reaction was uncalled for and that there was truth in what Bolu said. "I didn't mean to sound harsh. I'm sorry too." Seyi apologized.

Bolu smiled. Her smile was so innocent. "Please I can't finish my food," she opened up. She had been struggling since.

"I want! I want!" Bayo joyously rushed at it.

"I want my meat," Bolu removed the meat and tossed the half-finished plate of food to him.

"Thank you," he poured the food into his plate then returned the empty plate to Bolu who put her meat back and took her time to enjoy every bit of it.

Seyi took her plate to the kitchen, washed it and came back out. "You guys should wash your plates o, no dirty plate please. I'm not your house girl." She told them then went to her room.

Bayo finished his food, washed his plate and went to his room. He turned on the fan to cool his sweaty body then picked his phone and dialled Sijuade's number.

She picked on the third ring.

“Hello Siju, how are you?”

“I'm okay, you?”

“I'm good too. You won't believe what I just heard.” His eyes widened with excitement, ready to share the information he had just had with Seyi.

“What?” There was anticipation in her voice.

“It is Goke o,” he paused.

“What about him?”

“My sister said he is a cheat.” He lay down on his bed, getting a more comfortable position.

“Really? Why did she say so?”

“She said he was with her friend yesterday and even asked her out. You were right Siju, the guy isn't a good guy.” Bayo confirmed.

“You know I said it? I just was never comfortable about him.” She told him.

“Yeah, you did.” He agreed with her.

“Thank You Holy Spirit.” She said under her breath.

Bayo heard her but didn't say anything. He had always felt she was a bit extreme with her Christianity. He was a Christian too but didn't make everything about God or the Holy Spirit the way she did.

“I pray God will give me wisdom to know how to tell my

sister. I know God who has started this will perfect it in Jesus name.” She said and waited for Bayo to say “Amen”. When she got no response, she asked, “Hello, Bayo are you still there?”

“Yes I am”

“Thanks for the info; see you tomorrow.” She wrapped up the call.

“Alright, bye” Bayo ended the call. He didn't understand what just happened. He knew he was meant to say “Amen” to Sijuade's prayer yet there was something in him that made him feel *too big* to stoop low to say “Amen”. He just didn't think everything had to revolve around God or end up in prayer or something spiritual. Couldn't he just gist with her normally without her bringing up something spiritual? The thought pissed him and made him upset. He decided to watch a video on YouTube to take his mind of it.

He went to his saved videos which were 90 percent pornography, with the remaining 10% shared amongst football clips, funny videos, and music videos. He clicked on the first one. He had been introduced to masturbation and watching of pornographic videos by his uncle, Gboyega a month ago, the very same period he tried to molest Bolu. Unknown to anyone, Bolu wasn't the only victim of their uncle's notorious lifestyle, Bayo equally was.

Unlike Bolu however, there was no one to intervene and save Bayo that fateful day. Their uncle's one week visit left Bayo an entirely different person- a prisoner to porn and masturbation. Gboyega slept in Bayo's room and every night, he will hear his uncle making sounds and watching something on his laptop. His uncle would sit on a chair backing the bed and put the laptop on a stool in front of him. Bayo was always too scared to look and had to always force himself to sleep.

The night before his departure, like an angel of doom sent to destroy the lives of the innocent children, he tapped Bayo who had already succeeded in forcing himself to sleep.

Bayo woke up, wondering what his uncle wanted from him.

Gboyega put his index finger on his mouth, 'shhhhh' he hushed him and signaled for him to get up that he wanted to show him something.

Bayo sat up and watched as his uncle turned on his laptop and played a pornographic video for him to watch.

He initially resisted, "Uncle I don't want to watch," he shook his head and shut his eyes.

"Shut up and open your eyes, my friend." Gboyega said in a hushed tone. "Do you think I'll show you a bad thing? I'm your uncle, trust me." He was very manipulative.

Bayo innocently believed him and opened his eyes to watch it. Something in him knew it wasn't right but because his uncle had told him it wasn't bad and no one else had mentioned anything to him about pornography being a sin, he struggled with his conscience and continued watching.

“See, Bayo you are old enough to know these things.” Gboyega told him. “Your parents will not tell you; no one will teach you. At this age, your body will start experiencing some changes which are absolutely normal. You might notice you feel attracted to the opposite sex. That too is normal. As you watch this naked people, you may feel somehow in your body, don't resist it, instead put your hand into your boxer and fondle with your private part. That is the way to enjoy it. Like I said it is normal and nobody will teach you these things. Do you understand?” He asked him.

Bayo nodded, too dumbfounded to speak.

That was it! The deed was done. The agent of darkness had sown the seed. That was how it all began. Bayo had not been able to stop since that night. He watched and saved different videos on YouTube. Every opportunity he got he'd lock himself up and masturbate. Not a single soul knew about it until the previous day when Bolu accidentally stumbled on him in the act. Just as his uncle made him see it, it didn't appear wrong to him. He felt it was

something everybody did and a part of their normal body physiological processes like urinating and defecating.

Now, alone, in his room, upset about how the call with Sijuade went, he started watching the video on his phone. He pulled down his trousers and boxer and started pleasuring himself. He was so carried away, he didn't hear the knock on the door.

Suddenly, he saw the door being opened. He thought he locked it. He desperately prayed it was the breeze and not someone opening the door but by the time the door was flung open, he knew his prayer was far from answered. Everything happened so fast, he didn't have enough time to wear his cloth.

His mother stood at the door, her eyes wide open and jaw dropped. "What!" She exclaimed with her hand, covering her mouth.

Bayo knew he had been caught red handed. He quickly pulled up his boxer and trouser. "Mummy I... I" he stammered.

"You what?" She entered the room. Infuriated, she felt like getting a cane and beating every part of his body. "What did I just see you doing?" she moved closer to him raising her hand ready to pounce on him.

"Mummy, I'm sorry." He begged as he moved away from her.

“No, you are not, when I am done with you, you will be sorry.” She looked around for something to use to beat him but when she didn't find any, she removed her slippers and held one leg of the slippers up high ready to spank him.

Bayo raised his hand in defense and moved away. “Mummy please,” he pleaded.

“If I hear my name in your mouth. My friend keep shut.” She placed the index finger of her free hand on her mouth. “You know I told you I will get to the bottom of this and it won't be funny.” She reminded him.

Bayo kept trying to run from her.

“If you move again, Bayo, I'll make this worse.” She threatened him.

Bayo stood in one spot, raised his hands above his head and buried his head from the coming hit, “Mummy it's uncle Gboyega,” he cried out.

“What did you just say?” Mrs. Cole lowered her hand. “Uncle Gboyega did what?” She wanted to hear what he had to say.

“When uncle Gboyega came the last time, he forced me to watch porn and touch my private part. I got used to it after he left and I've not been able to stop since,” he opened up to her as he gradually dropped his hands and uncurled himself from the corner where he ran to for safety.

“Gboyega, my brother, did that?” Mrs. Cole pointed the slippers at herself before dropping it like a surrendering soldier dropping his weapon. Her eyes burnt with tears. She could feel all the energy in her body leave, her legs gave way under the weight of her body, next thing she knew, she was on the floor crying like a baby.

She had always tried to be strong particularly in front of her children. But at that moment, weakness took over her being. She had no strength to fight, no strength to pray and no strength to remain hopeful. The burden she had hitherto carried was too heavy for her. The more she tried to hold her family together and make things work, the worse things grew.

“Mummy, please I'm sorry” Bayo moved close to her where she lay on the floor and patted her softly. He had never seen his mother cry before.

The more he patted her, the harder she cried. “Why is life so unfair to me? What have I done to deserve all this?” She cried uncontrollably.

Bayo didn't know what more he could do, he figured he needed help so he went to call Seyi who was in her room.

“Seyi... Seyi” he entered the room panting.

Seyi was lying on her bed listening to music. She immediately removed her earphone and sat up when she saw how

Bayo flung the door open and rushed in. “What is it? What is the problem?”

Bolu was sleeping so she tried not to raise her voice.

“Mummy is on the floor in my room, crying?”

“Crying?” Seyi jumped out of her bed. “What happened to her? Is she okay?” The only time she saw her mother cry was when her father beat her and even at that, it was not in all cases she cried. Her mother was a very strong woman but like every strong thing, she had her breaking point and had just reached it.

When they got to the room, Mrs. Cole was no longer on the floor. She was sitting on the bed but still sobbing.

“Mummy are you okay?” Seyi asked and ran towards her.

Bayo followed closely behind.

“I will be fine Seyi, don't worry,” Mrs Cole cleaned her tears and stood up. “Get me my phone and hand bag.”

They both rushed out of the room to their mum's room.

Mrs. Cole went to the lobby that led to the sitting room. There were hung some of the family's portraits and there was a nail on the wall where they hung the car key. She took the key and went outside. She opened the car and sat inside, waiting for the children to bring her bag and phone.

As soon as they did. She asked Seyi to open the gate for her.

“Mummy, where are you going?” Seyi asked with concern.

“I don't know; I just need to get out of the house. I'll be back before night.” She told them. She was both physically and psychologically drained and desperately needed help. The only problem was she felt she had no one to turn to for help.

“Okay mummy, please be safe.” Seyi told her and went to open the gate.

Bayo stood by the car, still feeling all that happened was his fault. “Mummy I'm really sorry” he told her.

“It's okay dear,” she gave him a weak smile and started the car.

Bayo watched as she reversed and drove out of the compound.

Mrs. Cole had no idea where she was headed. She just needed solitude. She felt that all her problems originated from that house and needed to be far away from it. As she drove, she felt a strange urge to call Emeka, after all he said he'll always be there and he cared. “*What if I call him?*” She thought.

“*But he is a married man; I can't just call him anytime. He'll be with his family.*” She countered the first thought. “*I can't do this,*” she told herself. “*What then will I do? Who else can I call? I don't care whatever happens; I'll give it a try. If it doesn't work out, fine. At least, I tried.*” She made up her mind she was going to take the risk of calling him and face the consequence, whatever it was.

She picked her phone and dialed his number. As it rang, she kept wondering what she was doing. He didn't pick. Her phone was on auto redial so she allowed it dial his number again, he picked shortly after it began ringing the second time.

“Hello” his voice was husky.

Mrs. Cole realized he must have been sleeping. “I'm really sorry to bother you; I didn't know you were sleeping.” She said and sniffed.

“No, no, not at all” Emeka sounded more alert. “You aren't disturbing me.” He told her. “Are you okay? You sound like you are crying.” The tone of her voice and the frequent sniffs gave her away.

She was silent.

“Funke, are you there?” He asked.

“Yes I am. Please if it is not too much to ask, is it possible for us to see?” She needed a friend to talk to and a shoulder to lean on.

“Sure, where are you? I'll come meet you right away.” He sounded eager to help.

She told him her location.

“Alright dear, I'll be there in the next 20 minutes max.” He told her.

“Okay” She gave a sigh of relief. “Thank you very much. I

really appreciate it.”

“Oh please, don't mention.” He ended the call.

Mrs. Cole dropped her phone in her bag and placed her head on the head rest. She wondered if that was the best choice she had made. She knew how weak and vulnerable she was around Emeka. She remembered all the things he told her earlier that day. What then was she doing, calling and asking for his help? She felt a strong overwhelming rebuke for what she had just done and felt compelled to call Emeka and cancel but she ignored it and told herself he was just a friend she needed to talk to and that was all.

Emeka kept to his word. In about 20 minutes, he called her to confirm her exact location.

After a few minutes, Mrs Cole saw his car park behind hers. He came down and walked towards her car. She wound down her window as he approached.

“Hi dear!” He bent and rested his arms on the edge of the roof of her car.

“Hi Emeka!” Mrs. Cole managed a smile.

“I think we should drive into the estate, he pointed at the next street. This is a pretty busy road, don't you think?”

“Okay, sure no problem. She thought about it too but she didn't want Emeka having difficulty locating her. She was parked in an open place, opposite a major shopping mall. She started the

car and waited for Emeka to return to his car then she drove into the next street, watching Emeka through the rear-view mirror as she turned. She drove in a few meters into the quiet street and then parked the car.

Emeka parked his car behind hers and came down then walked towards her car. Mrs. Cole watched him through her side mirror. He had changed from the white shirt and navy blue trouser to a grey T-shirt and a pair of jean shorts but still smelt really good. She on the other hand was wearing a green chiffon *bubu* gown which she changed to immediately she got home. It was one of the light and free clothes she wore when she was at home.

Emeka walked towards her car. In between the two cars, he crossed over to the passenger's side and opened the door.

“Funke.” He called her name with a sweet tone as he sat down and closed the door.

Mrs. Cole looked at him and a weak smile broke out from the corner of her mouth. “I’m so sorry for bothering you. I had no one else to call or...” she was cut shut by his finger on her lips.

“Shhhhhh! You don’t have to be sorry for anything Funke. I’m here for you. I’m glad you called.” He looked right into her eyes.

Mrs. Cole could feel her heart beat faster, this time around not due to fear but a rush of emotions. Emotions that resulted from the feelings she had locked up but were suddenly being let loose.

His gaze pierced through her soul.

He dropped his finger from her lips to her shoulder rubbing her arm softly as his hand slid down to her elbow. “Funke, I love you,” he said, his eyes still locked with hers.

Funke could feel the hair on her body rise. She had not felt that alive in a very long time. In the past months, she had had sex only when her husband demanded for it. He never cared if she felt like it or not. When he wanted it, he always had his way irrespective of how she felt. She always felt used. There was no spark in their love life, no spontaneity, nothing. The frequency gradually declined until they completely stopped having sex. Many times her body had craved it but her husband was either out in the bar or at home but drunk. In recent times, everything about him repelled her. She had no desire whatsoever to be with him.

“I’m frustrated Emeka. My life is so messed up.” She opened up to him.

Emeka listened as she spoke. He was a great listener, he had always been.

Mrs. Cole went on to tell him all that had been going on in her home up until the point when she broke down in tears roughly an hour ago. “Why me Emeka? Why?” She hit the steering wheel in frustration. “I can’t take it anymore. I feel like I can’t survive this. My children are the only reason I’m still in this marriage, Emeka.

You know?" She looked into his eyes searching them to know if he understood what she was saying.

He nodded and wiped her tears with his hand. "I'm sure this must be hard for you." He said as he pushed her closer to him and hugged her, allowing her rest on his shoulder.

"It's unbearable." She cried, her voice barely audible.

Emeka patted her on the back softly as she cried, "This is too much for a human being to bear. No one should ever go through this horror," he whispered into her ear.

She pulled back a bit to look into his eyes. His lips were very close to hers.

He moved closer and planted a kiss on her lower lip. She struggled in her heart and mind to resist and pull back but her weakness had the better side of her and she kissed him back. When she felt his arm caress her body, she began to feel really uneasy. She pulled back and rested her back in her seat. She was so embarrassed, buried her face in her hands "I'm so sorry Emeka. That was very wrong of me. You are a married man. I'm truly sorry."

"Oh please stop it, Funke. Don't apologise" Emeka frowned a bit.

She looked at him "I better get going. We both have to return to our different homes. Thank you for being available to talk

to.”

“Funke, I’m always here for you. You want to talk? You need a shoulder to cry on? I’m just a phone call away. Okay?” he planted a kiss on her forehead.

She nodded. “Thank you” she was grateful but she hoped she won’t have a reason to call him the way she did. She watched him alight from the car.

“Take care of yourself,” he bent over and told her.

“Thanks, I will.” She smiled and started the car. She made a U- turn in front of one of the houses and honked at Emeka as she drove past him.

She got home around 8:30pm.

Immediately Seyi and Bayo heard the honk of the car, they rushed to open the gate for their mum. Their minds had not been at ease since she left. Bayo was the first to get to the gate. He opened it and greeted, “mummy welcome” as she drove in.

“Mummy, how are you?” Seyi opened the car door as soon as her mum turned off the engine.

“I’m fine, Seyi. Thank you” she smiled a bit and unhooked her seat belt.

Bayo locked the gate quickly and ran to the car. “Mummy, how are you?” He asked panting.

“I’m fine” she sounded tired and exhausted. “I’ll be going

to bed early tonight.” She told them as she alighted from the car.

“Okay mummy, please take it easy,” Seyi said, concern written all over her face.

“I will. Please help me take care of your siblings. Diner and everything they’ll be needing.” Mrs. Cole walked into the house, taking each step carefully and placing her hand on her forehead.

“No problem mummy, I will.” Seyi wanted to do all she could to ease the stress off her mum.

“Mummy, do you have a headache?” Bayo asked observing her hand on her forehead.

“Yes a little. Don’t worry. I will be fine” Mrs. Cole went into the house. Seyi and Bayo followed after her.

Bayo went to his room feeling terrible about everything that happened. He blamed himself for what happened to his mum. As he sat on his bed, he recalled the awful site of his mum on the floor of his room crying like a baby. It was a dreadful event he never wanted to experience again. He remembered what led to all this was his response to Sijuade’s harmless attitude of always bringing God into her conversations. It was because he got upset that all that happened ensued. As he ruminated about it, like scales falling off his eyes, he realized he was the one with the problem not Sijuade. A strong feeling of repentance came upon him. He told himself, “*There was absolutely nothing wrong with what she did.*” I was just

upset because I don't have a close relationship with God the way she does. He realized it was pride that stood in his way.

He knew the only solution was to turn back to God and ask for His help. He knelt down by his bed and began to talk to God like he would a friend who he had cut off communication with. He closed his eyes but imagined God was physically present in his room.

“Dear Lord, I acknowledge that I have been wrong all along. I messed up big time. Now I have seen how much I really need You. My life is so empty without You. It's a mess. I have struggled with masturbation and pornography these past weeks and I don't like it. I know you are not happy with me and I am so sorry. I have had no one to talk to but I never realized You have always been here. Please I ask that from today you help me to be a better person. I want what Siju has and I want to stop watching porn and masturbating. Help me with these and I promise to be a good boy. Thank You because I know You have heard me and I am confident that You will help me in Jesus name I pray, Amen.”

He stood up from his knees and sat on the bed. He felt this overwhelming joy flood his heart. He knew the next thing to do. He immediately picked his phone, went straight to YouTube and deleted all the pornographic videos. He felt that was not enough, he decided to uninstall the app. *“It's been a huge distraction anyway. I*

can do without it for now.” He told himself. He went through his picture gallery and deleted all the pictures and videos he knew God wasn't proud off. Finally, he went through his songs and deleted every single one of them. He knew they didn't edify his spirit and he had just made a promise to God which he was by all means willing to fulfil. He made a mental note to collect gospel songs from Sijuade the following day.

He heard a knock on the door.

“Come in” He knew it was either of his sisters.

Seyi opened the door and came in. “I want to prepare spaghetti for dinner. Is that okay?”

“Yes please, that's fine.” Bayo told her.

“Alright.” Seyi turned to leave.

“Do you need me to help you?” He offered.

Seyi wasn't expecting that. She turned around and paused before asking. “You want to help?”

“Errr yeah. I do. Something wrong with that?” He shrugged his shoulders.

“No. not at all.” Seyi figured it must have been because of what happened to their mum. “You can join me in the kitchen.” She told him, then left. “Bayo offered to help in the kitchen. Wonders will never end.” Seyi clapped her hand as she walked away from his room.

“I can hear you.” Bayo told her, raising his voice a little so she'd hear.

Seyi giggled, “sorry.” She went to the kitchen and brought out a pot to boil the spaghetti. She could still not wrap her mind around what happened to her mum. “*Did she get a call from work? Did someone she knows die? Is she broke?*” Seyi was tired of guessing what could have been wrong with her mum. Whatever it was, Seyi hoped her mum would snap out of it and bounce back to her feet.

Bayo came to join her in the kitchen as he said he would. “Where is Bolu?” He asked.

“She is doing her home work.” Seyi opened the cupboard above the ceramic counter where Spaghetti was kept. She tiptoed to see if it was there and when she couldn't find it, she stretched the length of her body and used her hand to feel for it.

“Let me help you sis.” Bayo was about 2 inches taller than his sister.

Seyi stepped aside giving room for Bayo to check the cupboard.

He smiled at her as he approached, “Let me show you how it is done.” He teased her as he effortlessly placed his hand in the cupboard and brought out a pack of Spaghetti.

“It's not your fault.” She eyed him playfully and snatched it from his hand.

Bayo laughed. “Is that all you need?” He asked with sarcasm in his voice.

“You are just a proud boy.” Seyi forced herself not to laugh.

Bayo smiled. “That's just me rendering help.”

“Thank you *beebee*,” she smiled as she broke the spaghetti into the pot of boiling water.

In another 20 minutes, dinner was set. They all ate at the dining table and afterwards retired for the night.

When Bayo got to his room, the thought to masturbate crossed his mind but the urge was gone. He changed into his pyjamas, said his night prayer and slept off peacefully.

Seyi stayed back in the sitting room till her father returned. She opened the door for him. His shirt was unbuttoned, one sleeve rolled up to the elbow while the other was down. His tie loosely knotted on his neck and he carried a briefcase on one hand.

“Welcome sir.” She knew better now. Even the Bible says a soft answer turneth away wrath. She stepped aside and allowed him stagger into the house.

“Where is your mum?” He asked wondering why it was not his wife that opened the door for him.

“She wasn't feeling too well.” Seyi explained to him.

“When she will not stay in one place, how won't she not feel unwell?” Mr. Cole hissed as struggled with his balance.

Seyi shook her head and felt so sorry for the wasted life her father was living.

As she locked the door, it occurred to her that her father can be given a copy of the house key so no one had to do vigil while waiting for him to return. She made a mental note to discuss the idea with her mum the next day.

Chapter 08

Mrs. Cole woke up the next day feeling a lot better physically but not much emotionally. She got up and carried out her usual routine. First to the kitchen to boil water for the children to take their bath and next to Bayo's room to wake him up.

The windows weren't closed this time around although the room was still untidy with his clothes littered everywhere. His cover cloth had rolled off his body and unlike other times, his pyjamas was on.

His mother observed the changes and hoped it was a positive change that has come to stay. She sat on his bed and tapped him on his shoulder, "Bayo, wake up." He tossed in bed as usual then finally opened his eyes.

"Mummy, good morning" He sat up. "How are you feeling?"

"Much better, thank you. Hope you slept well?" She asked.

"Yes I did." He smiled.

“The water will soon be hot. Make sure you don't go back to sleep.” She got up from his bed and left the room.

Bayo stood up from the bed because he knew if he remained there, he'd sleep off. He walked back and forth praying as he did. He thanked God for the day and committed it into God's hand. Afterwards, he went to the kitchen with an empty bucket to get hot water.

He met his mother preparing breakfast. He poured the water which had boiled from the electric kettle then filled it up with water from the tap and plugged it for the next person which was most likely Bolu. As he was about to leave the kitchen, he remembered something; he had a dream. He stopped walking and dropped the bucket of hot water.

“What is it?” His mother asked. “Are you okay?” She looked at him with concern filling every of her features, almost abandoning the oat she was preparing.

“I just remembered my dream.” He turned around to face her.

“Your dream? Was it good or bad?” Mrs. Cole didn't really take dreams seriously. She believed them to be figments of people's imagination or one's mind's way of continuing the activities of the day after the person had slept. She hardly saw them as a message or anything of that sort.

“Good I guess,” Bayo reminisced on the dream as it became more vivid. “I was in a dark cage. My hands and feet were chained. I looked so skinny and starved.”

“Ha! God forbid that is not your portion in Jesus name.” Mrs. Cole immediately rejected the dream. She ignored her 'dreams are just what we think' mentality.

“But something happened. A man walked into the cage, there was so much light surrounding him as he approached. I couldn't look at his face.” Bayo gesticulated with his hands.

“What now happened?” Mrs. Cole completely abandoned the food she was preparing and eagerly waited to hear what happened next.

“The people that were guarding the cage fell flat on their faces and began to beg for their lives. The man told them he came for me and had no business with them. Immediately, mummy,” Bayo's eyes were open wide, “the chains fell off. The man stretched his hand towards me and called my full name, “Adebayo”. He told me to get up that I was free.” He smiled as he recounted his dream.

“*Ehen* (really)?” Mrs. Cole felt a surge of emotions. “Wow!”

“Mummy, I think I had that dream because of what happened yesterday.” Bayo told her; his voice was full of with excitement.

“What happened?” Mrs. Cole's brows furrowed as she

wondered which of the many things that happened the day before he was referring to.

“You know, after you caught me, I felt terrible. I told God to help me stop and I promised to be a good boy.” He told her with a broad smile on his face.

“God? Where has God being all the while? Where was he when Gboyega almost destroyed my children's lives?” She knew there was a God, at least that was what she was brought up to believe. But in recent times she was beginning to believe He had signed off from anything that pertained to the Cole's Family.

“Go and have your bath before your water gets cold.” She changed the subject of discussion. She was definitely not going to go down that path, talking about God.

Bayo left.

Mrs. Cole resumed what she was doing. She remembered she was to meet with Pastor Gorge by 3pm. She had to ensure she finished all she had to do at work early if she wanted to make it in time. Tuesdays were her busiest day at work because she usually had at least three meetings back to back.

The morning was like most other mornings. Seyi stayed back at home. Mr. Cole remained in bed till 9am, then he started getting ready for work. Mrs. Cole dropped Bayo and Bolu off at their school and went to work.

It was a busy day as she had envisaged. She thought of Emeka so many times. She fought the urge she had to call him. She kept hoping he'd call her and every time her phone rang, she was quick to pick it and check the caller's ID. The third and final meeting for the day ended by 2:20pm. She hurriedly brought her phone out of her bag to check for any missed call from Emeka because all phones always had to be on silence during every meeting. As she checked her phone, there it was- two missed calls from Emeka, 12 minutes ago. She hurried out of the board room where all the meetings were held and went back to her office. She dialed his number on the way to her office. He picked on the second ring.

“Hi Emeka!” She had been dying to hear his voice.

“Baby.” Emeka had never called her that in years.

“*Baby? Did he just call me baby?*” She was speechless. She wasn't expecting that. Things were progressing fast between them. She had gradually stopped being concerned about the fact that they were both married and had separate families. She liked the sound of being called “baby”. It took her many years into the past. The period when things were perfect.

“How are you doing?” His voice always had that charm.

“I'm good. Just finished a meeting. Will soon be leaving the office for church.” She supported the phone with her shoulder

as she packed her laptop and some papers into her laptop bag.

“Church? You are still a church girl.” There was a hint of mockery in his voice.

Mrs. Cole knew what that meant. Back in school, her life revolved round three places; fellowship, lecture halls and her hall of residence. She however didn't like the sound of being referred to as a church girl. Not from him. That area of her life had died a long time ago. “No, I have a meeting with someone.” She told him. For some reason, she didn't want him to know it was the pastor she was going to see. The less people that knew, the better.

“Okay cool. I just wanted to check on you and be sure you are okay.”

“I am, thank you. How are you too?” She asked.

“I'm missing you.” He told her plainly. With her, he never beat around the bush.

A wave of heat passed through her body and pockets of sweat immediately appeared on her face. “*What am I doing? Where are we headed?*” Mrs. Cole immediately began to feel uneasy again, her heart began to beat faster. Deep down she knew all this wasn't right. But her flesh was quickly gaining control and her spirit on the other hand grew weaker and weaker. The voice of her conscience was being repeatedly silenced by her. She was letting down her guard and she knew it.

“Emeka, I don't know if you should say things like this” She managed to speak up in a tiny voice.

“You don't want me to tell you the truth about how I feel?” There was an audible smile in his voice. “Don't you miss me?” He asked her. The smile was gone. He was serious this time.

She knew she did, with everything in her. She had craved to be with him. Even her dream the previous night was proof. He kept appearing in her dream. She didn't know what to say. “Emeka, I have to go now. I'll talk to you later.” She ended the call before he could say another word.

She supported herself with the table and guided her steps with her hand till she got to her seat. She threw her body on the black ergonomic chair and held the arm rest tight, panting as if she had just seen a ghost. As she reminisced on the call, her phone rang again.

She knew Emeka wouldn't let the call end like that. She picked the call still panting.

“Hello, Mrs. Cole,” The male voice at the other end said. “Are you okay?” The person could hear her panting.

Mrs Cole checked the caller's ID. It was Pastor George. “Oh yes, I'm fine, thank you.” She tried to sound composed and make her breaths less audible.

“Okay, I called to remind you of our meeting by 3:00. I

hope you haven't forgotten?" He asked.

Mrs. Cole looked at her watch. It was 2:45pm. "No I haven't. It's just that I will be a bit late. I was held up at work." She explained to him.

"Alright no problem. I'll be expecting you then."

"Thank you sir." She ended the call. "*What does he want to talk to me about?*" She wasn't interested. She needed some space in her life. The only reason why she honored his invitation was because she respected him as her pastor and nothing else.

She left the office and arrived church at 3:15. She parked her car and headed for the pastor's office. The Pastor's secretary called the intercom of the office. "Sir, Mrs Cole is here to see you... Okay sir." She dropped the receiver. "You can go in." She pointed at the door leading to the pastor's office.

Mrs. Cole walked to the door and knocked. She heard a male voice telling her to come in.

She opened the door and entered. The office was air conditioned and had an automated air freshener that puffed lavender flavoured scent every 30 minutes. His Bible and laptop were opened on his table.

"Good afternoon sir." She said with a smile as she approached his desk.

Pastor George stood up and extended his hand for a

handshake. “How are you this afternoon?”

“I'm fine thank you. I'm sorry for coming late.” She shook his hand.

“It's okay. Please have your seat.” he pointed to one of the two guest chairs opposite his table.

“Thank you sir,” She took her seat.

“Can I offer you anything? A drink or at least water?” He turned to the fridge by his right.

“Water is fine, thank you.” Mrs Cole still wondered why he wanted to see her. She looked at her watch, she had to be at her children's school by 4:30pm.

Pastor George saw her take a peek at her watch. “Are you in a hurry?” He stood up and placed the bottle of water and a glass cup on the table in front of her.

“Not exactly, I'm to pick my children by 4:30.” She told him.

“No problem, we should be done before then.” He relaxed in his seat. “I'm sure you must have been wondering the reason I asked to see you.” He interlocked his fingers and rested his hands on the table.

Mrs. Cole smiled. That was exactly what was on her mind.

“Since you joined this church, I have noticed that you hardly come to church and when you do, your husband is never

with you.” He paused and waited to see if she wanted to say anything.

Mrs. Cole listened to all he had to say.

“Let me go straight to the point, I am really concerned about what seems to be the problem.” He gave her the chance to speak.

“Pastor George,” she started, “I appreciate your concerns. It's nothing really. We come to church as often as we can.” She wasn't ready or willing to divulge any information about the turmoil going on in her home.

“How is your husband?”

Mrs. Cole was getting irritated but tried her best not to let it show. “*Why is he asking how my husband*” she wondered. “My husband is fine.” She told him point blank and gave him the 'any other question' look.

He got the message and adjusted himself in his chair. “I don't mean to pry into personal matters, Mrs. Cole. I just felt I could be of help. Maybe even pray for you if you have any burden you wanted to share.” He explained.

“Pray for me?” She gave a sarcastic chuckle. “Thank you for your help pastor, we are doing fine.” She adjusted her bag hoping it will pass the message across to the pastor. She was done and ready to leave.

Pastor George sighed. He knew if he tried to press further, things could get ugly. “Thank you for your time, Mrs Cole, I’ll be praying for you.”

“Thank you too pastor.” Mrs. Cole got up. “My regards to your wife.” She smiled briefly and her smile immediately disappeared.

She left his office, thanked the secretary and went straight to her car. “*That pastor is unbelievable. I hope he never tries this again.*” Mrs. Cole needed help and she knew it yet she didn’t want to allow anyone get too close. Pastor George was not the first person to try. Mrs. Dedeke, her Sunday school teacher had tried on many occasions but she equally shut her out and withdrew from her. Emeka was the only one that had successfully gotten close and that was largely because of the past they shared.

As she approached her car, a car drove into the compound and parked next to hers. Mrs. Cole watched as the person driving alighted. It was Mrs. Dedeke

“Mummy Seyi, good afternoon. So good to see you.” She walked towards Mrs. Cole and hugged her.

“Good to see you too, Mrs Dedeke. How have you been?” Mrs. Cole was the reason they had not been in touch.

“I’ve been good. I’m so glad I saw you. In fact, God ordered your steps. I was praying yesterday and I had a burden for you. As I

prayed, I received a word for you from God.” She told her.

“Oh really?” Mrs. Cole wasn't too interested in whatever the word was but she didn't have a choice but to listen.

“It was a warning, mummy Seyi.” The smile on Mrs Dedeke's face disappeared. She looked concerned all of a sudden. “The Spirit of God asked me to tell you to be careful, mummy Seyi. It was like you were heading down a path and at the end there was a ditch but you weren't looking.” She sighed. “I got scared and immediately intensified my prayer when I saw that revelation. Is everything okay?”

“Everything is fine, in fact the revelation is as surprising to me as it is to you. Thank you, I will pray about it and be more careful.” She told her and hoped there wouldn't be more questions from Mrs Dedeke.

“We could pray together, whenever you are free.” Mrs. Dedeke offered.

“Alright, thank you very much.” She looked at her watch, “I have to get going, need to pick the children up from school.” She opened the door to her car.

“No problem,” I will see you later then. My regards to your husband.” Mrs. Dedeke stepped aside and waved as Mrs. Cole drove off. She was around for Bible study but decided to come earlier to see the pastor. There were a few things she wanted to

talk to him about and now that she had just seen Mrs. Cole, she decided to add her to the list.

She went to the pastor's office and greeted him warmly before sitting down.

“How are you Mrs Dedeke? I was just preparing for Bible study. Hope all is well?”

“I'm fine pastor, I tried calling you earlier to tell you I'll like to see you before service but your number wasn't going through.” She explained to him.,

“Oh really? I hope there is no problem?”

“Not really, actually I just saw Mrs. Cole and shared with her the revelation I had about her yesterday. I am really burdened for her.” Mrs. Dedeke couldn't hide her worry.

“Hmmm, I understand. I'm equally burdened too.” He sighed. “You know what we are going to do?” He paused.

“Okay?” Mrs Dedeke moved to the edge of the chair.

“I will inform the assistant pastor. Three of us can meet briefly after church to pray for her. Is that okay?” He asked.

“That is great. Thank you very much sir.” She clapped her hands together.

“We thank God.” He smiled.

Mrs. Dedeke discussed a few other issues with him and after about 15 minutes, left his office.

Mrs. Cole went to pick Bolu and Bayo and when they got home, everyone had lunch.

While at the dining table, Seyi remembered she had wanted to suggest giving their dad a spare key. “Mummy, something occurred to me yesterday.” She started.

“Okay? What is it?” Mrs. Cole took a sip of water.

“Why don't we give daddy a copy of the key to the house so we don't have to wait for him to get back every night after all, he has a key to the gate.”

“That's true, mummy.” Bayo couldn't agree more.

“Well, that is not a bad idea. I'll do that tomorrow, before going to work. Please remind me. Okay?”

“Sure, I won't forget.” Seyi smiled.

“Sister Seyi, do you know No Longer a Slave?” Bayo asked with excitement.

“Is that a movie or something?” Seyi was clueless.

“No *jo*, it's a song by Jonathan David and Melissa Helser.” He told her

“No, I don't know it.” Seyi took a spoon of rice.

“I got some really cool gospel songs from Siju today in school. I have been listening to them since. I didn't know what I had been missing.” Bayo couldn't contain his joy.

Mrs. Cole studied Bayo and knew there was something different about him. She remembered his dream but immediately brushed it off.

“I have a few too, but I don't really listen to them. They *kinda* dull my spirit.” Seyi didn't seem interested.

“Maybe it has something to do with the state of spirit man”

“Yeah right Mr know it all,” she rolled her eyes.

“Just saying...” Bayo wished everyone could share in the joy he was experiencing. “Gospel songs are spirit, soul and body lifting. Trust me.” he tried to convince his sister.

“Bro Bayo, I want.” Bolu spoke up.

Bayo laughed. “You don't even have a phone. Anyway, you can come to my room and listen to them on my phone later.”

Seyi thought of asking Bayo about Goke but remembered her mum was there. She didn't want questions about who Goke was. She decided to ask him later.

They finished having lunch and all retired to their rooms.

Seyi went to Bayo's room and Bolu followed her.

Bayo was playing, “You are Able” by Ada Ehi when they came in. He was folding his clothes which had littered his room.

“What's going on? Are you expecting someone?” Seyi could not wrap her head around what was going on. She was

noticing some changes in her brother.

“Nope, nobody.” He picked up a black T-shirt and smelt it. “Hmmm that stinks.” He threw it to a corner where he was gathering dirty clothes.

Seyi and Bolu watched with amazement.

“I like this song, bro Bayo. It's not dulling my own spirit o” Bolu said and looked away from her sister.

“Who asked you?” Seyi looked at her and hissed.

“Will you two ever stop doing cat and dog?” Bayo laughed. “Sit down *na*” he pointed to his bed.

Seyi and Bolu sat down.

“Anyway, I came to get gist.” She balanced on the bed, reclining with his pillow behind her. “Did Siju say anything about her sister and Goke?”

“What's with you and this Goke guy?” Bayo was arranging his books on his table.

“Nothing.” Seyi was quick to answer. “You know I told you he asked my friend out?” She reminded him.

“Is that all?” Bayo winked at her.

“What do you mean?” She began to wonder if he knew the truth.

“Just kidding” he smiled. “She didn't really say much. She talked to her sister who said she had been suspecting him. Her

sister apparently was already tired of the whole relationship and had been contemplating a break up.” Bayo told her.

Seyi sat up from her reclined position. “She should break up with that idiot. She deserves someone better.” She bit her thumb. “How I wished I could talk to that girl.”

“You seem so passionate.” Bayo pointed out. “Anyway, Siju has been praying about it. She says God is touching her sister's heart.”

Seyi looked at Bayo, speechless. “What?!” She couldn't fathom what was going on.

“As in her sister is also beginning to see that Goke is not good for her, thanks to Siju's prayers.” Bayo rephrased his sentence.

“I understood you the first time. What I don't understand is the way you are talking as if God will come down and do the magic.”

“Well, He won't come down physically but of course, when you tell Him things, He gets them done.” Bayo explained.

“Since when? I know that's what we are taught in Sunday school and that's what the pastor says in church but take a good look at our home, what has all the prayers done?”

Bayo left what he was doing and gave his sister his full attention. “Don't say that Seyi. Things may not be good now that

doesn't mean it will always remain that way. I have faith and I know things will get better.”

“I don't know about you but I've lost hope in things getting any better in this house. I just want to do and get out of this place.” Seyi said pointedly.

Bayo sighed, “It is well.”

“Yeah, that's what they all say.” She threw her hands in the air and walked out of the room.

“Bro Bayo, I believe things will get better. Don't worry, you hear?” Bolu was always so innocent at heart. She was very optimistic, hardly ever discouraged. She was just seven but had the heart of a grown up.

Bayo smiled. He remembered what happened on Sunday and knew he owed her an apology. “Bolu,” he started. He sat beside her on the bed. He knew she didn't hold it against him but she probably had many questions and perhaps concerns too.

“You know what happened the other day?” He juggled her memory a bit even though he knew she had not forgotten.

Bolu nodded her head and looked away.

Bayo placed one hand on her shoulder. “I'm really sorry you had to see that, I'm sorry I shouted at you and most of all I've told God I'm sorry for dishonoring my body.”

Bolu looked up at him. She seemed a bit confused.

“You may not understand now but masturbation, that is touching your private part to derive pleasure and pornography, those bad bad videos Uncle Gboyega used to watch are sinful acts.” He searched her eyes to see if she understood.

She gave a nod.

“Uncle Gboyega introduced me to it the last time he came and I struggled with it up until yesterday when I prayed to God to help me and I believe I am totally delivered.”

Bolu's eyes widened in amazement. “I also want that deliverance.” She said.

“What do you mean?” Bayo asked, his brows furrowed revealing his confusion.

“Uncle Gboyega, he tried to get me naked but he didn't succeed. Ever since he left, I used to be afraid that something bad will happen to me. Even sometimes, when I sleep, I have bad dreams. Because of Uncle Gboyega, I'm always afraid of men coming close to me.” She told him what she had never mentioned to anyone before. A constant torment she had lived with for weeks.

“Do you believe that if I pray for you, you will stop being afraid?” Bayo asked her.

She nodded.

“Give me your hands.” Bayo stretched his hands out.

Bolu's little fingers fitted perfectly into the centre of her

brother's palms.

“Dear Lord, thank You for Your daughter, Bolu Cole. We ask today, that you deliver her from the torment of fear. From today, she will no longer be afraid or have bad dreams in Jesus name.”

“Amen.” Bolu said and quickly added, “Jesus, please forgive Uncle Gboyega for what he did to us. Deliver him too in Jesus name.”

“Amen.” Bayo said.

A smile appeared on her face. “Thank you.”

Bayo smiled. “You are welcome. Do you have homework?”

“Yes.” Bolu stood up from the bed.

“Now will be the best time to do it, don't you think?”

“Sure.” Bolu walked towards the door and waved at Bayo just before she left.

Bayo smiled and waved back. He finished tidying up his room, then did his assignments. After he was done, he went to the sitting room to watch TV. He heard a knock on the door.

“Who is it?” It was most likely his father because he had the key to the gate but he had to be sure before opening the door.

“It's me.” Bayo guessed right. His father was back. Today was one of the few days Mr Cole came back early.

“Welcome sir,” Bayo greeted him and collected his laptop

bag.

“How are you?” He sounded tired.

“Fine sir.”

“What of your mother?” He walked inside.

“She is in the room.” Bayo locked the door and followed his dad behind.

Mr. Cole sat down in the sitting room and took off his shoe. “What did you have for lunch?”

“Rice.” Bayo placed the laptop bag on the floor beside his father's feet.

“Is there any left?” Mr. Cole not only did not go to the bar, he hadn't eaten since breakfast. That was unlike him.

“Errr, let me check sir.” Bayo rushed to the kitchen and was back in no time. “There is little rice in the pot sir.”

“Okay please serve me. I just need to take something so I can take my drugs.” He told Bayo.

“Alright sir.” Bayo went to the kitchen and dished the remaining rice into a plate, served stew on it and a piece of meat. He placed it in the microwave for 2 minutes and then served it with a glass of water.

“Thank you.” Mr. Cole collected the tray containing the plate of food and glass of water from Bayo.

“Daddy, are you okay?” Bayo sat on the couch next to his

father's

“Malaria. I'll be fine.” He struggled with the food because his appetite was gone.

Bayo could not remember the last time he sat down with his father. He usually would have left the sitting room after he gave him his food but somehow, he felt bold to stay back. Deep down he wished he had a closer relationship with his father where they could talk about anything and everything but most importantly, he wished his father was a believer in Jesus the way he was. He prayed a short prayer in his heart for him. *“Dear Lord, please visit my dad and change him in Jesus name, Amen.”*

“Sorry sir.” Do you need anything else?

“No, I'm okay. I'll just go in and rest once I'm done.”

“Okay sir.”

He ate his food half way and took his drug then went in to sleep. Every other person retired for the night after a light diner of noodles and boiled egg.

The next morning, as they were about stepping out of the house, Seyi reminded her mum about the spare key.

“Oh thank you, I almost forgot.” She went back into the room. Mr. Cole was having his bath. She opened the door of the bathroom.

“Who is it?” He asked, behind the shower curtain.

“It's me. I'll drop a copy of the key to the house for you on the dressing table.” She said and closed the door.

“Okay, thank you.”

She did and left.

Mrs. Dedeke was dressed in her nursing uniform. She worked as a public health nurse at PEPFAR (President's Emergency Plan for AIDS Relief), an initiative established to address the burden of HIV/AIDS in Africa. In the branch she worked in, HIV positive patients came regularly for their doctor's appointment and to collect their antiretroviral drugs.

She was seated at the vitals stand, where patients had their blood pressure and temperature checked before they went in to see a doctor.

There were lots of patients both young and old seated, waiting for their turn. She had a pile of case notes on her desk. Her and her colleague who sat beside her called out the names of the patients one after the other as they took turns to have their vital signs checked. A chair for the patient was to her left and another one was by her colleague's right.

“Mr Francis Abayomi” was the next name she called.

The elderly man stood up and approached.

“Are you Mr Francis Abayomi?” She asked politely.

“That's me.” He smiled.

“Please have your seat.” She pointed at the chair and unwrapped the blood pressure cuff. “How are you today sir?” she asked him with a smile.

“I'm fine thank you.” He placed his hand on the table and his blood pressure measurement was taken. An automated Thermometer was used to measure his temperature. After which Mrs Dedeke wrote down the values in his case note. “You'll soon be called in to see a doctor. You can sit there sir.” She pointed at a set of empty chairs.

The elderly man stood up and went in the direction she pointed.

She picked the next case note and called out the name, “Emeka Nwafor”

Emeka stood up. He was on the phone. “Hello Funke, please let me call you back.” He ended the call and walked towards the vitals stand.

Chapter 09

Mr Cole was seated in his office at the University. His laptop was opened before him. He looked at a piece of paper sitting on his table and said to himself, “There is no way these students will not carry over my course,” he studied their names properly, “Especially this Bolaji Adegoke, he is the most unserious human being I have ever met.”

Goke should have graduated the previous year but had to repeat a year because he was suspended from school for a month after he and some of his friends were caught with hard drugs. Unfortunately for him, the period he was on suspension coincided with the first semester exams. He was unable to write those papers and that automatically meant an extra year because the courses were taken only in the first semester and were compulsory. Now, here he was repeating these courses and he still didn't meet the 75% attendance cut off for one of them.

Mr. Cole made a mental note to call him to his office after

his lecture. That was if he was going to attend it in the first place.

As he stood in front of the hall, addressing the students, he scanned through them with his eyes, searching for Goke. He was nowhere to be found. Mr. Cole went on with the lecture and about 30 minutes into the one-hour class, Goke sauntered in.

“Where do you think you are going?” Mr Cole asked him. There was perfect silence. All eyes were on Goke.

“I had a flat tire.” Goke didn't look remorseful one bit. Nothing about him showed he was a student coming to learn. He had neither a book nor pen. He wasn't wearing a tie, which was compulsory for all male students and lecturers.

Mr. Cole had heard him give many excuses in the past but this was by far the lamest. He couldn't take it. “Your tire was flat?” He repeated the statement and was even more irritated by the way it sounded in his ears. “Couldn't you take a cab? I mean, I don't care if you chose to stay off campus for reasons best known to you but what I want to know is if there are no taxis anymore.”

“I forgot my wallet at home.” Goke gave another lame excuse.

“You what?!” Mr Cole had had enough. “Leave my class right now.” He ordered him and pointed at the door.

Without hesitation or a word of plea, Goke who was still standing leisurely strolled towards the door.

“And for your information, you did not make 75% attendance. I don't care if you want to go and beg the VC, you are not sitting for the exams next week.” Mr. Cole was angry. Ordinarily, he shouldn't have said all that in front of the other students but he was too upset to care.

“Whatever.” Goke threw his hand in the air and walked out on Mr Cole while he was still speaking.

“Useless boy.” He hissed and continued his lecture.

Mr. Cole returned to his office. As he was about to open the door, he saw a writing on the door with a red marker. “NO TRY AM” (DON'T TRY IT).

He hissed and entered his office. “That fool thinks he can threaten me. *Me sef get craze* (I am also crazy).” He dropped his laptop bag on his table. There was a knock on the door. “Who is it?” Mr. Cole wasn't expecting anyone. He was about getting ready to retire from the day's work.

“Funmi.” A female voice answered.

“Come in.” Mr Cole took his seat.

She opened the door and entered his office. She was one of his students. She usually appeared classy with the wealth of her parents written all over her but today she looked different. She barely applied makeup, she wore her hair in scruffy cornrows. Usually, it would have been concealed by her million braids wig.

She had been crying, her eyes were red and swollen, no makeup could conceal that even if she tried.

“Ha! I’m dead.” She placed her hands on her head.

“What is it? Please shut the door.” Mr. Cole wondered at the reason for the drama. He didn’t seem to care much.

She turned around and closed the door. “Mr. Cole please cooperate with them.” She clapped her hands together pleading, almost going on her knees.

“What are you talking about? Cooperate with who? Please leave my office if you don’t have anything to say.” He pointed at the door.

She brought out her phone from her bag. “I got a message from an anonymous person. The person sent me this picture.” She handed the phone to Mr. Cole.

He collected the phone and looked at the picture. “What?!” He immediately started feeling hot. He loosened his tie. “What does the person want?” He asked, finding it hard to swallow. His throat instantly dried up.

“I don’t know sir. The only message was that you’ll understand when you see it. Please sir, my parents are top pastors in the country, if this picture gets out, I’m doomed. They will disown me. Whatever this person wants, please do it sir. I’m begging you.” She went on her knees.

“I will understand when I see it?” Mr Cole repeated the message trying to figure out what it meant. He looked at the picture again. He could not imagine who could have taken a picture of Funmi and him stark naked in the hotel room where they had sex.

It was just once it happened and it was the condition he gave her for her to pass his course. She had begged and offered money instead but he told her if she wanted to pass, she had only one choice- to sleep with him.

He didn't mention it to anyone not even any of his buddies that drank with him at the bar. She wasn't the first student, he'd slept with and nothing like this had ever happened. He always went scot free.

Now here he was looking at the picture, he could only imagine how horrible things would get if it leaked out. First, he'll lose his job and any chance of him getting a job as a lecturer in any other university. Meaning his career would be ruined. Next the shame he'd face before his family. He couldn't even begin to imagine the gravity of what was at stake.

“Who could have done this? What does the person want?” He asked himself. “Take your phone. Stop crying, I will handle this.” He handed the phone over to the young lady and tried to sound confident. “Don't worry; there is no cause for alarm.”

“Thank you sir.” She wiped her face and left.

He had just told her there was no cause for alarm but the alarm in his mind had just gone off. It rang so loudly that all he could see was his impending doom. He buried his head in his hand. “*What am I going to do?*” He thought. His phone beeped, an SMS entered.

He picked his phone and checked the message:

“I pass your course and this picture doesn't get out. I don't and you face the consequences!”

Mr. Cole's pulse quickened. His hand trembled. “So Goke is the person behind this.” He dropped his phone, brought out his laptop from its bag and placed it on the table.

With sweat trickling down his face, despite the air conditioner on 18 degrees, he waited for the system to boot. He opened a document on his desktop “ARC408 Attendance”. He saw Goke's name, with his index finger still shaking, he traced the row which revealed his weekly class attendance and a total attendance score of 30%. Without wasting time, Mr Cole doctored the figures and Goke's total score became 80%. He saved it and shut down the laptop before returning it into his bag.

He picked his phone, read the message again and decided to reply:

“Please don't let it get out, you will pass my paper. You

have my word”

He sat back in his chair, loosened his tie further and sighed. He bit his thumb. “This guy must not do this to me. I’ll be doomed.”

Mrs. Cole had just left work and was on her way to pick Bayo and Bolu from school when her phone rang. She was held up in traffic so she comfortably dipped her hand into her bag to search for it. She brought it out and checked the caller's ID. It was Emeka. She smiled and picked the call.

“Hello dear.” She had been expecting his call since morning.

“Hi Funke, how are you?” He sounded tired.

“I’m good. How are you too? You sound tired.”

“Yeah I am pretty exhausted. I just got home, the traffic was terrible.” He told her.

“Yes it is. I’m currently stuck too. I hope it clears soon. How was your day? Where did you go?” She asked him. He hardly went out. Most of his work was done from home.

“My day had been okay. I’m sorry I couldn’t talk much the other time.” He said, avoiding the second question.

“Where did you go? It always feels like you hardly go out.” Mrs. Cole wondered where the curiosity came from. She just

wanted to know.

He chuckled, “Hardly doesn't mean never *na*.” He still avoided the question.

“Well, that's true. Anyway, it's good you are home. Eat something and rest, you hear?” She allowed the matter rest.

“Always caring. I will dear.” He gave a weak chuckle.

There was silence between then.

Emeka broke it. “So, when next will I be seeing your beautiful face, Funke?”

Mrs. Cole had been looking forward to seeing Emeka since that evening when he rescued her from the emotional turmoil she was going through. She however didn't have the boldness to open up to him. She secretly prayed he'll ask to see her again and he just did. “Errr.. I don't know,” she bit her lower lip, “When are you free?”

“Baby for you, you know I'll always be free.” He was already used to referring to her as 'baby'. He no longer seemed to care about any other thing but her.

“What of your family? Your wife and kids?” Mrs Cole wanted to understand what place they occupied in his life now. She didn't want to displace them after all, she had hers and wouldn't want anyone to stand between her and her children, not even Emeka.

“They are fine. You have nothing to worry about.” He told her confidently.

“Won't they begin to ask after your whereabouts?” She was letting out all her concerns. The traffic was gradually clearing.

“Trust me Funke, you have nothing to worry about. I give them all they want and if I tell my wife that I have to step out briefly, do you think she questions me?”

Mrs. Cole didn't answer. She figured it was an obvious 'no'. “In that case, we could see this evening after I drop my children at home. Is that okay?” She made a turn to the left and was completely out of the traffic.

“Alright, cool. Just call and let me know when to start coming. Where are we meeting?” He asked.

“I think that street was perfect. What do you think?” She asked.

“I think so too. That's fine, see you later then.”

“Bye.” She ended the call and returned the phone to her bag. She hoped that today won't be like the previous day when her husband returned relatively early compared to previous times. It was good he had his copy of the house key but she still wasn't ready to answer questions of where she went to or was coming from.

She went to pick Bolu and Bayo and headed straight home.

“Mummy” Bayo called his mum. He had allowed his sister take the front seat while he sat directly behind his mum. He observed her incessant smiles through the rear-view mirror.

“Yes honey.” She made eye contact with him through the mirror. She only called her children that either when she was so pleased with them or when she was in the best of moods.

“You seem happy, what's going on?” He asked with a smile.

“Is it a crime to be happy?” She smiled.

“No o, I'm happy you are happy.” He told her still smiling.

“And me too.” Bolu said. She was more happy that her brother had allowed her to seat in front than she was that her mum was happy.

Her mum gave her a brief sideways glance. “Thanks dear.”

Mrs Cole got home but didn't drive into the compound. “Children, I have to briefly get somewhere. Go in and meet your sister. I'll be back soon. Okay?” She turned to Bayo and Bolu.

“Where mummy?” Bolu was always inquisitive.

“No too far from here, dear.” She rubbed her daughter's cheek.

“Okay mummy.” Bolu and Bayo said simultaneously, came down from the car and went to knock on the gate.

Mrs. Cole waited for Seyi to open the gate. When she did,

she peeped and saw the car outside.

“Why is mummy not coming inside?” She asked Bayo.

“I don't know,” he shrugged, “she said she has a place she quickly wants to get to.”

Seyi came out of the compound and walked towards the driver's side of the car. “Mummy good afternoon,” she greeted her mum.

“How are you Seyi?”

“I'm fine ma. Bayo said you want to quickly get somewhere” She needed to clarify.

“Yes I won't be long.” Mrs Cole didn't want to divulge too much information.

“Okay ma, I prepared beans and sweet potato.” She told her mum.

“That's good, serve your siblings. I'll have mine when I return.” She started the car.

“Alright ma. Don't be long.” Seyi went into the compound.

Mrs. Cole waited for her to leave then turned off the car. She reached for her bag to call Emeka. She saw a missed call from Mrs Dedeke.

“This woman should leave me alone.” She snapped. “What is it *sef*? Is it by force?” She hissed and dialed Emeka's number.

He picked almost immediately.

“Baby,” His smile was audible.

“Hi dear. Can we meet there now? I just dropped my children at home.” She had quickly forgotten what made her upset a few seconds ago. Emeka made her happy and that was all that mattered to her. She wasn't going to allow anything take that away from her, not even a missed call from the woman that has in recent times appeared to Mrs. Cole as overbearing.

“Okay dear, I'll be there soon.”

“Alright dear.” She ended the call and started the car. She didn't want to spend another minute there just in case her husband or anyone showed up.

She got to the street they planned to meet and parked her car. She reached into her bag and brought out her Classic brown powder and lipstick. She needed to touch up her looks for Emeka. After she was done, she rested back in her seat and waited for him. She picked her phone out of her bag and turned it off; she didn't want any Mrs Dedeke or pastor calling her. The war with her conscience was intense enough. She needed some peace but with the path she was treading; there was no way she was going to have that. She placed the phone back in her bag and looked at her side mirror every time she heard the sound of a car coming and after about fifteen minutes of waiting, there he was in his black SUV. Her excitement heightened as he parked his car and approached.

He wore a navy-blue T-shirt and jean short. He opened the passenger's door of her car and sat beside her. "Sweetie pie, how are you doing?" He smiled.

His smile was perfect. Mrs. Cole took in his smell which always made her feel so comfortable and relaxed. "I'm fine." She smiled, a little bit shy. She avoided prolonged eye contacts.

Emeka smiled.

"Why are you smiling?" She asked with a smile.

"I have every reason to smile, my dear. Seeing you and being with you after these many years. You are the reason I'm smiling." He moved closer to her.

She knit her brows. And looked down.

"Did I say something wrong?" He appeared confused.

"No it's not that. I have a question." She looked worried.

"Okay...What is it?" He showed so much concern.

"Do you love her?" She looked at him, searching his eyes for answers.

Emeka sighed. He didn't appear thrown off balance by the question instead he seemed so confident and prepared for it. "Funke," he held her hand and looked into her eyes. "After you left me those eighteen years ago, I was shattered. My life became a mess. I went into drinking, something I had never done before. One day, in the bar when I was very drunk, a lady walked up to me

and began to engage me in a conversation. I had no idea what she said that night but what I knew was when I woke up the next morning, I was in her house. We apparently had sex that night. I told myself, such was never going to happen again. However, a month later, she sent me a message that she was pregnant. Long story cut short, we had to get married and I've been stuck with her since then. So to answer your question, Funke I have never ever loved any other woman but you and I still love you.”

Mrs. Cole could feel her head spinning. She didn't see this coming. Her heart began to race. She felt so sorry for Emeka and began to blame herself. “I'm so sorry Emeka; I put you through all this.”

“No, no please, you don't have to be. I have you now and that is what matters most. Let's not cry over spilled milk instead let us be thankful for where we are now.” He smiled and placed his hands on her cheeks.

Mrs. Cole felt some relief but the uneasiness she had been battling with ever since Emeka walked back into her life persisted. Deep within her, she knew what she was doing with Emeka wasn't right but she couldn't care any less. She felt she had hit rock bottom and things could not get any worse than they were.

Emeka moved closer “I love you Funke.” His warm breath brushed her face.

Mrs. Cole could no longer speak. No words were going to come out even if she tried.

He kissed her lower lip.

She closed her eyes and struggled with the antagonizing thoughts in her head. She couldn't resist him anymore. He placed his hand round her. She kissed him back and chose to damn the consequences of what she was doing. She had missed being loved and kissed the way Emeka did.

“You know what?” Emeka moved back just a little bit and looked into her eyes.

“What?” She searched his eyes.

“I did a little search and found a hotel just a few blocks away. What do you say we go there and you know...?” He smiled.

Mrs. Cole sat back in her seat. “A *hotel*?” She knew what that meant. Although Emeka and her never had sex when they courted, she was a married woman now. She tried to remind herself that fact but the more she did, the more she remembered the hurt that being married had caused her. Her body wanted to be with Emeka but her spirit resisted so hard.

“I'm sorry I even brought that up. What was I thinking?” He ran his hand over his head. “I'm really sorry, Funke. I'm not usually like this. I promise. It's just that when I'm with you I...”

Mrs. Cole cut in. “Let's go.”

“What? Are you sure?” Emeka asked, surprised but excited.

She looked into his eyes. “You want to go or not?”

“I...I do.” He stammered. Excitement written all over his face. He looked like a little boy who had just been given a gift he had earnestly craved. “It's just down the road.” He pointed.

Mrs. Cole started the car and headed to the place. She was no longer in control of herself anymore.

“Here it is.” Emeka pointed out.

They came down and went inside. The hotel wasn't all that nice but neither of them minded. All they needed was a place to be together alone.

Emeka made enquiries about the prices of the rooms and paid for the cheapest one. He collected the key from the receptionist and they headed to the first floor.

As they walked through the corridor, Mrs Cole wondered what she was doing. Flashes of her children flooded her mind. She remembered the Sunday school teaching on Sunday about the believer's response to temptation and that the Bible says there is no temptation that comes our way that is beyond us and something about a way out. She knew this was nothing short of a temptation but she didn't know if she wanted out or not.

Emeka opened the door and looked at her. He noticed she

had something on her mind. “Are you alright?” He asked her as he put his hand around her waist.

“I’m fine.” She brushed the thoughts off and smiled at him as they both entered the room. She dropped her bag on the floor and faced Emeka who was standing a few inches away from her by the bed.

He sat on the bed and tapped the bed beside him. “Come and sit my love.” He smiled at her.

Mrs. Cole returned his smile and sat right next to him.

He moved closer and began to kiss her and unbutton her shirt.

She knew something was wrong. Everything was wrong. Her peace was totally gone and she knew it. She didn't resist him but she knew the more he progressed, the more troubled she became. With the last strength she had left in her she quietly prayed. “Lord, if You can, please get me out of here.”

Immediately she said that prayer, her phone rang. It had being turned off, she was sure of that. She initially ignored it and allowed Emeka take off her shirt but then it rang again.

“Sorry Emeka, I need to see who is calling me.” She told him.

He didn't answer her. “Ignore it”. He was so engrossed.

“Please Emeka, it's been ringing. It might be urgent.” She

pushed him away.

“Now of all times for Christ's sake. Who is that idiot?” He raised his voice and punched the pillow.

Mrs. Cole looked at him in a funny way wondering why he was so angry. She reached for her phone and saw it was Seyi that had been calling her. She picked it immediately.

“Hello.”

“Mummy.” The female voice sounded apprehensive.

“Seyi what's wrong?” She asked.

“It's me mummy, Sis Seyi is not breathing.” Bolu's voice faded away and she started crying.

“What?! Seyi is what? What happened? I'll be there right away.” She hung up and jumped up. Her heart was beating at its fastest. She couldn't feel her legs again but she knew collapsing was not an option. She snatched her shirt from the bed, picked her bag and headed for the door.

“What happened?” Emeka asked looking so confused.

“I have to go, something happened to my daughter.” She wore her shirt and dashed out of the room. Straight to her car and she drove off.

“Oh my God, Please Seyi must not die.” She prayed with hot tears flowing down her cheeks. “What entered into me. Why did I leave my children? If I was with them nothing would have

happened to Seyi.” She began to blame herself as she sped home.

Immediately she got to the gate of the house, she came down from the car and with her copy of the gate key opened it and rushed in. She left the car outside with her bag inside it. Nothing mattered to her right now than the life of her daughter.

“Where is she?” Mrs. Cole shouted as she barged into the house.

“Who mummy?” Bayo asked, confused.

“Where is Seyi?”

“She is in her room” Bayo stood up from the couch he was sitting on watching TV and followed his mummy inside. “Mummy what happened?” He asked.

Mrs. Cole ignored him and rushed straight to Seyi's room. She flung the door open and she saw Seyi helping Bolu weave her hair.

“Mummy, are you okay? You seem disturbed.” Seyi asked.

Bolu and Seyi looked at her in amazement. Bayo standing behind her too wondered what was going on.

“Bolu didn't you just call me to tell me Seyi wasn't...” She didn't complete her sentence. The words were too heavy in her mouth. She couldn't bear to imagine any of her children dying.

“Mummy I did not call you.” Bolu told her mum, still wondering what exactly was going on.

“My phone is charging in Bayo's room mummy. Nobody called you. I can show you the call log if you want.” Seyi tried to convince her mum.

Mrs. Cole could still not comprehend what just happened. She was sure her phone rang and she heard Bolu's voice. “Where is my phone?” She asked not necessarily expecting answer from her children who didn't even know she parked the car outside. She turned around and rushed out of the house. She needed her phone. She knew she wasn't out of her mind. Her phone was going to prove them wrong.

Seyi, Bayo and Bolu followed her as she left the house and out of the compound.

Mrs. Cole opened the door of the car and reached for her bag. She brought out her phone to check her last call.

The phone was off.

“No way, this can't be.” She shook her head. “This phone rang and I picked it.” She said trying to convince herself she wasn't losing her mind.

She turned it on and checked her last call. It was the call she made to Emeka.

She couldn't believe her eyes. Before her legs would give way again, she sat down on the driver's seat too dazed to lift her legs into the car. She rested her body on the steering and tears

flowed uncontrollably.

“Could the call have been God's answer to my prayer?” Her mind flashed back to some minutes ago when she asked God for help. *“Does God still care about my messed up life?”* She wondered.

Seyi, Bayo and Bolu gathered around her. Seyi and Bolu stood by the open door, Bayo opened the passenger's door and crawled next to her. They all hugged her. “Mummy sorry.” None of them knew what was going on but they knew their mum was going through a lot. As they hugged her, she cried the more.

Then Bayo spoke softly into her right ear “Jesus asked me to tell you that He loves you and has forgiven you and He can fix this mess, mummy.”

She lifted up her head from the steering where she had buried it, looked at him with tears flowing down her cheeks. “What did you just say?” She opened her eyes wide causing the skin over her forehead to wrinkle.

Bayo moved back a little. He couldn't interpret the look on his mother's face. Was she angry and about to slap him or was she shocked and need to clarify what she had just heard? He wasn't so sure but he suddenly felt the boldness to speak. He repeated himself. “Jesus asked me to tell you that He loves you and has forgiven you and He can fix this mess”

“Jesus spoke to you?” She pointed at him.

“Yes mummy. It was an amazing experience. I was in my room this evening after lunch. I picked my Bible to read and the strangest thing happened.” His eyes were wide with excitement. “You remember the man I told you I saw in my dream?” He reminded his mum but didn’t wait for her response. “He entered my room, mummy. He told me he was Jesus and He had a message for my mummy. He said I should tell you He loves you and has forgiven you and He can fix this mess.”

Mrs. Cole looked at him in amazement. “Me?” She pointed to herself.

“Yes, you mummy.” A smile broke out on Bayo’s face.

Mrs. Cole lifted her head up and fought tears from falling. “Jesus loves a mess like me. How possible is that?” She shook her head. “Does he know how much of a mess I am?” She could not hold back the tears any more.

“Mummy stop crying” Bolu and Seyi told her.

Bolu took the end of her flared skirt and used it to clean her mother’s face. “Jesus loves all of us.” She told her.

“Thank you.” her mum appreciated her for the kind gesture. “Please open the gate for me.” She told Bayo.

He did and Mrs. Cole drove into the compound. She picked her bag and went into the house. Without saying anything, she went straight to her room, dropped her bag on the bed and fell

on her knees.

“Jesus, if what Bayo said you said is true, then I want you to know that I acknowledge the fact that I need you. My life is messed up. My home is on fire. Nothing is working. My husband drinks and womanizes. Everything is wrong with this family but I need you. We need you Jesus.” She cried some more as she poured out her heart. “Please Lord, I am so, so sorry for the rubbish I did with Emeka. I know it was wrong and I was heading down the wrong path yet I just didn't know how to stop. Until you miraculously intervened. I'm truly sorry.”

She remembered what Bayo said, “Jesus loves you and has forgiven you and can fix this mess”. She cried more, “You even forgave me before I asked for your forgiveness. What kind of love is this?” She felt she needed to tell God she was ready to turn a new leave. “Dear Lord, I believe I have been so wrong. From today, I want to live my life for you. I want to please you and make you proud.” She went on praying for the next 20 minutes. She prayed for her husband and children, she asked God for wisdom to cut off from Emeka, she asked for God's help in all her endeavors.

When she was done, she felt so light. All the burdens on her mind that had weighed her down had been lifted. She had such joy and peace, like she had never experienced, envelope her. She knew something new had happened.

Seyi had been noticing some changes in her brother. He was now cheerful and always happy. He didn't lock himself in his room like before. His room was now neat and most surprising was how he always spoke about God. Hearing him talk about how Jesus appeared to him and spoke to him was the last straw that broke the camel's back. She was convinced something had happened to her brother and whatever it was, she wanted it.

She got back to her room after her mother's return and sat on her bed, facing the window. Her mind went back to when she was much younger and believed so much in God. Then, she'll wake up and say a prayer to God before getting out of bed. She was always proud to talk about God wherever she went. She'd listen attentively to her Sunday school teacher as she was taught the Word of God. All these began to change when she started witnessing her father beat her mum. Then, she'd pray to God to make him stop but he never did.

She was convinced that He didn't care for her or her family. She drew back from Him. Things got worse in her home and she was sure God not only didn't care for her family but also didn't want to have anything to do with her. However, today when she heard Bayo speak about God's love, something was awakened in her.

Hope.

Hope that things weren't always going to remain the way they were. Hope that there was light at the end of the tunnel and most importantly hope that Jesus loved her.

She closed her eyes to fight back the tears. Her heart had become hardened over the years and nothing broke her. She couldn't believe she was about to cry. She lifted her head to resist the tears but the more she did, the more she knew she had to let go. Not just the tears but the grudge she had held against God all these years for allowing her family go through such hard and difficult times.

“God why?” She cried out. “Why did you allow all these to happen to us? Where have you been all the times dad beat mum and made all of us live in fear?” The tears flowed uncontrollably. She fell on the bed, buried her face into her pillow and screamed.

“No God, you can't tell me you love me or this family?” She was ready to argue with God if He gave her the chance. She hugged her pillow and cried so hard. As she did, she felt an awesome presence around her. She felt hands wrap around her and someone hug her but she saw no one. Her sobs gradually subsided.

“Where have you been?” She asked, convinced the presence she felt was the Holy Spirit.

“*I never left.*” The voice was audible and brought with it so much peace.

“What? You mean you have been there?”

“I was much more hurt, my daughter.”

Seyi had always wondered all her life why God allowed bad things to happen. She immediately remembered a scripture from the Bible: “When you pass through the waters, I will be with you and through the rivers, they will not overflow you: when you walk through the fire, you shall not be burned; neither shall the flame kindle upon you.” She sighed. She knew what it meant. The word is “when” not “if”. It wasn't God's desire for what happened to happen. But even though it did, He was right there with her.

“I want to heal you. Allow me to love you.” There was so much peace that accompanied those words.

Seyi cried, “Jesus, I believe you. I now believe that you never left me. Please heal me.” She went on her knees. “Help me to love again, restore my faith in You. Help me forgive my father.” As she prayed, she had an assurance that her prayers were being answered.

She released all the hurt she had locked up for years and in its place, she felt joy and peace. Her tears where no longer tears of hurt but of joy.

She remained on her knees for a few more minutes and when she knew the work was done, she got up and sat on the bed. She thanked God for healing her then she lay on the bed and slept off.+

Chapter 10

Mr. Cole went straight to the bar from work and remained there till late that night. He repeated the same practice for the next one week during which was the exams for the students offering his course. Goke was allowed to write the exams and he passed just as Mr. Cole had assured him. Mr. Cole however still felt uneasy. He couldn't fathom where he'd begin to gather the pieces of his life from if that picture leaked. As he sat in one of the booths with his friend, Kola, all he kept thinking about was how he got himself into that mess and how he could get himself out. He hoped more than anything that Goke would let the sleeping dogs lie since he had passed his course.

“Akin, what have you been thinking about these past few days? You always seem lost in thoughts” Kola asked him and took a sip of his drink.

The music was blasting at its loudest, guys and ladies were busy digging it on the dance floor but none of these caught Mr Cole's fancy. He was miles away, he didn't even realize Kola

was talking to him

“Akin!” Kola gave him a slight hit on his shoulder, raising his voice even louder than he did before.

Mr. Cole jolted back to reality. “Yes? What is it?” He had a frown on his face. He wasn't in the mood. If he had his way, he wouldn't have wanted any company.

“What is not it?” Kola sat up. “Can't you see how you are gradually becoming?”

“I have a lot on my mind, Kola.” Mr. Cole signaled to the waiter to get him another drink.

“That's pretty obvious. See, you better forget about your worries and enjoy yourself. That babe has been checking you out for the past 30 minutes, I bet you haven't even noticed.”

“*Abeg* (please) who the babe help? She should better go and check out her destiny.” Mr. Cole hissed.

Kola hadn't seen his friend like this before. Usually, a drink or two was always enough to calm whatever storm was raging in his life but this time around, he had had five bottles and was about to go for the sixth, yet nothing.

As Mr. Cole started with the sixth bottle, his phone rang. It was Funmi. His heart skipped a beat.

He got up and without saying a word to Kola and stepped out of the bar. He usually picked calls in the bar but he knew he

needed to hear Funmi clearly especially now that the sound of his racing heart beat almost deafened him.

“Hello Funmi, what is it?” He asked with apprehension audible in his voice.

Funmi sobbed endlessly. “I thought you said you had it under control, Mr. Cole?” She could hardly get herself together.

“What do you mean?” Mr. Cole felt strength leave his legs. He pressed the phone harder to his ears in order to hear Funmi properly.

“The picture, I thought you promised to handle it.”

“What happened, Funmi?” He wanted her to go straight to the point. He feared the worst had already happened.

“It’s all over the school and social media. So many people have been calling me that they saw a picture of me naked with a man.” She burst into tears.

Mr. Cole couldn’t believe his ears. He wished the ground could open up and swallow him at that moment.

“Hello.... Hello” Funmi’s voice faded away as Mr Cole slowly removed the phone from his ear and sat on the ground. He didn’t care who looked or was passing by. His image and reputation had been tarnished anyway.

He covered his face with his hands and clenched his teeth hard. “*How could that idiot have done this to me?*” He asked himself.

Kola came out of the bar to look for Mr. Cole, he was taking too long. He saw him seated on the ground and rushed towards him.

“Akin, what's going on?” He bent over and asked him.

Mr. Cole didn't answer.

“Akin... Akin” Kola tapped his shoulder.

“I'm doomed!” Mr. Cole looked at his friend. “Ha! My life *don* finish.” He bit his lower lip.

“Talk to me Akin, what happened?” Kola was so concerned.

“Please can you take me home?” Mr Cole asked.

“Alright, no *wahala* (problem).” Kola went inside, settled the bills, picked their bags and quickly returned to Mr Cole who had now stood up and was waiting by his car.

With the remote in his hand, Kola opened the door and Mr. Cole sat at the passenger's seat.

Kola entered the car and looked at his friend. “Are you sure you don't want to talk about it?”

“Kola, where would I even start from? Please just take me home.” His voice trembled and even though, it was dark, Kola could still see that his eyes were moist with tears.

He turned on the ignition and reversed out of the compound.

Neither of them said a word to each other as Kola drove him home.

Mr. Cole thanked him and alighted. He didn't wait for him to leave before he entered the compound and went straight into the house.

"Welcome sir" his children echoed. They were seated with their mum in the dining, having dinner.

"Welcome dear" Mrs. Cole said with a smile on her face. He had begun to notice some changes in his wife and kids but today's welcome was exceptional. The smiles were all broad, they seemed very happy; these things that hadn't happened in years.

Mr. Cole wondered the reason for the warm welcome from his family members. "*Do they already know? Are they being unusually nice in order to make me feel terrible?*" He went into his room without responding.

"Mummy, is daddy okay?" Bolu asked. It was one thing for her dad to be mean but it wasn't his usual nature to be snobbish.

"My dear, I don't know too. Let me go and check on him. You all should continue eating." She stood up and went into the room.

She opened the door leading to her room and to her surprise, she met her husband sitting on the floor, crying. She rushed to him and knelt beside him. "Akin, what is the problem?" She placed a hand on his shoulder.

He was too ashamed to look at her. He suddenly felt he didn't deserve a woman like her. His life flashed before his eyes. He realized what a terrible husband and father he had being. He sobbed harder.

Mrs. Cole wondered what could have happened. She was determined that no matter what it was, she was going to stand by her husband. She sat on the floor with him and patted his shoulder.

He curled up, rested on her laps and continued crying.

Mrs. Cole lifted up her head, faced the ceiling and began to pray in tongues under her breath. She told God to take control of the situation no matter what it was. As she prayed, a scripture dropped in her heart.

“Casting all your care upon Him, for He cares for you” 1

Pet 5:7

She immediately knew the scripture was for her husband. As he threw his body on her laps like a child, she called his name “Akin.”

He continued crying.

“Akin”, she called him again.

His sobs reduced. He lifted up his body and looked at her waiting to hear what she had to say.

Mrs. Cole had never seen her husband that vulnerable. He looked like a child that had just been beaten by his parents for

doing something terrible. She felt so much pity for him.

“I don't know what is wrong”, she started, locking her eyes with his “but I want you to know something.”

Mr. Cole paid rapt attention.

“I have a word for you.” she continued. “Whatever it is you are going through, God wants you to cast your cares upon him because he cares for you.”

“It's not possible Funke.” He shook his head. “He can't care for me!”

“That's what I thought about myself too, Akin.” She held his hand. “I was convinced beyond every reasonable doubt that God didn't care about me or this family but I had never been more wrong.” She tried to explain to him, hoping to make him understand.

“I've been a terrible person. God is certainly punishing me for all I did. There is no way he cares.” Mr. Cole just couldn't fathom how God, who he had consciously turned his back at could care for him.

Mrs. Cole wanted to know what he was referring to as a punishment but she didn't want to push it if he wasn't ready to tell her. “You know it is the one God loves, He chastises?”

“Funke, I've done terrible things. Too terrible, I can't face you to tell you.” he avoided eye contact with her.

“Akin, I'm your wife. You can tell me anything.” As those words left her mouth, she wondered if she could really take what it was he had to say without being hurt after all, she was human too. She prayed for God's strength and grace.

Mr. Cole took a deep breath and released it in a heavy sigh. He held his wife's hand. “Funke, I am so sorry.” He started. “I have been a terrible husband to you and a terrible father to our children. He burst into tears.

Tears flowed down Mrs. Cole's face. She remembered, the times he beat her, the times he wasn't there for them as a family. “It's okay,” she mustered all the energy left in her as she patted him on the back.

“I don't deserve all this Funke, I don't. Promise me that as I tell you these things, you'll find a place in your heart to forgive me.”

Mrs. Cole sighed. “I promise.”

He spent the next five minutes opening up to her about all the terrible things he had done. He concluded by telling her the mess he was in and how the picture had leaked.

When he was done confessing to his wife, a thick silence took over. Mrs. Cole couldn't utter a word. She stared into space and didn't try to stop the stream of tears pouring down her cheeks.

“Please say something Funke, I'm begging you.”

Mrs. Cole stood up from the floor where they both sat and went to a corner of the room. She buried her face in her hands and

cried. “Lord, this is too much for me to bear.” She lifted up her voice and cried.

Mr. Cole stood up from the floor, came to where she was and knelt in front of her. He held on to her legs and pleaded “Funke, I’m sorry. Please find it in your heart to forgive me.

Mrs. Cole looked at him, she struggled with the rage welling up within her. His sight disgusted her. She wished she could forgive him but it seemed so difficult. The hurt she felt fueled the rage. The more she remembered the hurt, the angrier she grew.

“Akin please step aside,” she said in a hushed tone, her teeth clenched together. She knew if he didn’t, she was going to raise her voice.

He let go of her legs.

She wished she could go as far from him as possible but it was night, leaving the house at that time wasn’t the wisest thing to do. She decided to go into the bathroom and locked herself inside.

“Dear Lord please help me. I can’t do this on my own.” As soon as she said that short prayer, she was convinced of the next step to take.

Akin remained on his knees, he didn’t know what else to do or who else to turn to. He closed his eyes and prayed, “God, you said you care. If you really do, please bring me out of this mess and I promise to serve with everything I have and I am.”

Immediately he said those words, Mrs. Cole came out of

the bathroom.

Still on his knees, he turned around, and watched as she approached. She stretched her right hand out to him. “Stand up” she said.

That was the last thing he expected her to say. He probably thought she'd rain curses on him. Still not sure what was going on, he took her hand and got up.

“It's okay Akin, I have forgiven you.” She knew, ordinarily, by her strength, she couldn't have forgiven him but right from within, she felt a fresh surge of strength to let go of the pain and hurt.

“Thank you Funke, thank you very much.” He felt like hugging her but wasn't sure if she felt the same. “I promise to change and turn a new leaf, Funke.” There was excitement in his voice.

“I'm glad but it's not me you are to promise, its God. He is the one that can give you the grace and help you need to turn a new leaf.”

“Please pray for me, Funke. I need what you have.”

Mrs. Cole prayed for her husband after which she told him all about Emeka. He took it well and they both agreed that henceforth, they were both going to be open to each other.

“Is there something you want to tell the children?” Mrs. Cole asked with a smile.

“I believe there is,” he returned the smile. That was the first time in many years, they had smiled at each other.

They both left the room and went to the sitting room. Bolu and Bayo were watching TV while Seyi was in her room.

“Bolu, go and call you sister.” Her mother told her.

“No let me go and see her myself” Mr. Cole told his wife. I need to talk to her alone.” He left the sitting room for her room. As he knocked the door, he prayed for God to help him say the right words and help Seyi forgive him.

“Who is it?” Seyi asked from inside the room.

“It's me.” he waited for her to tell him to come he but didn't get a response. Just as he was about telling Seyi how sorry he was, the door was opened from inside and he saw Seyi standing in front of him.

He didn't know where to begin. He froze and was speechless.

“Daddy do you want something?” Seyi asked, wondering why her father stood at her door speechless.

“Seyi please I need you to forgive me.” He clapped his hand together.

A weak smile broke out on her face. “I have forgiven you.”

He got up and hugged her. “I've been a terrible father and I've asked God to come into my life and make me a different

person.” He told her.

“I’m so glad to hear that.” She hugged him back.

“let’s go to the sitting room, your mum and I have something to say.”

“Okay sir.” She followed him.

When they got to the sitting room, they all sat down. Mr. Cole spoke first. “I don’t know where to start from.” He paused and searched their eyes to make sure they were all following. “I want to apologize for my terrible attitude these past years.”

A smile broke out on Bayo’s face. He looked at Bolu who was sitting next to him and gave her a high five.

Mr. Cole smiled and continued. “I have asked God to come into my life. I promise that from today, I will be the best father and husband there can ever be.” He looked at his wife and smiled. I want us to collectively invite Jesus to be the foundation of this home.

They all held hands and he led the family in prayers after which they hugged. Everyone was happy. After a while, it was time for bed.

“Goodnight daddy, goodnight mummy.” The children all echoed then went to their rooms.

The next day was Friday. When Mr Cole got to his office, knowing what lay ahead, he bowed his head on his desk and

prayed to God. He asked God for grace to cope with whatever ensued as a result of the picture that had leaked. Thankfully, he already had his family's support. After about an hour of getting to work, he was summoned by the school disciplinary committee.

There was an unexplainable calmness and tranquillity he felt. He knocked the door leading to the office and was asked to come in.

The deputy vice chancellor (DVC) academics, his head of department (HOD) and a third professor were seated. He stood before them fully aware of why he had been summoned.

The DVC academics was the first to speak. "Mr Akin Cole, I believe you are aware of why you have been summoned here." He opened a file before him without looking at Mr Cole. His glasses rested on the bridge of his nose.

"Yes sir." There was remorse written all over his face.

"It has come to our knowledge that you were involved in an illicit sexual affair with one of your students, Miss Funmilola Oni. What do you have to say about this?"

There was silence. All eyes were on him.

Mr. Cole prayed for God to direct his speech. "Everything that was said is true sir." He started. "I'm fully aware that what I did was wrong. I have apologized to Miss Funmilola and everyone that was involved and if given another chance, I promise that it will never happen again. I am a changed man now."

“What do you mean by you are a changed man?” His HOD asked in a harsh tone. His eye brows furrowed. He was a very strict man.

“I have given my life to God and asked him to change me. Jesus now lives in me sir. I'm not that man that was involved in those acts. I cannot do them anymore.” Mr. Cole told him.

There was silence. The HOD didn't expect such an answer. He instantly felt uncomfortable in his seat. There was something about what Mr. Cole had just said that pierced through his soul. Unknown to everyone that sat in that office, he had been having an affair with his secretary.

After a lot of questioning, Mr Cole was told that they would get back to him with regards to their verdict.

He left the office and went straight to his office. He thanked God for how things went and hoped for the best. He called his wife and informed her about how things went. She prayed with him briefly and they both agreed in prayers that whatever verdict, they'd trust God.

“Where are you now?” Mr Cole asked his wife.

“I briefly want to see Mrs. Dedeke, my Sunday school teacher. She has been trying to get through to me but I've not made the time to meet with her. So, we agreed to meet for some minutes at her place of work.” She explained to her husband. Things had become blissful for the couple. They now spoke about almost any

and everything. No more skeletons in their cupboards.

“That's the woman you said never stopped praying for you and our family right?”

“Yes o, in fact I'm so grateful to God for that woman. Her prayers really went a long way. I had no idea she was even fasting and meeting with the pastor to pray for us.”

“Wow, God bless her. I'll definitely love to meet her when we go to church on Sunday.” Mr. Cole said.

“I'll certainly introduce you to her. Anyway, I have to go now. I'll call you when I get back.” Mrs Cole was about stepping out of her office.

“Alright dear, I love you.”

“I love you too.” She ended the call and smiled. She loved the passion that now burned between them. It was much more than she had ever experienced. Whatever feelings she shared with Emeka seemed like a child's play compared to it.

She placed a call through to Mrs. Dedeke to inform her that she was on her way.

“Alright sis. Just let me know when you arrive.” She told her.

“Will do ma.” Mrs Cole ended the call.

As she drove into the compound of where Mrs Dedeke worked, she called her to inform her she was around.

“I’ll join you in a minute.” Was her response.

Mrs. Cole sat in her car, waiting for her. She decided to turn on the radio to listen to what it had to offer while she waited. In the process, her eyes caught a glimpse of her image in the rare view mirror. She noticed a pimple on her forehead and took a closer look. As she did, something caught her attention.

She saw someone that looked familiar pass by. She wasn't sure she saw right. She checked the side mirror to confirm who she had just seen.

“Isn't that Emeka?” She asked herself as she turned around to see him for herself just in case the mirror was deceiving her. She followed him with her eyes till he entered his black SUV.

“Oh Lord, what is Emeka doing here? I thought it was HIV positive patients that come here to receive care?” She wondered. Her pulse quickened. Reality dawned on her. She wanted to give excuses for him, “maybe he just came to see someone”, “maybe he is here on behalf of someone”. But the truth was obviously glaring.

Just as she was battling with the thoughts, she heard a knock on the window of the passenger's door. She turned to see who it was.

Mrs. Dedeké was waving at her.

She alighted from the car and went over to greet her.

They hugged.

“How is everything mummy Seyi?” Mrs Dedeke always had that heavenly smile on.

“Very fine, thank God. I'm sorry I've not been able to find time to see you. I told myself that even if it means me coming to see you right inside your office, I must make sure I see you.” She laughed.

“I understand. I'm glad to see you like this. You look bright, I can literally see the glory of God radiating upon your life.” Mrs Dedeke joined her in laughter.

“I don't know how to thank you enough ma. God really used you for us. We are so grateful. Our home was almost burnt down by a fire we ourselves started but now, a greater fire burns in our home; the fire of God.” Mrs Cole was grateful for the change every single member of her home had experienced.

“We give all glory to God. And by the special grace of God, that fire will not burn out in Jesus name.”

“Amen.” Mrs Cole remembered the person she saw. “Please I want to ask a question” she raised her index finger.

“Okay? What is it?” Mrs Dedeke was all ears.

“I understand that whatever goes on here stays here. I mean, it's against your ethics to discuss details about patients. But I saw someone who I know and I was wondering why he was here. Like if he was here to see someone or is actually a patient.” Mrs Cole just had to get it off her chest.

“Well, a lot of people come here for different reasons so I can't say.” Mrs. Dedeké had to be as confidential as possible.

“Okay, I understand ma. It is well.” Mrs. Cole sighed. She said a silent prayer in her heart, thanking God for delivering her from the claws of the evil one. She was so close to being a prey. If not for God's divine intervention, she might have contracted HIV.

They wrapped up their conversation, prayed and she left.

On her way, she had a leading to call Emeka. She didn't understand why. It made no sense to her. They had not spoken since she left him in the hotel room that day. He had tried reaching her but she stopped picking his call. She believed that the best way to be totally delivered from him was to cut off. She therefore could not explain the leading she was getting to place a call through to him.

She initially resisted the thought but it persisted and she perceived it was the voice of God. She parked her call, brought out her phone from her bag and dialed his number.

He picked on the first ring.

“Hello Funke.” There was a harsh tone in his voice.

“Hi Emeka, good afternoon.” Mrs Cole wasn't sure the reason why she called. She hoped that as they spoke, she'll understand.

“What do you want from me Funke?” His voice was raised and much harsher than before.

Mrs. Cole was speechless. She didn't see that coming.

“Was it not bad enough that you left me in the hotel room, you stopped picking my calls too?”

“It was not my fault, I...” she tried to explain herself but was cut short.

“Funke please spare me the lame excuses. Let this be the last time you ever call me.” He snapped at her.

“Emeka why are you talking like this? I did what I did because, I realized my wrong and I wanted to make things right.” She tried to explain herself.

“Did you say make things right? Make things right my foot. Why didn't you make things right those many years ago when you destroyed my life and made me fall into the arms of prostitutes? Why didn't you make things right before I got so loose and contracted HIV? Why Funke? Why?”

Mrs. Cole couldn't believe her ears. She was shocked to her bones. Thoughts of guilt and condemnation began to creep up on her. She almost started blaming herself for all that happened to him when she heard the voice of God again, this time around it was telling her not to allow the devil sow seeds of guilt. She immediately remembered two scriptures. The first that says if any man be in Christ, he is a new creature old things are passed away, behold all things have become new 2 Corinthians 5:17 and the second which says there is therefore now no condemnation to

them which are in Christ Jesus... Romans 8:1.

“Emeka, I had no idea all these happened to you and I am sincerely sorry but...”

Before she could complete her sentence, he cut her short again. “Please keep your apology to yourself. You are just lucky I didn't succeed in my plan to sleep with you. Fuck off.” He hung up on her.

Mrs. Cole was dumbfounded. Her phone fell out of her hand, her mouth was left open. She placed her hand on her head. “Oh Lord, what if you hadn't delivered me.” She wondered. She felt a fresh wave of gratitude to God. She was definitely going to tell her husband when she got home so they could thank God together.

Later that evening, when she got home, Seyi welcomed her with the broadest smile.

“What is it? What happened?” Mrs Cole returned the smile.

“Mummy, Sope just called me to tell me my name and hers were among those shortlisted to study law.” Seyi jumped with excitement.

“Congratulations my dear.” Her mum hugged her. You'll do great. I have a feeling God will use you to reach out to Sope and many more in that school with the love of Christ.”

“Hmmm I pray so o.” Seyi clapped her hands.

Just as they were speaking, Mr. Cole came home, looking somewhat downcast.

“What the matter?” Mrs. Cole knew something had just happened.

“The SDC called me back after a few hours and told me they had reached a verdict. I was let go.

“All we can do now is trust God. Our tomorrow is in His hands.” Mrs Cole said with so much faith.

“You are right my dear.”

Mrs Cole shared her discovery about Emeka.

“Wow, thank God. We need to pray. Let's all gather together to thank God and commit our lives unto God.”

Seyi called her siblings and Mr Cole led the family in prayer.

The End.

Burning Coles

(A Novel)

About the Book

Having accepted the reality of being married to a drunk, Funke Cole finds herself in an interesting twist when her past walks into her present and wants to be a part of her future.

Her husband and three children all in their own way experience their fair share of the fire Burning in their home.

When they can no longer bear the scourge of the flames, who do they turn to to put it out?



About the Author

Emmanuela Mike-Bamiloye is a daughter of God who loves to use her gift of writing to share His Word to the world. She is a medical doctor, drama minister and fashion designer.

She is Married to Damilola Mike-Bamiloye, the first son of the Founder of Mount Zion Faith Ministries and they are blessed with two daughters, Gloria and Grace.

Her other writings including her first novel, Gbemi are available on her website ellaswritings.com