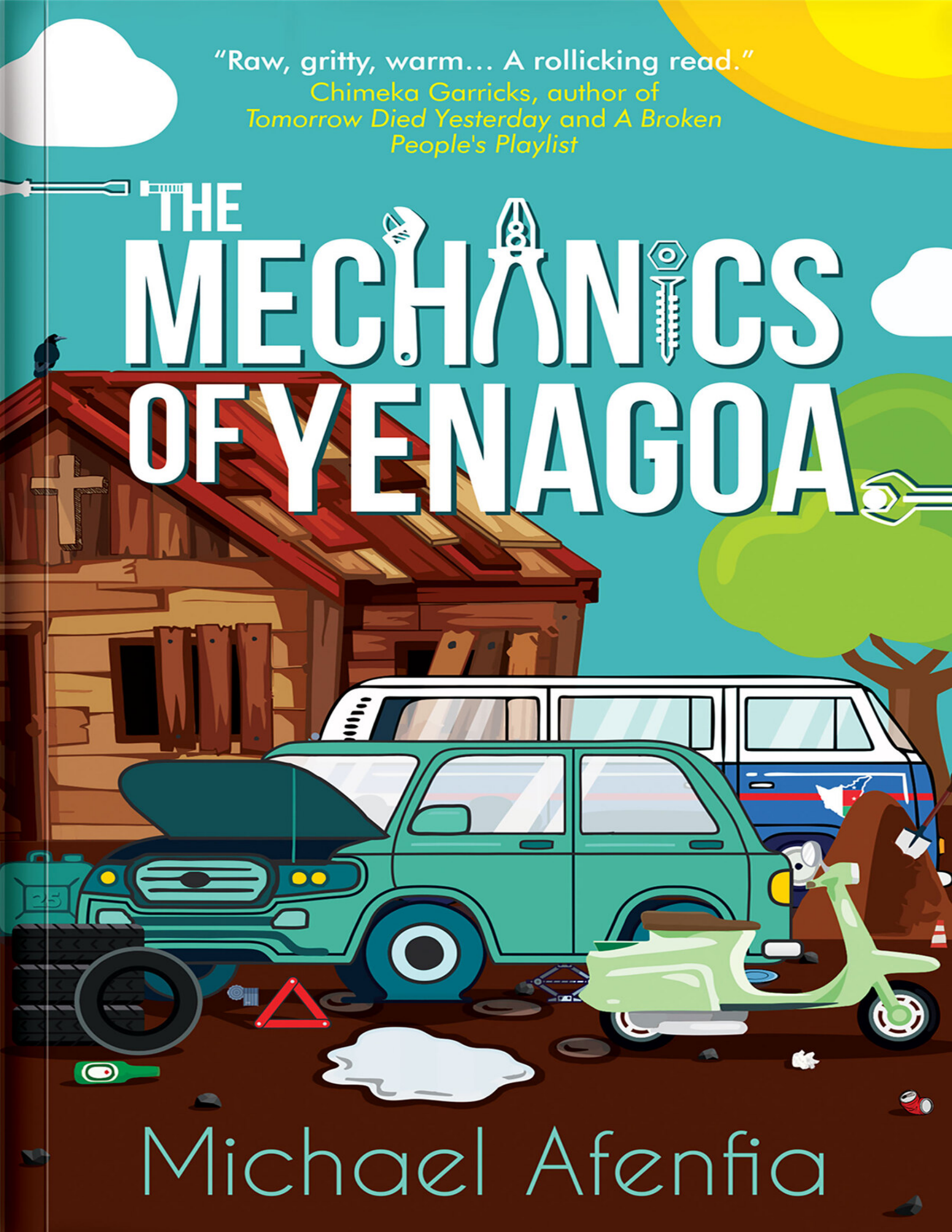


"Raw, gritty, warm... A rollicking read."

Chimeka Garricks, author of
Tomorrow Died Yesterday and *A Broken
People's Playlist*



THE MECHANICS OF YENAGOA

Michael Afenfia



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OF
YENAGOA

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To
Moji, Biboye and Weniebi –
for believing in me the most and for opening up our home to the characters
in my head.
And to the many fans of this story that saw the potential in the first episode
and urged me to keep writing, episode after episode until now we have this.

PART ONE

CHAPTER 1

I guess I should begin by introducing myself. That's what people do when they have a story to tell. My name is Ebinimi, and that's what my friends call me, not Ebi or Nimi because I don't like people shortening my name or calling me anything other than the name I was christened at birth, and people have tried and failed trust me.

Like in secondary school some of my classmates thought they could nickname me Bola Tinubu and make it stick because they said I looked like him. I think it's the eyes, and the way they droop when I smile. But I shut it down only after two weeks. Don't ask me how I did it. What is important for now is that it didn't end well for the principal initiator.

Once in a while, I allow Jacob. But that's my surname and so I prefer that the person calling me was older – like my teachers and lecturers at school or people from the church who insist on calling me Brother Jacob, which I detest by the way. As far as I am concerned, that moniker was a ploy to gnaw at my conscience and make me feel bad for not showing more commitment to the ministry of Reverend Ebizimor. As if allowing him use up almost half of our compound for his Sunday and midweek deliverance services without collecting a kobo from him was not enough.

A few days ago, I saw him supervising the replacement of the small signboard of the church with a bigger one. In shiny black and gold lettering, "REVEREND EBIZIMOR AND THE JERUSALEM WARRIORS INTERNATIONAL" was now visible from at least one kilometre away and there was nothing I could do to get him to bring it down or revert to the old signboard. And then there was all that singing, drumming and prayers that only reached heaven if it was acted out in deafening decibels. But what could I do when he had my elder sister, Ebiakpo, wrapped in his crooked fingers, what could I do when she was his biggest fan and staunchest convert?

She said it everywhere, all the time: Reverend Ebizimor was responsible for her first and only pregnancy. Responsible, not in the sense of him being Anda, my nephew's biological father, but that his prayers, fasting and

spiritual conjuring somehow made her union with her husband Benson fruitful after almost eight years of marriage.

Letting the church share part of the land we inherited from our grandparents was a compromise. The deal was – if I let the church stay, then she would allow me use what was left behind the house for my mechanic workshop. I had no choice but to agree because renting anywhere else for my business was out of the question. Yet after four years of being co-tenants, it was beginning to feel like I was the tenant and the church and its members were my landlords.

I was losing my sanity. I had lost control over what went on in my compound and sometimes even inside the three bedroom flat I shared with Saka, Biodun and Broderick, the apprentices in my workshop. But don't get me wrong, I am not complaining. I would be an ingrate to do so because the church has also been a blessing in disguise.

Patronage to my car repair shop increased significantly since the church moved in. Every single day, power hungry politicians, profit-seeking businessmen, lonely married women and desperate single ladies trooped into number 9 Kalakala Street, Ovom under the guise of fixing their cars. But what they really came to do was procure miracles and obtain divine solutions for their problems. I really don't know what would have become of my business or how much of a mechanic I would have been if it weren't for the referrals that came directly or indirectly from Reverend Ebizimor and those in his ministry.

And then there was Blessing. I never would have met her if I didn't give in to Ebiakpo and let the man of God establish his ministry on our joint inheritance. It's hard to imagine life without all the excitement Blessing colours it with. It wasn't love at first sight, but hearing her sing Sunday after Sunday . . . it wasn't long before I started feeling something.

That was how she became the love of my life; the sugar in my tea, the cockroach in my cupboard, the kidney in my suya. But all that was before the pregnancy. That was how the wahala started, this pregnancy we didn't plan for.

CHAPTER 2

“E binimi, it’s like you’re not even listening to me. Where is your mind?” Blessing asked in frustration.

Her question brought me back to the matter at hand. Our conversation had been interrupted by a call from a complaining customer who wanted me to know that after all the money he paid for a new fanbelt, his car was still over-heating.

“Look here, Blessing, I’ve told you I cannot bear this cost alone.”

“What do you mean you cannot bear this cost alone? When you were enjoying my *thing*, did you call other people to join you?”

She was shouting now, so I raised my voice to match hers. “Oh, oh, oh, so you wan make we go dia abi? You don forget say I sabi wetin happen between you and—”

“Don’t even go there, Ebinimi, I won’t take it. You cannot take this subject and change it into something else. When bad belle people want to spoil my name, you sef dey follow dem shebi? Abi you see me when I dey do anything?”

“Under my very nose Blessing, two times Saka and Broderick catch you, yet you still get mind dey deny, abi?”

“I nor dey deny anything. Nothing happen, I don tell you taya you nor wan hear me. The man na my reverend and the founder of the church, me I be choir mistress, we nor go get meeting again? We nor go choose song or plan how to conduct service and move the church forward again?”

“Oh, so na sing una dey sing abi? When my boys dey hear ‘ah um ah yay.’ for window. That one na the latest Frank Edward song abi? Which kain chorus be that one?” I asked her, knowing how much she detested being romantically linked with our pastor.

“Ebinimi, think what you want, in fact say what you want. All I know is that you are responsible for this pregnancy and you know it.”

“I don’t know that I am responsible for anything. Come to think of it, is

this the kind of conversation a choir mistress should be having with anyone?”

“As if you are not a member of the same church. Look, Brother Ebinimi, there’s no need arguing over this issue. I’m not asking you to buy me a car or send my younger ones abroad. All I’m asking from you is money to get rid of this baby before it is too late. I have been telling you this matter for some days now, but you nor wan shake body. Abi you think say na joke I dey joke?”

“In the absence of any DNA test, Blessing, I will contribute my share. Let Reverend Ebizimor bring the rest.”

“Hmmm.” Blessing wagged a finger at me. Her face turned red and her ample bossom jiggled as she spoke. “Ebinimi be careful of accusing an innocent man of God oh, so you don’t attract the wrath of God.”

“Now he is innocent abi? Weren’t you the one that told me about Sister Agnes?”

“Please don’t quote me or bring Agnes into this matter.” She became fidgety all of a sudden. Then she jumped from the edge of the bed where she had been sitting and headed straight for the door with her imitation Gucci handbag. My diversionary tactic had worked.

“Na go be dat?”

“In fact, just bring what you have,” she said, turning around. “I will look for the rest of the money myself. After all it’s not your fault. Nor be me, a whole choir director and Lagos-trained beautician and makeup artist agree to open leg for common mechanic like you?”

“For your information, I’m not a common mechanic. I am a graduate of Banking and Finance with MBA in view. Na me choose to become mechanic, nobody force me so make you watch how you talk to me.”

“Oya, Oga graduate banker and mechanic combine, let me have the money.”

“I don’t have it right now; you can come back tomorrow.”

I watched Blessing sashay out of my room and listened to the pitter-patter of her footsteps echo down the corridor, till all I heard was the silence of morning. She did this whenever we spent the night together. She would usually sneak in at about 10 or 11 o’clock at night when there won’t be a

chance of her running into the Reverend or anyone else from the church. She didn't like running into the other guys in the house either, so she'd cook from home and we'd lock ourselves in for good food and adult fun until it was time for her to steal away again. Sometimes she left really late and I'd have to drop her off so she won't be harassed by the police or the bad boys on her street, and at other times when she slept over, she always made sure to leave before anyone else on the street woke up.

I loved Blessing, no point denying it. I loved her cocoa butter skin and the way she wiggled her waist when she wanted my attention. I loved that she was not all up in my business and controlling like my other girlfriend, Adinna in Akenfa.

Blessing had the voice of an angel and most times when we were alone together, she would sing and twerk for me like she was in a Wizkid video. The best thing about her was that she was an expert in making delicious edikaikong and pounded yam, and her banga soup tasted like it was made in the restaurant of a Niger Delta Five-Star hotel even though she wasn't Ijaw like me.

I liked and trusted Blessing a lot, but the rather sudden announcement of a pregnancy came across to me like a trap. She always bragged about being a big girl and knowing how to take care of herself, with or without protection, so why now? It was like she wanted to force me into handing her money because I confided in her about the five hundred thousand naira Saka found wrapped neatly in a yellow and black stripped nylon bag three weeks ago.

The money was inside the trunk of a broken down Peugeot 306 that had been abandoned in the workshop for months by the spoilt son of one of the Judges of the State High Court.

The first thought that came to my mind upon the discovery was to draw the guy's attention to the find, but everyone said I didn't have to because it was possible he knew nothing about the money. Saka, Blessing and everybody who knew about the situation speculated that whoever kept the money in the car would come for it before the end of the day, but it had been weeks and no one had shown up yet. I knew in their minds they had already apportioned the money amongst themselves and decided what I should do with the balance, but I refused to be a part of such madness.

The reasonable thing to do was to go to the police with my find, and I was

a reasonable man.

CHAPTER 3

S aka sang at the top of his voice as he dismantled the dashboard of the Ford SUV he was working on. He was louder, way louder than Rihanna and Bryson Tiller doing the actual singing from the Toyota Highlander I was working on, which was the source of the music thrilling my boys and the few customers waiting to get their cars fixed.

“Which one be why, why talk again, Saka? You no go kill person for this Kalakala Street sha,” Broderick said handing him a screwdriver in exchange for the breaker bar he was working with.

“If no be why, why talk, wetin dem come dey sing?” Saka asked. He dropped more screws on Broderick’s open palm.

“Wild, wild talk. Abi your ear block?”

“Wetin that one come mean?”

“Wild talk – Like when man and woman dey talk dirty, dirty talk for bed.”

Biodun jumped in. “You when dey correct person, e be like say na your own ear block pass sef. What they are saying is ‘wild thoughts.’ Wild thoughts like crazy thoughts. Person suffer sing song finish, na so una go dey this Yenagoa dey spoil the music.”

I looked up. “Look, look, look Broderick, e be like say you no get work to do. Just leave Saka to concentrate on that dashboard while you help Biodun jack that car he’s working on. I promised the owner it will be ready by 2 p.m.”

“Oga Ebinimi, this car won’t be ready by 2 o’clock oh. You know we still need to fix the back shock. I would suggest you switch off your phone so that when him call, him no go fit reach you.”

“What if he decides to come by himself?” Biodun asked.

“Then he won’t meet me here.” My response was muffled so no one else heard me.

I had plans to meet up with my girl, Adinna, by 1 p.m. We had arranged to drive to Amassoma together in the afternoon for tutorials with some of our

course mates on campus. Going for these tutorials was the only way I could prepare for my final exams starting in a week's time. But honestly, going to Amassoma wasn't all about studying for our MBA 687 and 631. Adinna and I would have the opportunity for a getaway, some 'us' time far away from the suspicion of our respective partners; Blessing, in my case, and the honourable commissioner for employment, rehabilitation and social welfare, Justus Woyinpereowe for her.

Our rendezvous was to be in the usual place, the well-furnished two-bedroom bungalow that Agüero, my bosom friend and course mate rented in Amassoma for days we needed a secluded place to read and for nights when it was too late to return to Yenagoa after lectures. Renting an apartment close to the university campus made sense for someone who really didn't know what to do with all the money he made from his oil bunkering business, the logic worked with his young and gullible wife Preye at least.

The place in reality was the *slaughterhouse* for his side-chicks and one-night stands. That was why it was code-named 'the altar'. However, being his best friend, he let me have the keys whenever I had need of it, and today, I really did.

Adinna said she wanted to be with me. It had been so long – three weeks and four days to be precise, since we did anything because her commissioner sugardaddy was beginning to suspect her and so he had some boys follow her around.

I missed Adinna and she missed me too. When she called me the day before to tell me how she was feeling, she also said something came up I needed to know about and she didn't feel comfortable or secure discussing it over the phone.

I also had something to tell her as well. Blessing, my other girl, changed her mind about the abortion. She was keeping the baby and so I had a major decision to make and someone's heart might get broken when the time came to make my big announcement.

Adinna was twenty-seven years old and crazy about me – she really was. For someone four years younger than me, it felt appropriate calling her my sugarmummy because of all the money and gifts she lavished on me. At first, it didn't feel right allowing her spend so much on me, but after a while

I got comfortable with accepting things from her because I knew she could afford them.

I made it a point of duty though, never to ask her for anything, but if she gave me, I took. I also knew that the money for the shoes, shirts, phones, bottles of expensive wines and alcoholic beverages she bought for me from time to time came from her old commissioner manfriend, so in some sense, I felt like it was my share of the Bayelsa State government resources coming back to me. And if it wasn't that, then it was payment for services he couldn't properly render to his girlfriend because it took a lot to satisfy Adinna Lakemfa.

Adinna said he had asked her to marry him but she had serious misgivings about becoming the second wife of a 63-year-old diabetic who was also her boss and who would never ever be able to make her reach orgasm.

My Adinna had started out as his confidential secretary. She was employed to type his letters and memos, and manage his official correspondences, but instead of being just that, she worked her way to managing his bank accounts and his *epileptic libido*. Her words not mine.

As I planned our drive to Amassoma, break-up sex wasn't the only thing on my mind that afternoon. Perhaps even more urgent than attending to my masculine needs was my fear for my personal safety. My decision to succumb to the pressure from Blessing and the guys at the shop over the mysterious five hundred thousand naira we found had come back to haunt me.

I knew I should have gone to the police. It was the sensible thing to do. However, both Broderick and Biodun's mothers picked the same morning to be rushed to the hospital for sicknesses they couldn't quite describe while Saka's younger sister was going to be kicked out of school on the first day of exam if I didn't help him pay fifty per cent of her school fees in the College of Education in Ikere Ekiti. As for Blessing Bassey, she didn't make it a secret what she wanted from the loot.

So, instead of reporting at Ovom police station in the morning, I found myself heading to GTBank to withdraw the money I had paid into my account for safekeeping. Blessing got one hundred thousand naira to take care of the baby situation, while Saka, Biodun and Broderick shared another one hundred thousand naira to deal with whatever concocted family issues

they needed money urgently for. As for the remaining three hundred thousand naira, let's just say my birthday party last weekend at Stop Over Night Club wasn't shabby at all. The turn-up was lit, to say the least.

And now I was in trouble. Tiekuro, the Judge's son who had abandoned his car weeks ago in my shop, as if it was a wrecking yard, had suddenly remembered where he kept his money and he wanted it back. I didn't know where to get that kind of money in the number of days he gave me to return it to him.

I met with Adinna in front of Kilimanjaro by 1:30 p.m. For discretion, we thought it best not to ride in either of our cars so I opted to use a Toyota Prado dropped off for routine maintenance by one of my more pliable customers. I wasn't very familiar with the owner of the car but the guy who brought it, Paulo, had been a longtime customer and a frequent visitor to my workshop. We weren't exactly close, but I knew he trusted in my expertise as a mechanic because of the countless times I had handled the cars he brought in for maintenance.

The car was black, had tinted windows and was just what I needed to drive my girlfriend to Amassoma in style and incognito. Just so I wouldn't have to be looking over my shoulders when driving, I made up some story to Paulo about a fuel pump malfunction that would take the car off the road for a day or two.

"Ebinimi, you've been awfully quiet," Adinna said turning down the volume of the car radio so we could hear each other better. "I hope all is well." I could see the worry in her eyes. But she still managed a smile. Where Blessing was brash and all energy, Adinna was soft and meek.

"Maybe I'm just worried about you," I said.

She didn't know about Tiekuro and his threats and it wasn't something I wanted to discuss with her. I didn't also want to bring up the fact that I was certain we were being tailed. It couldn't be mere coincidence that the black Ford Explorer behind me made the exact same turns I did, slowed when I slowed and accelerated when I tried speeding up the car. Adinna and I could be in a precarious situation. We were being followed.

CHAPTER 4

“That is how I would have died someone else’s death oh Reverend.” I ended my narration with a sigh.

“Brother Ebinimi, you must give this testimony in church on Sunday. You mean they had guns?” Reverend Ebizimor asked, already reaching out for the bottle of anointing oil on his desk. “I told you two weeks ago about the vision that I saw, but instead of you to do what I asked, you started *carrying face* for me.”

“I was not carrying face for you, sir. You know because of the ulcer I complained to you about the last time, I couldn’t do three days dry fasting.” From the look on his face, I knew he wasn’t buying my explanation.

“If you couldn’t fast, what of your pledge? What if they had killed you, eh? What is twenty thousand naira compared to your life? Please try and pay that money this week. You can give it to the church treasurer if you don’t see me. That is what the Holy Spirit ministered to me.”

“I will try, Reverend.”

“Brother Ebinimi, you have to try. You have to take the things of God more seriously this year. Just look at it na, my brother, because you drove your customer’s car for lectures in Amassoma, with your girlfriend inside —”

“My course mate. She is my course mate, sir.” I was quick to correct him because I didn’t want anything trickling back to Blessing.

“Course mate? Ok oh, if you say so. Although Saka told me she is your woman sha . . . but that one is not important. What is important is that God delivered you from a case of mistaken identity and God will continue to deliver us from all cases of mistaken identity in Jesus name.”

“Amen.”

“God will not let us die the death that is meant for someone else.”

I chorused another “Amen” and then lied about customers waiting for me in the workshop so I could escape before my unsettled twenty thousand

naira pledge became thirty thousand naira plus interest.

From his office, I headed straight to the repair shed in search of Saka. I was mad at him and his blabbermouth for rambling about something I told him in confidence. Just because I had returned flustered from my botched rendezvous with Adinna, and had chosen to confide in him out of the need to tell someone about my terrifying near-death encounter with suspected assassins, didn't give him the right to go and tell someone else; and to think it was my pastor, my tenant for that matter.

"Saka, why you dey talk like woman?" I berated him in front of Biodun and Broderick because I knew he would have blabbed to them too. "So because I tell you wetin happen to me yesterday, you don rush go tell another person abi?"

"Oga Ebinimi, no vex. No be say I been wan tell am anything, but e be like say him hear as me and you been dey talk for backyard yesterday and him sef been stand outside when you rush inside. All of us fear na, Oga. We never see you like that before and I reason am say since Reverend nor be ordinary person, na man of God, I just feel say maybe you need anointing."

"Na your papa need anointing," I shouted at him. "I send you message? Na so your mouth go dey do *cho-cho-cho* like parrot every time."

"True Oga Ebinimi, I never see you like that since I begin work here."

He was right. Even with my eyes wide open, I could still see the two cars surround us, and the three masked, gun-totting men ordering Adinna and I out of the car. In broad daylight! The one leading the operation was built like a rock and his grip was like a wrench. Every time he spoke, it was like the sound from a leaking exhaust pipe. I think that was what made Adinna pee on herself. Me? I peed too, but thank God for my black jeans, it wasn't visible.

The man didn't say much, he just kept howling, "Aaron! Aaron! Aaron!" And then he ransacked the car like it had some hidden compartments a full-grown man could hide in.

All of this happened within seconds but it felt like an eternity, and within that eternity it took me like five lifetimes to realise they were looking for someone else – the real owner of the car – Aaron Barnabas-Treatment, the Public Relations Officer of the South South People's Voice and one-time Caretaker Committee Chairman of Yenagoa Local Government Municipal.

“Please I am not Aaron. I am a mechanic in Yenagoa, sir. Please I am a nobody; my name is Ebinimi Jacob, sir. Please, I can show you my driver’s license. I am not a politician. I am not even the owner of the car, sir. I was just going to school in Amassoma with my classmate—” If the slap hadn’t come when it did, I would have told them my entire life history.

“Shut up your stinking mouth!” The leader jabbed my ribs with the butt of his gun.

I howled, my face wet with tears and phlegm. “Yes sir, yes sir. I no go talk again.”

“I say keep quiet!”

Not only did I stop talking, I clamped my lips with my hands.

“God save you today. You see all dis gun when we carry so, the instruction dem give us be say make we no return with any bullet inside, so Mr Fine-Boy-Mechanic, make you go tell Aaron say God save am today, but tomorrow na another day.”

My hands were still shaking several minutes after they left. Suddenly, I didn’t know where the ignition of the car was, or what to do with the keys. I couldn’t find the throttle and even the steering wheel felt like it weighed a ton.

I reversed the car and headed back to Yenagoa, not sure if I was driving or flying. I dropped off Adinna at Akenfa without saying a word to her even though I could see that she was shaking and crying uncontrollably. I noticed Saka, Broderick, Biodun and the Reverend discussing in front of the workshop when I got back. They appeared to be signalling to me about something going on in the workshop but I ignored their summons. At that moment, nothing was more important to me than locking myself up in the room until I was certain it had all been a bad dream and no one was coming after me.

“Ehen Oga Ebinimi, about the other matter,” Saka’s voice brought me back.

“Which other matter?”

“The 500k na,” Saka said. “The guy come back here yesterday afternoon oh. Him come dey make trouble again after you drive commot. We thought that was what got you upset and made you cut short your journey when we

see you just show back inside the workshop like say person dey pursue you.”

“Oh my God!” I didn’t think I could stomach any more unsavoury news after my ordeal. “Tiekuro came back? Was he with the thugs he said he was coming back with?” I put my hands on my head and moped at my apprentices. “When will all this wahala end sef?”

“Oga, as I dey see am so, this matter no go end until you give the guy him money back oh.”

CHAPTER 5

My sister Ebiakpo and her husband Benson were at each other's jugulars again. They'd been quarrelling a lot lately and I didn't think it was healthy for their boy, Anda who was far too quiet and withdrawn for a four-year-old. I knew that all the shouting and drama being acted out in his presence daily by his parents was adding to his acute shyness and I had mentioned this fact to his mother a number of times.

Our parents fought all the time too while we were growing up, so I could relate perfectly with the turmoil going on in the poor boy's head. That was why as often as I could, I asked his mother to allow him spend time with my boys and me in the workshop, and she always obliged me.

What I wasn't certain of, though, was whether her eagerness to bring him over to the family house was really because of me or because of Reverend Ebizimor. It was no secret that Ebiakpo idolised the man of God, whose intercession on her behalf she claimed was the reason she even had the boy in the first place. Reverend Ebizimor and the Jerusalem Warriors International Church was her own Shiloh. The pastor only had to say the word and she'd bundle little Anda faster than anyone could say his name and send him off to live with him in the church and serve in the Lord's vineyard for the rest of his life, just like Hannah made Samuel do in that popular Bible story.

Ebiakpo wasn't telling me much, but something told me that her never-ending fights with her husband might not be unconnected with her closeness with Reverend Ebizimor. When she came in this morning with her son, I really wasn't in the mood to listen to her litany of accusations and counter accusations against her husband. Neither was I ready to have my little nephew follow me around like an appendage stuck to my behind with glue. My head was filled with worries about my own troubles and I didn't want to add the small boy's clinginess and inquisitiveness to my growing list of *katakata* .

Even though I wasn't in such a good mood, I was happy to see her at my doorstep. She couldn't have chosen a better time to visit. After all I had

been through in the last couple of days, I really needed someone that was family to whom I could *unbundle*, and Ebiakpo was all the family I had in Yenagoa and anywhere else in the world.

Since she chose to appear in Ovom without informing me of her visit, she seemed the perfect person to conscript for my sudden meeting with Aaron Barnabas-Treatment, a meeting I was almost running late for. Paulo and his personal assistant had come in about thirty minutes earlier in the company of two armed mobile policemen to retrieve the SUV from the workshop and to inform me that “Oga,” wanted to see me, “now, now, now for Ox-Bow Lake.”

The prospect of meeting with Honourable Aaron was pretty scary to say the least. In the light of what I had just been caught doing with his vehicle, I wasn’t expecting any hugs or backslaps from him. If anything, I expected to get a chiding worse than the one I received from those bad boys on our way to Amassoma yesterday. If the renowned Aaron Barnabas-Treatment had sent two sergeants to come to the workshop to fetch his car from me, I could only imagine how many more were waiting for me at Ox-Bow Lake.

“So all these happened to you and you couldn’t call to tell me?” That was Ebiakpo’s reaction to the abridged version of my ordeal in the hands of the hired killers sent to take out the former local government chairman. “So if God hadn’t spoken to me to bring Anda here to spend a few hours with you and Reverend, I wouldn’t have known that my only brother almost lost his life?”

“I didn’t want to scare you, Ebiakpo,” I offered a weak defence when I saw how distraught she was by my story. “See how you are even tying and untying your head-tie like Patience Ozokwor, when I haven’t even given you the complete gist.”

“And you say the owner of the car wants you to come and see him?”

“His PA said I should start coming *now, now, now* and I don’t think I should go and see him alone. That is why I am asking you to come along with me.”

“Ebinimi, can you hear yourself at all? Oh ho! So you want me to follow you to go and see an angry man so that they will kill you and me for our dead parents and allow that useless, *wakawaka* man I married to dash my only child to another woman, abi?”

“Ebiakpo, I can’t go alone. It won’t be wise.”

“Since you don’t want to go alone, why don’t you go with a man? I don’t think going with a woman is a good idea.”

“You are not just a woman, you are my elder sister and he would listen to you. Once we get there, we’d just go down on our knees and beg him for forgiveness. If you can cry and make tears come out of your eyes like tap water, all the better for me.”

She didn’t smile. “I still think we need another man to join us – Reverend Ebizimor—”

“No.” I immediately put an end to that thought. “That one will just be asking for money as if we dey dig am from ground.”

“Then Benson—”

“The same husband you just called *wakawaka* man, abi you want him to put sand in my garri? Please follow me let us just go and meet the man. The worst that can happen is that I will sleep in police cell this night, after all I didn’t steal his car or damage anything inside or even sleep with his wife.”

“And Anda, who will take care of him while we are away?” Ebiakpo asked.

“But Broderick, Biodun and Saka can do that very well. You know Anda is quite fond of them and they enjoy having him around as well.”

Ebiakpo wanted us to drive to Ox-Bow Lake, but I didn’t think it was such a good idea, considering I might be headed straight for the police station from there and she wouldn’t be able to drive my car back home alone if that happened.

We opted to charter a tricycle. The rider was a Hausa man who’s English wasn’t too good, but I could make out three hundred naira as he mouthed out our fare after Ebiakpo asked. She wanted to haggle but I jumped into the back seat and pulled her inside. I was going to beg for mercy from someone I had offended. The last thing I wanted to do was piss him off by being tardy.

My sister was praying out loud – casting and binding out demons, and howling in tongues all the way to our destination. The instruction from the PA was to meet his boss at the Ox-Bow Lake pavilion. Aaron Barnabas-Treatment wasn’t there when we got there, so we walked into the arena and

looked for the most secluded corner in the spectators' stand to await my fate. We waited for almost an hour and still no sign of Oga Aaron, his PA or any of the policemen that came to the house only a short while before. Still, we waited because we knew it was typical of big men to keep small people like us waiting. It made them feel even more important, I guess.

We were both lost in thought. My sister's gaze was on the sky, while I stared at the lone couple on the jetty. From where I sat, I couldn't tell if they were young, but I could see they were madly in love with each other from the way their bodies stayed glued together all the while they leaned on the aluminium railings at the edge of the pier.

At intervals I checked my phone for the time, and as daylight gave way to darkness my trepidation heightened. I allowed the lovers their privacy and shifted my focus to the entrance for any sign of the arrival of the big man.

"Oga said you should meet him in the car." Ebiakpo and I didn't hear the footsteps; we only heard the gruff voice commanding us to our feet. My legs began to wobble as I struggled to my feet. It was time for me to face the music for my lack of caution.

CHAPTER 6

Ebiakpo and I stood up at the same time.

“Yes, who are you?”

In the darkness, I couldn’t tell if it was one of the policemen that had come to the house earlier in the day, or someone else, although it really didn’t matter because it wasn’t as if we were going to get into a conversation about politics or the weather.

“She’s my elder sister, sir,” I offered after an awkward pause. I knew Ebiakpo was too tired to speak up, but mostly she was too afraid to answer the question.

The man made a gruff sound that stopped in his throat. It was certainly one of the policemen from before. I could tell because Ebiakpo had put on the torchlight from her phone so I could make out his face. “Honourable Aaron Barnabas-Treatment say make you come see am, you come dey carry anoda person join body. Wetin come concern your sister for dis matter, abi na she been follow you dey inside the car?”

“No sir, that was my—”

“Abeg Oga mechanic, spare me the details,” he cut me off brusquely. “My Oga is waiting for you in the car, don’t keep him waiting.”

“And my sister, can she come along with me?”

“She stays here with me. Go answer your papa name.” He motioned in the direction of the black SUV parked inside the main entrance of the pavilion. The police orderly in the front passenger seat alighted from the car and signalled for me to jump in and occupy the spot he just vacated.

The first shocker of the night was seeing the “big man” behind the wheel. Paulo was nowhere in sight. He was driving himself, and that took me unawares. Because of the two policemen I had already seen, I assumed he’d have his PA and a driver in the car with him and maybe an escort vehicle with a couple more policemen lurking around somewhere around the pavilion. In the light of my very recent encounter with people out to get him, I didn’t think he’d feel safe with just me, a complete stranger alone

with him in the car, but Honourable Aaron didn't seem perturbed.

The second surprise was realising how young he looked. It wasn't just his small stature and baby face or the casualness in his appearance. This was a young man, probably in his mid-thirties and only a few years older than me. Judging by how he looked now, he must have been in his mid or late twenties when he was appointed Caretaker Chairman of Yenagoa Municipal Council a few years ago. That appointment marked the launch of his political career.

As a happening Yenagoa boy, of course, I had heard stories about him from customers in my shop and in the places I hung out with friends. But seeing him in person, I was really struck by his youthfulness and the aura of simplicity around him. Nothing I had heard about him prepared me for this disarming moment.

"Ebinimi?" His voice was low and measured. He called my name like he was counting numerals or cueing in a symphony. "Ebinimi, the mechanic that took my car out for an enjoyment ride with his woman."

"I'm sorry sir. I am very sorry sir. It will not happen again sir." I was looking him straight in the eye, hoping that even in the dimness of the lush interior of his car, he would see how remorseful I was and go easy on me.

"I am mad at you, very angry at what you did," he continued counting his words as if I hadn't even spoken.

"You have every right to be sir. It was totally wrong for me to carry a customer's car out with or without permission. I will never do it again." I took advantage of his delayed speaking pattern to make a case for my life because I really couldn't tell what he had up his sleeves.

"But what if I was the one driving the car?" It occurred to me he was doing a monologue so I stayed quiet and allowed him continue. "At least now I know that people are after my life and I would be very careful going forward so that I don't walk into a setup. Abi Ebinimi, what do you think?"

He called my name like we were long lost friends and it was terrifying – like the kiss before the sting.

"They said I should tell you that tomorrow is another day." I thought telling him that might soften his heart and help reduce the severity of my punishment.

“Mad people. Mad, mad people. But they have failed. And they will continue to fail like that because I serve a living God. Na who born their father?” His voice took on a strange baritone, but it was still measured. “Bastards!”

“There was no scratch to the car sha . . . I have returned it to your PA intact, just the way Paulo brought it to my workshop sir. Even the clutch and break sef—”

“Ebinimi, God used you to save my life. That is all I can say on this matter. My PA tells me you are a graduate.”

“Yes sir. I studied Banking and Finance in NDU and now I am doing my MBA.”

“Interesting.” He broke the word into four distinct syllables, punctuated by long pauses. “Very interesting. That is what I keep telling our Bayelsa boys. They have to go to school. They have to become doctors and professors so that these Igbo, Yoruba and Hausa boys no go dey look us down.”

“That is what my father used to tell me too before he died.”

“Oh, your father is dead?”

“And my mother too.”

“Is that why you became a mechanic, because you’re an orphan?”

“That is part of it sir. Maybe if my parents had been alive I would have followed a differet path.” I had a feeling I was talking too much, so I stopped talking. But, it seemed like the powerful Honourable Barnabas-Treatment was interested in my story.

“You have regrets being a mechanic?”

“No sir, but you know parents – if they had been alive, maybe they would have wanted me to become a lawyer or a doctor or a diplomat. I don’t think they would have been very happy with me being a mechanic.”

“So why don’t you get a bank job or even join the civil service. I know that the state government employs young people like you from time to time.”

“But I like what I do sir. I enjoy being a mechanic. It is what I had always wanted to do. My father told me that at ten years old I could almost change a flat tyre with very little adult supervision or help and by the time I was

twelve I was moving his car within our compound. Sir, I graduated from the university because I know it would have made my parents proud and I think I owe them that much. The master's programme I am running in NDU now is because I think a postgraduate degree in business administration would help me run my business properly. But I don't think I want to work for someone else when I have this gift I can survive on."

Aaron Barnabas-Treatment stayed silent for some time, all the while bobbing his head as if he was in long contemplation. "Look eh Ebinimi, I have to go now because I have a meeting with the Speaker of the House of Assembly, but come to my office on Monday. I think I have a small job for you to do for me." He reached for a bag on the back seat and brought out a bundle of money he handed over to me. I couldn't tell how much it was because I couldn't quite make out the denomination but it looked like a lot of money.

"Sir—" I began to protest.

"That is five hundred thousand naira. Use it for your school and also for your business."

"Sir, did you say 500k? It is too much na." A part of me was jumping for joy because 500k was just what I needed to make Tiekuro and his threats go away for good. The other part of me knew I had to play coy because no Bayelsa man would collect money from another man without posing a little, even if it were free money.

"Abeg take am dey go jare. If to say those mad boys bring me down, na five hundred thousand for bring me back to this world when sweet pass sugar?"

I tucked the money underneath my shirt because it wouldn't fit into the pockets of my slim jeans and raced back to where Ebiakpo was held in temporary captivity by Barnabas-Treatment's guards. I didn't know whether to hug her or lift her up so I just settled for screaming her name in excitement. She must have thought I had lost my mind, but she did well to stay silent until we got back to the house before starting the interrogation.

"Ebinimi, wetin happen with that man? Why were you jumping up and down shouting my name like you won the lottery?" She asked even before the driver of the *keke* that dropped us was done sorting out our change.

"This one is not a road-side gist oh Ebiakpo. We need to sit down inside

the house with a bottle of something hot to digest am well well.”

“Okay oh bros,” she said yawning loudly. I could tell my sister was exhausted from our strange and what could probably be best described as a dangerous outing. “Let me go and see whether my son is still awake,” she added, leaving me to sort out the change with the *aboki* that brought us home.

I waited until he counted out the complete change and zoomed off before entering the compound. It was quiet and dark outside the house. Reverend Ebizimor and his workers must have left hours before. The generator wasn’t turned on and I thought it was strange. Because of Anda, I thought the guys would be needing electricity in the house so they could engage themselves watching Super Sports while waiting up for the kid’s mum and I to return home. As I approached the front door, I noticed it was wide open. Why weren’t they worried about mosquitoes?

“Broderick! Broderick! Broderick!” He was the youngest and the one I scolded first whenever they misbehaved.

“Oga, Broderick no dey house.” It was Biodun.

“Where did he go at this time of the night? Don’t tell me he went to carry *ashi* for Hospital Road again oh.”

“Oga Ebinimi, no be wetin happen. Na him and Oga Saka comot together.”

“Where did they go to?”

“Dem go find Anda. The boy don loss.”

CHAPTER 7

It had only been fifteen minutes since we discovered Anda was missing, but it seemed like fifteen days. The tension in the room was so strong, it could have been written by James Hardley Chase for one of his crime novels. I didn't try to comfort my sister because it wasn't something I did very well, so I let Saka, BRD and Biodun do the *job*. Even though I was too distraught myself to look Ebiakpo directly in the face, from the corner of my eyes I could see she was being frustrated by a call that wouldn't go through.

"This *wakawaka* man has switched off his phone again. This is exactly what I have been telling him for months now, but will the foolish man listen? No. He has gone to carry one of those his *ashewo* again in Hospital Road and has turned off his phone because he doesn't want to be disturbed, but God will expose him today. The God of Reverend Ebizimor will expose him, because now there's an emergency and the useless man's phone is telling me it is unavailable. If anything happens to Anda, if anything happens to my son, I swear, God will punish his entire generation. It will never be good for any of them."

I couldn't get why Ebiakpo was raining curses on a man that wasn't even present, instead of focusing on the issue at hand and how to come up with a viable course of action. But who was I to tell her what I was thinking. If anything, I knew to thread carefully when dealing with my sister. Knowing her, it wouldn't be long before she remembered that her son got missing in my house and so I must know something about it, even though both of us were out together to see Honourable Aaron at Ox-Bow Lake at the time my little nephew vanished from the house.

Not wanting to question her attack on her husband, I signalled to Biodun to be on the lookout for Saka and Broderick who were already on their way back from combing the neighbourhood. The three of them came back to the parlour a few minutes later and from the look on their faces and the sluggish way they approached my sister and I, I knew without asking that their mission wasn't successful.

Ebiakpo must have sensed it too, and like someone injected with an extra dose of adrenaline, she tossed aside her phone and began rummaging through all the items of furniture again. Chairs were turned upside down, bed sheets strewn on the floor and mattresses made to stand upright. She stormed the kitchen, and I could hear the sound of pots and pans clanging as Ebiakpo upturned and shook utensil after utensil, hoping that her little boy would somehow, miraculously transform from silverware back to real boy. Even knives, spoons and forks were not above suspicion as they loudly protested their innocence at the callous way she allowed them crash to the floor. Back in the bedrooms, drawers and wardrobes doors were almost yanked off their hinges and no item of clothing was spared the humiliation of being kicked and trampled on.

“Ebiakpo, you know that scattering things about won’t solve this mystery confronting us. If pushing down chairs and breaking beds would bring Anda back, I’m sure he would have been found even before we got home. Sister, you need to calm down.”

“Ebinimi, don’t tell me to calm down oh, because if you do, you’d have to tell Blessing to calm down when she has a four year old son for you that suddenly goes missing after the two of you finally come to your senses and stop this *boju-boju* love you’re playing inside church. When that time comes, remember to tell her to calm down oh!”

I ignored Ebiakpo’s outburst, choosing to vent my angst on Saka who in our absence, should have been the adult in the house.

“Saka, why eh? Why are you guys always this careless? This is not a car you have gone to fix brake pad for instead of clutch oh, this is a human being, my own blood nephew we are talking about here. How can a human being just disappear like that under your watch eh, Saka?”

“Oga Ebinimi, the thing sef surprise me oh!”

The only reason I didn’t give him a hot slap was because he was older than me and he looked completely crushed. Behind him, Broderick and Biodun were shaking uncontrollably like leaves. Together, the three of them cut a sorry sight, perhaps even more pitiable than the broken-hearted mother of the missing child.

“How e take surprise you, eh? The three of you should listen, and listen very carefully. What I want is an explanation, a very cogent explanation for

why the child we left in the care of three hefty adult men vanished into thin air right under your noses. Abi the boy na spirit?”

“Ah Oga Ebinimi, how Anda take be spirit na, no be the boy when dem born for my presence again?” Broderick asked.

“But aren’t you the ones that said he vanished?” I retorted. “The last time I checked, only spirits have the power to appear and disappear at will.”

“Oga Ebinimi, abeg no vex for us,” Saka pleaded. “Me, I been no dey for workshop sef. Immediately you and Madam Ebiakpo waka that time, that madam when dey use that red Kia been telephone me say make I come help her start her car when no gree to start after she buy fuel finish for NNPC filling station. When I return, I see the two of them outside yard,” he said pointing to Biodun and Broderick. “Dem say whether na me carry Anda comot? I tell dem say I no see the boy oh! Na so dem begin hala say the boy don loss. As dem tell me the matter finish, na so all of us begin shout him name but him no answer. We come enter house and scatter everywhere but we no see am. We even check the whole yard, we open all the cars and look for the back of the plantain tree for backyard but we no see the boy.”

“The thing worry us well well Oga Ebinimi no be small,” Broderick jumped in, “na so we comot for compound come enter all our neighbour dem house one by one, but the boy was nowhere to be found.”

“Who was he with? Who saw him last?” Ebiakpo blurted out impatiently.

“Me. I been dey sleep for room oh, I didn’t even know what was happening until I heard Broderick shouting my name.”

“Biodun, I didn’t ask you where you were. What I asked was who saw him last? Broderick, was it you?”

“Me and Anda been dey watch TV for parlour, na him I hear person dey shout for gate. As I go outside, I see say na that fat guy and some of him friends.”

“Which fat guy?” I knew the answer even before asking.

“That guy when say him forget money for car.”

“Tiekuro!” I blurted out in anger.

“Yes sir. I told him you were not at home, but he said I was lying. He even said he would not leave until he collected his 500k otherwise the whole of Ovom go hear the matter.”

“Ebinimi, what is this boy saying?” Ebiakpo asked, jumping to her feet. “Is he saying that somebody is holding my son ransom because of a debt you owe?”

“I don’t think he has said that yet.” I got on the defensive. “Broderick, can we hear the rest of your story?”

“As he entered the house, he just chook head for parlour. He didn’t even enter inside oh, him only put head small for door and when he didn’t see you, he left.”

“You saw him leaving the house?” I asked.

“Yes, Oga Ebinimi,” Broderick responded. “I even escorted him outside to be sure he left without damaging anything and so that I could lock the gate properly after him. I waited until he drove off with his friends and when I came back to the house I didn’t see Anda or Blessing.”

“Blessing, did I hear you say Blessing?”

“Yes sir. Sister Blessing, that your former . . . former . . . former girl . . . former madam, been come find you, but she been enter inside your room go sleep because she say sleep and hungry dey catch am. But she been give me and Anda meat-pie and puff-puff and fanta when she been carry for bag.”

There was graveyard silence after Broderick spoke. I couldn’t tell if his explanation gave clarity and provided pointers as to what could have happened to my nephew after we left for my meeting with Barnabas-Treatment or if the matter just got more complicated.

“Did Andaowei eat it?”

“Yes, Mummy Anda. He finished it and was even asking for more.”

“Hey! Hey! Hey!” Ebiakpo was already rolling on the floor. “Blessing has killed me. Blessing has killed me oh!”

CHAPTER 8

I saw the WhatsApp messages from Blessing when I came out of the bathroom. She wanted us to meet at Comfort Kitchen in the afternoon.

As I typed my unavailability because of the number of cars that were still unattended to in the workshop, I wondered why she didn't just come over to the house instead. I wasn't happy that she wanted us to meet in one of the most expensive restaurants in the city where I'd have to spend money buying food and drinks when we could just as well have met in my house and I wouldn't have to spend any money at all.

Blessing didn't like my suggestion about her coming over to Kalakala Street. She texted back immediately that she was still sore and too humiliated to meet with anyone from the workshop or the church. She insisted that we met "IN CAMERA" to discuss "URGENT MATTERS."

Seeing those key words in upper case, coupled with the way she finished off her sentences with a lot of exclamation marks and that sad emoji thrown in there awkwardly at the very end of her request, when she should have just used a full-stop was enough warning that my woman wasn't taking no for an answer.

I'd come to realise that whenever Blessing did that thing where she mixed up capital and small letters in one message, it was either I was in trouble or she just wanted attention. Obliging her when she got like that hadn't ended well for both of us in the past and I wasn't in the mood for her one-sided arguments and endless tirades over an incident she ought to have moved on from. But I was powerless to resist any further when she played the victim card and reminded me that I didn't stand up for her.

Ever since the vanishing and dramatic reappearance of Anda, and the pounding Blessing received from Ebiakpo in the interval she was the prime suspect in the presumed abduction of my nephew, she had refused to put the matter to rest or forgive me for the part she thought I played in the harassment she suffered in the hands of my sister. In spite of my several apologies and honest explanation that the entire episode was a mix up and a crazy misunderstanding between a garrulous wife and her insensitive

husband using their son as bait in a game of mad-people's-chess, my on-again-off-again girlfriend hadn't stopped crying and cursing. In spite of how contrite I was, she insisted that my action was deliberate and that I had ganged up with my sister and her sister-in-Christ and fellow church member to beat her up and embarrass her in public because of our last nasty break up over the pregnancy issue.

"Me? Ebinimi, me? Na me your sister disgrace like that for public like say I be common runs girl when snatch person husband, abi? Chai, I don suffer! Blessing Bassey don suffer for this Yenagoa, no be small. If no be this Jesus work when we don enter so, when come cool me down like ice water, do you think I would have let another woman disgrace me the way your sister did so tay my Brazilian hair almost comot for my skull sef."

"But Blessing –"

"Make you no Blessing me anything. My only regret be say I no bite one of her ear comot or pour hot water for her face or even rub pepper for her private part."

At any other time, I would have cautioned her against talking about my elder sister in that manner, but since I was trying to pacify her, I let it slide.

"You wen carry belle naim wan follow person fight?"

"Which belle? No be you say I no carry belle, say na lie I dey lie? Anyway, you say you no want pikin so I don comot am. That was what I came to tell you that night."

"You have removed the pregnancy?"

"No, I no remove am. I give am to my mama to carry am for me," she replied in a sarcastic tone. "Ah Blessing, you don soft finish no be small. I swear, I don soft finish like over ripe plantain. This church thing don kill my ginger."

"Blessing, don't talk like that na, abeg. I have told you the entire thing was an honest mistake. When Broderick told us you came to the house, we all thought—"

"You all thought what?" She interrupted me, "that I would kidnap the small boy and ask for ransom or force you to marry me, otherwise I won't return him to his mother, abi?" She paused to shake her head for a bit as if in contemplation of how weak she had become. "You think I'm that

desperate for your rice-without-meat-love, when correct guys, commissioners, permanent secretaries, special advisers, supermarket owners and even bank managers dey line up for my shop to take me out and spoil me with better money?”

“No na, Blessing. It’s not like that ehn. E never reach make you dey insult me na.”

“Why won’t I insult you, Ebinimi, weren’t you the one who first insulted me when you came to my house with your sister to attack me and almost strip me naked in front of my younger ones and my neighbours on top of something that I didn’t even know anything about, ehn?” she asked, her voice rising and drawing the attention of the other customers in Parliament Bar where I had agreed to meet with her because she had refused to come to the house so we could trash out the issue between Ebiakpo and her, once and for all.

“But I have apologised a thousand times on behalf of my sister and her husband,” I pleaded one more time. “Please, believe me, it was not intentional. We were confused and worried that something bad had happened to Anda.”

“And that something bad was me kidnapping him, abi? Why on earth would I do that, me Blessing Bassey of all people! Why would I now go and hide Anda? Think am na? What do I stand to gain by kidnapping him, your hand in marriage?”

Someone close to where we sat chuckled and I almost lost it, but I quickly held my anger in check not wanting to create a bigger spectacle than we were already creating.

“Blessing, I have told you it was a mistake and we are all very sorry for the assault on you that night. How could we have known that it was the boy’s father that came and carried him away when no one even saw him enter the compound?” I asked her, hoping that my question wouldn’t infuriate her even more. “Remember that the very Broderick who should have been looking after the boy was fast asleep and didn’t even hear you leave—”

“When I came out of the room, I saw BRD and Anda sleeping on the couch,” Blessing cut in. “I didn’t want to disturb them so I left and bolted the gate from the outside like we normally do when we close from church.

As I say I shouldn't disturb the boy's sleep, na bad I do?" Blessing asked me. "Na bad I do?" she repeated.

"But apparently after you left, my brother-in-law, Benson, stopped over for a visit believing that his wife and son were also visiting too. Lo and behold, he came in and saw Anda and my apprentice that should be looking after him both fast asleep in the parlour. He tried waking Broderick up, but the foolish boy was too far gone to even stir, so he carried his son home and switched off his phone to teach all of us, including his wife Ebiakpo, a lesson in carefulness and security consciousness."

"So that is how I would have been accused falsely of something I am completely innocent of and maybe even sent away to languish in Okaka prison for nothing. That is after Sister Ebiakpo, the dragoness and deputy mama of Reverend Ebizimor and His Jerusalem Warriors International Group of Churches must have plucked my eyes oh."

"It was never going to come to that na. Thank God that Benson called off the torture and switched on his phone to let his wife know that Anda was fine and that the entire episode was orchestrated by him to drive home a point."

"Anyway, all of you should thank God that some of Reverend Ebizimor's anointing has robbed off on me and I am not who I used to be. If you doubt me, go to my secondary school in Uyo and ask about me. If they do not remember me there again, then I can refer you to Lagos where I learnt this make-up and hairdressing business I am doing today. They will tell you everything you need to know about me."



Three days later, nothing had changed. Blessing would call me every morning, afternoon and night to complain about aches and pains in different parts of her body as if fixing cars was the same thing as tending to the human body. The last time I checked, I was a mechanic not a medical doctor, but Blessing didn't care. It was as if her intention was to run down my phone battery life with all seventy-one nonsense messages about wanting to see me urgently, and then an idle me was supposed to shut down my business just like that to humour her.

Because of her insistence, I agreed to meet with her in Aguero's place at Amassoma much later in the day. I knew my friend Aguero was in town

because we spoke just before I went to bed about a lecturer that wanted us to raise some money for him to bury his father.

Aguero thought buying a cow and supporting this particularly difficult man with a cash donation of five hundred thousand naira would guarantee our graduation with flying colours when the time came. Mindful of the number of calls and messages I had received from customers that needed their cars fixed and returned to them before the close of day, I made a mental note to clear with Aguero, in case he had plans of performing a sacrifice at the altar himself.

I rushed the breakfast of beans, yam, bread and pure water BRD bought for me from Mama Favour's joint just a couple of houses away from ours, and then slipped into my grease-and-dirt crusted navy blue khaki overall before heading outside to join Saka and company in the workshop.

I had anticipated a very busy day and that was exactly what I got. The cars kept coming in and out as if we ran an assembly plant, so I couldn't catch a breather – not even for lunch. It wasn't until almost 4 p.m. when I saw a reminder from Blessing about our plan to meet up in Amassoma that I remembered I hadn't even spoken to Aguero about using his apartment that evening.

I put a call across to him that rang through. Knowing my friend like I did, it was easy to guess that he was either at a business meeting or with one of his babes. But I was certain he'd return my call as soon as he had a chance to. I returned to the crankshaft that was proving stubborn for Saka and me, and soon lost track of time again. When twenty minutes later my phone rang and it was Aguero, I had a knowing smile on my face as I touched the green light on the screen of my Tecno phone.

"Sergio Aguero!" I hailed him.

"Ebinimi Jacob, wetin dey happen na?"

"Nothing oh, your boy still dey hustle to make am na."

"Which one be hustle again, Oga Ebinimi? No be you dey keep all the Yenagoa big boys on the road? If you lock up shop one day alone, you sabi how many big big men and women go enter keke for this town?" We both laughed and then we bantered for a few seconds before I went right to why I'd called him earlier.

“Guy, abeg the altar go dey free this evening?” I asked, “Blessing say she want to see me for something important, and I suspect say we fit offer some burnt offering to the gods afterwards.”

“Ah, it won’t be possible today. I don arrange sacrifice there for this night.”

I masked my disappointment with laughter and a joke to make light of it. “Father Abraham! Na who be the Isaac na?” Aguero laughed too. “Whose daughter has fallen into your trap this time?”

“This one is not a trap oh; it is very serious. In fact we are already talking like long term commitment to each other.” The sombre way he said it made me laugh even harder, but I was still curious to know if he was serious or just pulling my legs. Aguero was happily married and he didn’t do long term commitment with any babe and I could swear he wasn’t the type that went around formalising things with side chicks.

“Who is this babe that has done you strong thing like this abeg?” Aguero was silent, and because the silence lasted for too long, it made both of us uncomfortable.

“Adinna.”

“Adinna? My own Adinna?” I was stunned and surprised I could even still speak.

“Yes,” he replied, still sounding sombre. “Adinna Lakemefa. She and I have been dating for some time now. I just didn’t know how to tell you.”

“Wait, wait wait.” I took the phone away from my right ear and put it back again in disbelief at the bombshell my best friend just dropped. “Abeg make you talk am again.” I was certain Aguero was joking.

“We no plan am, things just happened. I know say I no suppose tell you like this for phone but fear dey catch me to tell you face to face.”

“You’re joking man. Like this is a joke, right? Whatever happened to the bro code?”

“I didn’t mean to break it. Ebinimi, you and me are more than brothers na and you know it. But things happened we couldn’t control. You probably won’t even remember this now, but there was this day about six months ago you asked Adinna to ride with me to Amassoma for lectures and that you’d be joining us later.”

“I remember that day. I eventually couldn’t make it to Amassoma because I had to go to Port Harcourt to tow a vehicle that was involved in an accident along Ada George Road.”

“That was the day. Adinna and I . . . we slept together for the first time. I – we stopped over at the crib to pick up some notebooks or something after the lectures and then . . . I mean it just happened. Like one thing led to another and we found ourselves in that position. We tried to stop after that first time, but you kept cancelling dates with her and giving us more opportunities to be together and stuff kept happening and then emotions got involved.”

“So it’s my fault that my girlfriend and my bestfriend betrayed me.”

“I’m not saying that! I’m just saying that she and I, we have this vibe. Remember when you guys almost got killed recently? Well, I was the one she turned to for comfort because you acted as if you were the only one that could have been killed that day. Seeing how terrified she was, I couldn’t turn her away because she needed someone to pour out her feelings to and now things are really serious between us . . . you know what I mean?”

“No. I don’t know what you mean.”

“Ebinimi . . . please can we meet up somewhere. This isn’t a conversation we should be having over the phone. Let’s talk about this man-to-man—”

We had nothing to talk about, not over the phone and certainly not face-to-face. I cut the call. I didn’t need to hear the full story to know that I’d never speak to Aguero again or forgive Adinna for playing me for a fool.

CHAPTER 9

“Ebinimi, I dey tell you, this guy get political ambition,” my sister Ebiakpo said in a matter-of-fact way after I told her about the outcome of my second meeting with Honourable Aaron in his office. It was the first time I’d be seeing her after her showdown with Blessing following the Anda and Benson disappearing act.

“So, someone cannot do good in this Bayelsa again without people thinking there’s a political undertone or that he has a political ambition, abi?” I asked her. It was also the first time she’d be hearing about the five hundred thousand naira appreciation money I got from Barnabas-Treatment that night at Ox-Bow Lake. I suppose that, plus the latest offer he made to me was all too much for her to take in on a hot Thursday afternoon.

“What do you expect me to think? Twelve cars, who buys twelve cars in one day with the intention of giving them all out as gifts, if not someone with serious political ambitions?”

“When you put it like that, people would think these cars are all tear-rubber. No, they are not. That is why he wants me to go to Lagos to check them out before he pays for them. By the way, out of the twelve vehicles, he told me that two are for his personal use; one is for his pastor; eight are for the eight local government chairmen in the state, while the remaining one is a bus he wants to put on the road under his ABT Foundation’s Mass Transit Scheme to help the people.”

“And you say this man doesn’t want to be governor or senator? Ebinimi I dey tell you, this so-called Honourable no pure. Don’t put your hand in his matter. What if the cars are stolen or something or they are being purchased with stolen government money?” Ebiakpo asked as she followed me into the parlour from the kitchen. “Please let us know the one that is worrying us oh, before you go and involve yourself in EFCC wahala.”

I didn’t know what to make of my sister’s advice. As it stood, she was the only woman in my life because I had broken up with Blessing again and Adinna had left me, and so as far as feminine intuition I could count on went, I didn’t have too many options. As much as I was happy that I got

paid when I was clearly in the wrong, somewhere at the back of my mind I also knew that five hundred thousand naira might just be too much for the favour he thought I did him. After all, it wasn't as if I apprehended or killed the guys sent to get him or something, I merely lay on the floor and got the scare of my life. I mean, I didn't even have to go to the hospital afterwards and even the beautiful Adinna who was with me, wasn't touched.

But, being the sharp Yenagoa boy I was, the last thing I wanted to do was sit down and complain about getting money I didn't think I deserved. I decided that even if I accepted the money, it shouldn't stop me from treading cautiously. With all of his power, position and wealth, didn't Honourable Aaron Barnabas-Treatment know someone else he could send to Lagos to check out the vehicles he wanted to buy? Why did it have to be me? Was there a trap somewhere I wasn't seeing? He had told me that if I could certify the cars as fit and organise drivers to help bring all twelve of them to Yenagoa, I'd get an additional five hundred thousand naira.

The more my sister spoke, the more I became convinced that this trip to Lagos and bringing cars to Yenagoa business wasn't exactly my hustle. I decided there and then to send a text message to Barnabas-Treatment's PA, informing him that I had declined his oga's offer.

I left Ebiakpo in the parlour to get back to the Toyota Avensis I was fixing before the owner came back for it. It had been in a bad accident that affected mostly its rear; so much of the repairs required were on the body of the vehicle and not necessarily mechanical, but I still needed to supervise the panel beater and spray painter I had brought in to do the job. Biodun and BRD were in one corner of the workshop slugging it out with the engine of a rickety Primera while Saka was all by himself, doing battle with the shaft of a white Honda Accord.

We were all lost in the silence of our individual thoughts until Saka, the resident entertainer in Ovom, broke into a song. This time, I could have sworn it was an Indian or Chinese song, but the melody was unmistakably from a song I had heard before and his repeated refrain of two familiar words convinced me he was singing a Wizkid song.

"I chew I chew Isiewu, gbaragbara winchi winchi, ale ale Iseiwu, gbaragbara manya manya –"

"Saka! Saka! I have told you that the way you destroy other people's song

like this, if somebody else destroy the fruit of your labour like that, you won't like it oh!"

"Oga Ebinimi, him no dey destroy the song na, na remix him dey remix am for Wizkid," Biodun said with a straight face, it was hard to tell if he was joking or serious in his defence of Saka.

"So Wizkid wan remix song him no see Drake again abi, na Saka done be DJ Spinall now?"

"I don tell am tire say nothing like gbaragbara for the song, him no wan gree. Me na '*daewoo daewoo*' I dey hear oh."

"No be only Daewoo, na Julius Berger," I mocked Broderick. "See, the next time Lishman of Rhythm 94.7 FM plays that song again on radio, please you guys should clean your ears and listen well well otherwise I go ban singing completely for this my shop," I warned.

Saka ignored my warning and the taunting of his friends—as well as the few customers in the workshop who knew the correct lyrics to the song as he continued with his comical bastardisation of the hit record. He would have gone on with his performance for a little longer if she had not walked in.

She was dark skinned and tall with an upper body built like a boulder. At first glance you'd have thought she was a guy, a very strong guy, the kind of guy that worked as a bouncer in a nightclub or with a politician. But no bouncer I know in Yenagoa would wear a short black dress and long lashes with pretty much nothing else. When she moved, it was as if the ground shook and her voice was like a roar that stopped us all in our tracks. She didn't have to ask for our attention, she got it the moment she walked into the compound.

"Who be Ebinimi? I say which of una be Ebinimi?"

No one would speak, so I pretended my heart wasn't pounding and just blurted out the truth before the other guys pointed at me. "Na me be Ebinimi, who you be and wetin you want?"

"My name na Oyintari, but for this town dem dey call me Jigger or Sucking-Blood. You can choose any one you like because they both mean the same thing. As to your second question, I don't want anything. The person wen want something dey inside car outside dey wait for you."

“Who?” I really shouldn’t have asked. I already knew whom.

CHAPTER 10

I watched transfixed, as fat Tiekuro and his gang of plump all-female bouncers sped off into Melford Okilo Road. For close to five minutes, I was rooted to the same spot where our conversation took place wondering if what just transpired was a dream or if I actually let the small boy get away with threatening me.

What had me immobilised for that long was not the anger, but the fear – the fear that he and the girl that introduced herself as Oyintari AKA Jigger or Sucking-Blood and the two other girls that looked just like her, would actually carry out the actions they promised against me, my family and my workshop if I didn't give in to their demands, or worse still, if I went to the police.

After my recent brush with assassins along Amassoma Road and the incident with Anda and his parents, the last thing I wanted was a situation that would expose me or anyone I cared about to any form of danger. That was why I had put away the gift money from Honourable Aaron, knowing that I was still indebted to Tiekuro who had made it sufficiently clear to me and the guys in the shop that he was going to make our lives a *living hell* if he didn't get back his money. The money from Barnabas-Treatment was a miracle because quite frankly I was tired of looking over my shoulders or worrying that something bad would happen to my sister and her son or to Saka, Biodun and Broderick because of me.

That night I got the money at Ox-Bow Lake, I purposed in my heart to give the whole thing to Tiekuro the next day and that was what I would have done, if the whole Anda vanishing thing hadn't scattered my brain. As soon as that dust settled, I took the money to the bank with the intention of getting Tiekuro's bank account details and transferring it to him so there would be peace again in Kalakala Street, but my phone decided to act up that very day. As luck would have it, a customer that hadn't been to the shop in a long while came in with a burnt top gasket and a UK-used iPhone 7plus for sale. I transferred seventy-five thousand naira to his account for the phone and used another ten thousand naira to get accessorises.

I knew I no longer had the complete five hundred thousand naira, but that wasn't a problem because I knew I was going to make it up again at the end of the month when civil servants in the state would have received their salary and would be bringing in their cars to my shop for maintenance and that was exactly what I told Tiekuro.

When he told me to transfer what I had to his account, I thought he was okay with my explanation. I brought out my new phone, dialled *737# and transferred four hundred and fifteen thousand naira to the Zenith Bank account number he gave me. Within seconds of the debit confirmation on my phone, I heard his phone beep. He had received the alert. That was when he smiled at me and delivered what I considered a blow to my balls.

"This one you give me na the interest. You still never pay me the original five hundred thousand naira when you dey owe me."

"See this guy oh!" I almost lunged at him, but I remembered quickly that he came prepared. "You sure say your head dey correct at all?"

"Na your mama head when no correct!" Jigger growled at me like a rabid dog.

"Jigger make you cool down," Tiekuro spoke calmly and I wondered why. "The guy mama don die."

"Ehnnn, if she die nko, na me kill am?"

"Jigger, I say make you take am easy, abi na your dough dem take? You know say my mumsy too don delete, and I have a soft spot for motherless people like myself. The only thing when I want you to do, na to tell am wetin go happen if he doesn't give me the robs when I dey ask am for by the end of next week."

Jigger grinned and I froze. Whatever her smile was intended to accomplish, it did so effectively because I hadn't noticed the several gaps and discoloured teeth earlier. "This your workshop, we go burn am down . . . anything when we see inside the day we come, whether na person oh, or na motor oh, or na house oh, everything inside we go reduce to charcoal."

"Saka, Biodun –"

"What do you think you are doing?" Tiekuro stopped me before I could ask for reinforcement. "You want to call your workers, abi? So, as we come quietly like this, you no like am abi?"

I changed my mind about calling for help and thought against arguing with them any further. The lead Amazon repeated her threat to burn down my workshop and everything in it, while Tiekuro warned me against going to the police. “You will only be making matters worse for yourself,” he said casually.

Those were his parting words before driving off with his goons. Oyintari sat in front with him, while the other ladies crammed themselves into the backseat of the White Toyota Hilux they came in.

I was afraid and confused as to how five hundred thousand naira suddenly became nine hundred and fifteen thousand naira and how that figure could keep rising if I didn’t do something about it fast. There was no point waiting till the end of next week. It had to end immediately. I brought out my phone from my pocket and dialed a number. While waiting for the voice from the other end to come on, I could overhear Saka singing loudly in his gruff voice across the fence.

“...iphone 4 legbegbe, iphone 5 legbegbe, iphone 6 legbegbe, oya fun won legbegbe, oya fun won legbegbe ...” Perhaps this time he nailed the song, I was too distraught to care.

“Hello?” came the voice from the other end.

“Hello, hello Oga PA, na me Ebinimi. Ebinimi Jacob.”

“Ha Ebinimi, I see your text message oh. I don even tell boss man say you turn down him offer—”

“That is why I’m calling. I have changed my mind. Can you please help me tell Oga Aaron say I don agree to go the Lagos.”

CHAPTER 11

“See, young man. Me, I don’t like people that cannot make up their minds,” Honourable Barnabas-Treatment said in the sluggish way he spoke as if speaking fast would somehow shorten his lifespan. “First, you said you needed time to think about it, and then the next thing we hear is that you’re not doing. Now you are in my office kneeling down and squeezing face like person when dem give bitter leaf chop.”

“My leader, I’m very sorry sir. I have already explained everything to you sir. This person I told you about has sworn to do something bad to my family and me if I don’t give him the money he is demanding from me. Please sir, I need your help.” I refused to get up from the floor even after he told me he didn’t like people going down on their knees for him.

“And you don’t want me to involve the police or call some of my boys to pay this character a visit?”

I tried explaining to him why I didn’t think it was a good idea. Even if he called the commissioner of police, there was no way he and his men could protect us forever. Maybe for a few days we would feel safe, but what happens when they leave? Tiekuro didn’t seem like the kind of person that would let go that easily. I’d rather give him the money and put this whole wahala behind me.

“My leader, no be to go Lagos go carry motor come Yenagoa again? I go do am, today today sef I ready to begin go. The guy is saying that I still owe him five hundred thousand naira after all the money I have given him. Please sir, let me just do this job for you and when you pay me, I will pay him everything he wants so I can get my peace of mind back. Please my leader, I am begging you.” ‘Leader’ was what some of his aides called him and since I needed his help, I felt like I should call him that too, and it felt right.

“This boy Ebinimi, abi wetin be your name, now you are in trouble I have turned to your leader? I don’t operate that way oh, you see me, my yes is yes and my no is no. Period.”

“Oga, I am loyal. Just try me and you go see say I go deliver and you go

enjoy me.”

“Enjoy you, you be woman?” He looked at me, closed his eyes and spoke in his usual lazy manner. “Ebinimi, make you go back to your workshop. You had your chance and you blew it. It is now my turn to sleep over your request. When I’m done thinking and I come to a decision, my PA will contact you.”

I left his office dejected. Ignoring the fifty-six missed calls on my phone, I headed straight to Reverend Ebizimor’s office for prayer and counselling. I noticed Saka and the few customers in the workshop beckoning to me, but I shunned them all. There was no way I was fixing anyone’s car when I had big issues of my own to fix. The way I felt, I knew I wasn’t thinking straight. I was desperate and needed help from wherever I could get it.

Honourable Aaron was the only one with the immediate capacity to rescue me from Tiekuro and his female attack dogs and if some spiritual intervention was required to bring him to that realisation, then so be it. I had paid my dues, well most of it, as far as meeting up with my financial obligations to Reverend Ebizimor and the Jerusalem International Warriors International church went, so perhaps it was time to call in some favours – seek counsel from the overseer and bring in the church to fast-track the resolution of my matter.

As I approached the Reverend’s office, I could hear voices from behind the flush door. Though muffled, I made out two distinct voices, one male and the other female, praying fervently in tongues. It wasn’t clear initially; the prayer points, but as I got closer and strained my ears to eavesdrop on the midmorning supplication, the refrain suddenly became quite audible.

“Die! Die! Die!”

I couldn’t help wondering whose murder the man of God and whoever his prayer partner was at this time were plotting. Thankfully though, I didn’t have to wonder for too long.

“Die! Die! Die! Die oh, Ebinimi Die!” It was Blessing!

I burst into the room and received the shock of my life. My pictures were scattered on the ceramic-tiled floor of his small office. Reverend Ebizimor and Blessing, arms locked in a prayer of agreement were trampling feverishly on pictures of me at different stages of my life. There was one of me as a child and another of me in secondary school. I saw my

matriculation and convocation pictures and lastly, one where I wore my favourite navy blue grease-and-oil-stained coverall. I was standing at the entrance of Kalakala Street, smiling over something I couldn't even remember anymore.

“Blessing!”

“Ebinimi!” Blessing froze, so did Reverend Ebizimor. Clearly, I took them by surprise. “It is not what you think.”

“Blessing, I saw you jumping on my photo and wishing death on me. There's only one thing to think.”

“Ebinimi, it isn't how it looks. We were praying for you to die in the heart of any woman trying to take you away from me.”

“Or lead you away from the church and em . . . em . . . Christ, don't forget to add that.” Reverend Ebizimor said, too embarrassed to look me in the eyes.

I was in no mood to listen to their lies, so I stormed out of the office and locked myself up in my room. I took a long swig from the bottle of Red Label I always had underneath my bed for times like this when the only way out of my problems was to drink something really strong and get drunk. I wasn't quite there yet, but I think I was pretty close to being inebriated when the call came.

“Oga say make you come now now for him hotel when dey Baybridge.” It was Honourable Aaron's PA.

Half an hour later, I was with him in his hotel room. My heart was pounding as if it was part of the drums of a marching band, and I couldn't hide my anxiety.

“I have changed my mind about the Lagos trip. I do not think it is the right job for you.”

My heart sank.

“But, there's something even more important and profitable that has just come up, and I believe you can handle it easily.”

My heart lifted again.

“I will give you seven hundred and fifty thousand naira now and another seven hundred and fifty thousand naira when the job is done.

Instinctively, I did the math in my head. After paying off Tiekuro, I'd still have one million naira to play with. "I will do it sir. Just tell me what it is and it's done."

"I have confirmed the identity of the person that tried to kill me. I could tell you why he wants me dead, but that information could put you in very serious trouble. So, I would just tell you what I want you to do me. For you, it would be an opportunity to make quick money, but for me, it is revenge, sweet revenge."

"I'm listening, my leader."

"His name is Sir Thomas Kimikeama, and his son Waritimi Kimikeama I understand is someone you know very well."

My jaw dropped. "Yes sir. Waritimi and I go way back."

"Now, this is what you will do for me and for your family," he paused. "You will plant some guns and cocaine in the boot of your friend's car. There will be an anonymous tip-off to the police and he will be arrested. Now, don't worry about him getting into too much trouble. I'm sure his father will get him out eventually, but not before the scandal of his arrest would have embarrassed him, cut short his 2019 political ambition, and teach the wretched bastard never to try me again."

I was tongue-tied. I didn't know how to relate to the breaking news that a man I'd known and respected for most of my life as a leader in the state and the father of one of my closest friends could be associated with kidnap and murder. I was confused. Could Sir Thomas Kimikeama really be the mastermind of the assassination attempt that may have cost me my life?

If Barnabas-Treatment had named him the target of his revenge plot, then maybe he knew what he was talking about, in which case the stakes just got a little bit higher and it wasn't just about the money for me anymore.

It was true, we had been friends for so many years, but didn't Waritimi "Aguero" Kimikeama stab me in the back when he stole my girl Adinna from me?

As I walked out of Honourable Aaron's hotel suite with the brown envelope containing the part payment for the job I had just accepted to do for him, the only thought that crossed my mind was, payback is a bitch!

CHAPTER 12

“Saka, do you know that our customer that lives in Otio? The one that uses that brown Lexus Jeep?”

Saka nodded.

“He said the fuel in his car is leaking and he is afraid to start it. I want you and Broderick to go and see what the problem is. Make una nor go sleep for road oh or tanda for there like say work nor dey here. When una finish, him go give una the money when him dey owe me, plus anything when him put on top for una today work and transport.”

“Wetin make we do with the money?” asked Saka.

“Which kain foolish question be dat? You nor go bring the money come give me again, abi na your money?”

I watched him leave to get his toolbox and fetch Broderick. I reminded them again as they left for Otio, that I needed them back in no time because of the amount of work already piling up and the customers calling to ask when they could come for their cars. It was a Thursday, and knowing Bayelsans and how their Fridays and Saturdays were spent attending burial ceremonies and marriages, most of the people who had brought in their cars for maintenance would like to have them back before nightfall.

As crazy as things were in the shop, I had never had a crazier week. And the craziest part of it was yet to come. With everything I was dealing with, I really couldn't care much about broken down vehicles and their angry or dissatisfied owners.

If someone had told me, even a week before, that I would have guns – two fully loaded AK 47 rifles and three locally made pistols inside my house, I would have called that person a dreamer. But that was exactly the situation I found myself, and it was terrifying.

Honourable Aaron Barnabas-Treatment's personal assistant – who at that point insisted that I call him Mr Freedom because I was now 'one of the boys' – had called me two nights ago. He said on the 'bossman's' instructions, they were coming with the guns and cocaine to my house the

next day, so I had to stay up late to receive them. They came in a little after midnight, because I needed to be certain no one was awake when I received the *goods* .

The other heavy matter on ground was handling Aguero. The reconciliation with him wasn't as difficult as I had anticipated. I guess he realised that he was the one that offended me, so when I called him three days earlier, he answered at the first ring. I bet he was surprised I called to ask if I could ride with him and Adinna to Amassoma for lectures like we were cool. Of course, Adinna opted out when she heard I wanted to join them, but that didn't bother me at all. Clearly, she was on a guilt trip as she should be if she had any ounce of conscience in her backstabbing heart.

Riding with Aguero was all part of my plan. When we were about halfway to Amassoma, I asked him to reduce the volume of the music playing in the car because I thought I could hear an unusual sound that wasn't the voice of Childish Gambino performing *This is America* . I am a mechanic so of course he believed me when I said the sound was coming from the engine. To scare him even more, I told him not to exceed 80km per hour to avoid causing any major damage to the car. Because of how convincing I sounded, he was even the one that suggested I drove on the return journey to Yenagoa so I could take the car to my workshop after dropping him off at home.

So Aguero's car was in my compound and the guns were arranged underneath the bed in the unoccupied guestroom reserved for when Ebiakpo stayed over for a vigil. The two *Ghana-Must-Go* bags couldn't fit under the bed and leaving them in a corner would be too conspicuous in case someone barged into the room. Anyway since I was the sole custodian of the room keys, I thought it was the safest place to hide Mr Freedom's delivery until I was ready to make the transfer to Aguero's car.

I had everything figured out. By 10 p.m. I asked Broderick to turn off the generator, forcing all three of my housemates to bed early. Like I did when they brought the guns and narcotics, I waited until midnight just to be sure no one was awake before going into the guestroom to retrieve them. With only the light from my phone guiding me, I tiptoed out of my bedroom and into the hallway. I carefully turned the lock and entered the guestroom, but just as I slid to get under the bed for the *goods* , I heard footsteps.

It was unexpected, I froze. Next thing I knew, someone was trying to open

the door and the intruder succeeded. By this time, my heart was palpitating. Could it be robbers? Instinctively, I pulled my legs completely underneath the bed and stayed still, scared of what fate could befall me if I were detected. Thankfully it was pitch-black in the room.

“Shhhhhhhh, no make noise.” It was Saka! *What the fuck!* What was Saka doing in the guestroom at this time of the night?

“You don’t lock the door?” I recognised the second voice too. It was Sister Agnes, Blessing’s friend and fellow choir member in Reverend Ebizimor’s church. I couldn’t imagine why they were both in the one room in the house only I had the keys to, but I was sure going to find out. My prayer as their footsteps got closer to the bed, was that my carefully structured plan shouldn’t go up in flames.

“Yes. Make you no fear, I get my own key when I cut, besides everybody for this house don’t sleep,” I heard Saka clearly, even though he was whispering. “Agi, Agi . . . Agi my tomato juice, Agi my assurance, make you no worry oh, I don’t plan everything well well this night.”

“Make you no *Agi* me anything, oya where the money?”

“But we go finish first na, abi make I give you the money before we start?”

“Saka, I no wan hear story abeg. I tell you say the cloth when I wan use for my sister marriage on Saturday still dey tailor place and the balance to collect am na six thousand naira.”

“Na 6k be your problem. The money wen customer pay my oga dis afternoon still dey my hand so if I fit do two round dis night sef, I no mind to double am for you.”

The sudden creak above my head told me they were now on the bed. Their combined weight pressing on the mattress made me fear for my life. I froze still; I didn’t want to mistakenly squeeze a trigger. If anything happened to that bed, I was dead.

There was silence for a while and then heavy breathing, which was followed by kissing sounds. As the sounds grew louder, I could sense it wasn’t kissing anymore and my imagination ran wild. This went on for a few more minutes and the next thing I heard was – “Saka, your father . . . I repeat am your father.” There was moaning on both sides, and then, “your

father,” again. The bed was squeaking badly now, but none of them seemed to care at this point, and neither did I.

I couldn’t believe that those two were having unprotected sex on what used to be my grandparents’ bed. Alas, the devout Sister Agnes was a tigress in bed!

I wouldn’t know exactly how long it happened, because I was uncomfortable for the most part trying to stay still and hold my breath, but I guess the gyrating and muffled name-calling did something to me. The audible sigh of climatic denouement that Sister Agnes heard when it was over was not her lover’s. It was mine.

“Who was that?”

“What?”

“The sound from under the bed?”

“Maybe na rat?”

“Rat no dey make that kind noise,” she insisted.

It wasn’t Saka but Sister Agnes who summoned courage to look under the bed. I tried covering my face with my hands, but with the full light of her phone beamed on me, there was no mistaking who it was. Any even if I had hidden myself, there were other things to be seen.

“Brother Jacob!” And she passed out.

CHAPTER 13

I came out from under the bed with the tell-tale signs of my accidental voyeurism splattered on my grey sweat shorts and my heart full of shame. But thank God for the semi-darkness in the room and the frenzy of trying to revive Sister Agnes.

I helped Saka lift his woman from the floor and unto the bed; her modesty covered up with my family's defiled bedsheet. At that point, I had completely forgotten about the guns and drugs right under the bed because what was uppermost in my mind was making sure that we didn't have a dead girl on our hands. If anything bad happened to Agnes, it was going to be very difficult explaining her nakedness and her death to law enforcement officers.

A visibly shaken Saka shook her body as he called out her name.

"Agnes, Agi, Agi—" He didn't realise his voice was getting louder and louder as he called, so I tried hushing him up by gently pulling him away from Agnes.

But my apprentice brushed aside my concern for discretion with so much ferocity I almost landed on the floor. Saka tried stirring Sister Agnes back to consciousness by shouting her name repeatedly; something I didn't think was a good idea. I had hoped that between him and me we could somehow contain the situation and avoid the scandal that was sure to erupt if Biodun and Broderick became involved but we were both helpless and he was really frantic and desperate.

I steadied myself and cautioned Saka again to bring down his voice, but it was too late.

Biodun and Broderick came bursting into the room like the pair of Aki and Paw-Paw from those crazy nollywwod movies from back in the day. Their humongous rechargeable lamps were pointed at a shocked and traumatised Saka and I. One of them had a machete and the other was holding a spanner. I didn't know whether to let them stay or order them back to their room. Before I could decide what option was best, given that we still had an unconscious woman to worry about, Biodun I think it was, summed up

courage and asked the one question I didn't want to hear.

"Oga Ebinimi, Saka, wetin dey happen for here?"

In that moment, it took only a few seconds for me to assess the situation and analyse the options: it didn't look good at all. Beside me was an unclad Saka, and on the bed was a partially exposed Sister Agnes. I could only imagine what was going through their minds. If I were in their position, I'd have thought the three of us were into some kind of freaky shit.

"Una . . . una dey alright so?" This time I was sure who it was. It was Broderick.

"When . . . when we hear . . . hear . . . hear shout, we been think say na . . . na . . . na thief people don enter house oh," Biodun added, stuttering from obvious confusion.

"No be sister Agnes dey on top bed—"

"Why una dey ask question like say una be police when want collect money from keke man?" I barked at Broderick. "Enter kitchen bring water for me jor, make we see how we go wake this girl, before this matter gather muscle."

Broderick and Biodun scurried out of the room to do as I asked, while a distraught Saka reached for his cloths and put them back on. The boys came back with a bucket of water each, but we only needed one to do the trick.

Once Sister Agnes regained consciousness, Saka broke down in tears and she joined him. Understandably, she couldn't look any of us guys in the eyes, and I couldn't quite make out if the words she muttered were thank yous to us for saving her life or for looking away as she got back into her cloths.

I ordered all of them out of the guestroom so I could be alone. I couldn't imagine my body on that bed without some form of cleansing by Reverend Ebizimor or anyone else I could find first thing in the morning. Confused still, I sat on the cold tiled floor trying to figure out what had just happened. With what transpired a short while ago, I doubted anyone was going to ask me what I was doing in the guestroom of my own house. They dared not. The real question was what Saka and the born again chorister, and sometimes usher of the church in my compound were doing in my guestroom at that time of the night.

As I sat down in the dark, listening to the sounds of the night, I couldn't help wondering if it was a sign for me to discontinue with my plans of helping Honourable Aaron destroy a political foe through his son. Apart from stealing Adinna away from me, Agüero had been a good friend. Cross that, he was like the brother I never had. Did I really want to put someone that was once that close to me through such a terrible ordeal and make him suffer for the sins of his father because of a girl I was going to break up with eventually?

I didn't know how long I sat there in the dark pondering my next move, but when I found strength to get back on my feet, my mind was made up. I didn't care whether anyone saw me or not. I didn't have to tiptoe or try not to bump into anything or anyone in the hallway. I didn't care how loudly the front door creaked when I opened it or what dangers were lurking in the yard at that time of the night. What had to be done, had to be done.

Everything fitted back into two medium-sized ghana-must-go bags that I carried by myself to the boot of Agüero's car, which was already positioned for my convenience behind a huge truck in the workshop. After making sure the trunk was firmly locked, I went into the house and confirmed the same thing for the guestroom door. Back in my room, I changed into a blue and white striped cotton pyjama bottom before jumping into bed. From across the fence just by my window, my neighbour's annoying cock did its thing, which was how I knew it was exactly 4 a.m.

I was sure I started snoring before my head hit the pillow. Sleep was sweet and filled with dreams of Sister Agnes doing sweet things to me.

CHAPTER 14

I got the alert at exactly 4:48 p.m. I was at the mechanic village along Imiringi Road negotiating the cost of a tokunbo gearbox urgently required by the driver to the chairman of Sagbama local government council, who needed to have his boss' Honda Pilot fixed.

He had towed the vehicle to my workshop from somewhere around Mbiama junction this morning. This driver had gone out on a frolic of his own when the car started acting up. Seeing how afraid and desperate he was for the car to be repaired before the owner found out, I had to abandon everything else I was working on in the workshop to assist him put the car back on the road.

The amount stated on the GTBank notification I received was seven hundred and fifty thousand naira as expected, and the transaction narration read from BusBode Limited. I wasn't familiar with that name or company, but there was no prize for guessing whom the money was from and what it was meant for.

Because it was exactly the amount of the second instalment promised by Honourable Barnabas-Treatment when the job I was contracted to execute for him was completed, it could only mean one thing – mission accomplished. The deed was done and I had been paid fully. Even if I had wanted to, there was no turning back now. Agüero must have been apprehended.

In that instant, my heart sank. I should have been over the moon with joy and excitement, but what I felt was far from joy or excitement. What had I done? Instead of the relief of accomplishing a challenging task, what I felt was the shame of betrayal. I tried to tell myself that it wasn't betrayal, but just me taking my pound of flesh from someone who had wronged me, but it wasn't working.

The owner of the shop I was buying the parts from, a neatly-dressed man in his early thirties, was boasting to me, in an unusually loud and heavy Igbo accent, that as far as gearboxes went, other spare parts dealers in Yenagoa came to him to "learn work." In other words, there was nowhere

else I could go to for what I wanted, short of ordering from Ladipo in Lagos. He was telling me about the dangers of that option, but what I heard him say instead was “Judas, why?” evidently, my mind was playing tricks on me.

I tried stifling my guilt by stepping out of his dingy store for air, but the voices in my head and all around me became even louder. The chant of “Judas! Judas!” seemed to be coming from every buyer and seller in the spare parts market. The intensity of these imaginary voices and the apprehension they created in me must have upset the enzymes in my innards, because all of a sudden I heard an audible growl from my stomach.

“Oga Chinedu, abeg where una toilet dey?”

“Na piss you wan piss, abi na toilet you wan toilet?”

“I wan toilet.”

“Ah, that one go hard oh, de person wen dey hold de toilet key no open shop today, so if de thing dey catch you well well e be like say na dat bush for yonder you go go do am oh.”

“Ah, inside bush? Wetin I go take clean—”

“You go buy pure water from that woman for junction,” he said, pointing at a young lady wearing a clingy spaghetti-strap dress.

When I got back to Ovom, my boys were busy at work, which was a big relief because I still couldn’t bring myself to look at them directly in their eyes, especially Saka. I noticed how quiet he had been all day and he hadn’t even broken out into a song.

Every time we came in contact with each other in the house or in the workshop, or if I needed to give him instructions, I noticed the discomfiture in his demeanour. I suspected he saw the same thing when he looked at me, and nothing could be truer. In a weird way, I was certain the voice of Agnes moaning, “your father, I repeat am your father . . .” like a knock-off version of Simi would hunt me for months to come.

After work, I called Mr Freedom. I thought I could get details about Aguerro’s arrest and how it all played out from him but he was tight-lipped. He turned down my offer for drinks at 64 Lifestyle and hurried off the phone. Just then, Biodun came in with a plate of jollof rice and fried plantain he said he cooked himself for me. It was my first real meal in two

days, but I couldn't eat it. It tasted like horseshit! There was too much pepper and very little salt in it. The awful taste of Biodun's concoction made me miss Blessing and her cooking.

I reached for my phone and transferred thirty thousand naira to Blessing. When she called to ask what the money was for, as I knew she would, I told her it was for fresh fish pepper soup and unripe plantain. I expected the insults and hesitation, and I was prepared for both. I told her I was sorry for my outburst the last time – and all the other sweet nothings she loved to hear me say to her.

“Ebinimi, Ebinimi, why you dey treat me like this?”

“You know say if person when you no love do you something, e no dey pepper body? I love you, that na why every small thing when you do dey burst my brain.”

“Ebinimi, Ebinimi, make I no call you three times oh.”

“If you call me three times, that one mean say na serious yawa for my side na,” I joked. “See, Blessing, na beg I dey beg you. I’ve been through so much lately, I just need pepper soup with something soft to cool me down this night, you know na?”

“Hmmmm . . .” she paused for a bit. “Where I want to see fresh fish buy this night? Okay, I go try Kpansia night market.”

Blessing didn't disappoint; the food tasted like heaven. After eating the sumptuous fish and plantain, we got down to some hard tackle and a full yoga session to help ease my tensed nerves.

When we finished, I felt emboldened to call Tiekuro. I had put off calling him even after I got the first installment from Aaron on that day he told me about the job because I wanted to be sure of how the whole thing went before spending the money. Now that I knew, there was no point avoiding him any longer. His number wasn't on my phone, so I asked Biodun to get to him with word that I'd like to meet with him in the morning.

When I heard the knock on my room door at five-thirty in the morning, I was certain it was Tiekuro and his all-female squad. I was half-expecting them after all, but I didn't think they'd show up that early. Blessing stirred from underneath the duvet. She wanted to know who it was, but I ignored her question.

I had steeled myself to pay him off and then give him a piece of my mind afterwards about why I thought he should never threaten me or any member of my family again. But when I opened the door, it wasn't Tiekuro or Sucking Blood standing there.

It was Adinna.

CHAPTER 15

“It looks like I’m interrupting something—”

I didn’t let her finish. If Blessing sensed it was another woman wanting to see me that early in the morning, there was going to be trouble and I didn’t want that, at least not so soon after settling with her and giving her the full assurances of my undying love and devotion.

“Adinna, what are you doing here so early in the morning?” I whispered. Of course, I already knew the answer, so I could only hope that I nailed my angry face and surprise voice. I pulled her to the living room and joined her on the sofa. She seemed distraught and broken, like she was struggling to get something off her chest. So, I asked, this time even gentler, “Are you okay?”

“Ebinimi, I know it’s early, but I couldn’t sleep last night. Something terrible happened yesterday; I don’t know if you’ve heard already?”

At that point, I widened my *okpolor* eyes for effect and in pretend anticipation of what was to come, so she wouldn’t suspect I already knew what she was about to say.

“It’s Aguero. He was arrested yesterday. The police found guns and cocaine in his car.”

“What?” It was all I could say. Before I could think of what next to add so I came across as believable, Blessing walked into the parlour. She had on one of my white BYC undershirts that barely covered the flagship of her lady parts and nothing else. She did a sexy walk to where I was and wrapped her arms around me, completely ignoring my female visitor.

I didn’t know she had it in her to speak with so much tenderness, so it must have taken a lot of practice for Blessing to sound so sweet and demure before an adversary. It wasn’t a side of her she showed often, but I could tell the strategy was intentional.

“Baby, did you see the pink bra I left in your room the last time I slept over? I wasn’t wearing any when you called me to come and be with you yesterday.”

I saw Adinna cringe where she sat. I could tell she was embarrassed and uncomfortable, but I guess the problem that brought her to my house that early was bigger than the morning-after glow of her ex's lover.

"Ebinimi, make I dey go. Clearly, I came at a bad time." Adinna started to get up from the chair, but I motioned to her not to leave.

"See, Blessing we go look for your bra ehn, but I have a guest that has come to discuss a very serious problem with me."

Blessing hesitated, but I guess it occurred to her in that moment that if it was a contest, she had the upper hand. She was the one I spent the night with and she literally had the T-shirt to prove it and even rub it in. Her performance to mark her territory had been executed quite successfully.

After releasing me from her embrace, Blessing planted a kiss on the nape of my neck before going back into the room. Adinna waited a few seconds after hearing the bedroom door close before she continued.

"Ebinimi, I know I wronged you and you have every right to be angry with me, but right now, you are the only one I can run to. No matter what has transpired between us, you, Aguero and I, he is still your friend. You and I know that he has his own problems oh, and he can get himself involved in some shady things, but guns and drugs? Aguero isn't that kind of person and you know it."

"Well . . ." I paused, as if in deep contemplation of the situation before continuing, "all these bunkering and *kpo fire* business he puts his hands into sometimes exposes people to all kinds of bad actors and dangerous characters."

"I know he's into illegal refining and smuggling of crude oil, but guns and cocaine? Ebinimi, that's not your friend na. That isn't the Aguero I know."

"So what do you want us to do now? Are his parents aware? Is Preye—" I hesitated, not sure if it was appropriate for me to bring up his wife, but Adinna didn't seem to mind.

"She's aware, so are his parents. I understand his dad has even spoken with the police commissioner," she hesitated for a bit and then continued, "but I know something the rest of them don't."

"You do?" My eyes popped again. This time it wasn't pretence, but real concern. It looked like my secret was out and that was why Adinna came to

see me. “What do you know?” I managed to ask without revealing how scared I was.

“I know it was a set up, and I also know who is responsible.” I was already drafting my confessional statement in my head when she added, “It is Justus.”

Phew! She thought it was her *aristo* ! She thought it was her boss, Justus Woyinpereowei, the 63-year-old Commissioner for Employment, Rehabilitation & Social Welfare who had asked her to be his second wife and she had turned down many times, only to accept the same position from the much younger, virile and good looking Aguero.

Adinna was convinced her boss was responsible for her fiancé’s arrest and gun and drug possession charges because he had said to her only two days before the arrest that if he didn’t marry her, no one else would.

You should have seen the relief on my face, hands, legs and every other part of my body when I realised Justus Woyinpereowei was her main suspect and not I. I was surprised I hadn’t thought of that angle, because as I did, it made perfect sense to go along with her conspiracy theory and perpetrate the notion of her sugar daddy’s complicity in the frame-up of her latest guy.

Even though she and Aguero really hurt me, a part of me felt terribly guilty that I was even having a conversation with her about an innocent person when I knew the truth about the guns. It was like I was in a Star Wars movie and had crossed over to the dark side.

“You mean someone as highly placed as that in government is after Aguero?” I acted surprised. “Are you willing to say this to the police or even before a judge in court?”

“Yes, I am. The man threatened me only a few days ago. I swear, Justus made it clear that he was prepared to teach us a lesson, we wouldn’t forget in a hurry when I told him again that I was serious about not wanting to sleep with him anymore since Aguero and I started talking marriage.”

“Nonsense!” I exclaimed. Adinna must have thought my outburst and anger were directed at her moneybag, when all the while I was wondering if the gold-digger thought I was a fool. Aguero was young and handsome, but he was also rich and from a wealthy background. If it was money she was after, he had more than enough to spend on her so it made perfect sense for

her to leave me for him and that was exactly what she did. What I couldn't fathom was why in the world she would come to one jilted lover to complain about the threat from another jilted lover? But I played along.

"So, what are we going to do now?"

"Ebinimi, I don't know. I can't even go and visit him at the police station because of his wife," Adinna said crying.

A part of me wanted to sympathise with her, while the other part was happy that my contrived karma had served up a very cold dish.

"Crying wouldn't solve anything, Adinna. Let me prepare so I can go and see him in the station. He's at Ekeki police station, right?"

"No, he's at the SARS office at Road Safety road.

I saw her off to the gate where the cab driver that brought her was already fast asleep and snoring loudly. When I got back to the room, Blessing was all dressed up to leave. But I trust my girl; she wasn't about to leave without a fight.

"Well done oh, Ebinimi. I see say this na your 'bring-back-all-the-old-firewood' week, abi? Look, make I first tell you, that sugar when you dey put for mouth before you call me go soon melt."

"Blessing, wetin come dey bring this kind talk this early morning again?"

"Ask me, Ebinimi; I say make you ask me. You don see *mumu* Blessing, no be so? If to say I nor dey house, nor be *jogodo* that *karishika* come find for Ovom this early *momo* ? After you tell me last night say una no dey again, she still dey come find you. But you see as my God take expose the two of una, abi?"

"See, I'm not ready for your wahala this morning abeg. You when dey shout, 'expose,' not you and Reverend Ebizimor God expose to me the other day?" I got back into bed and covered myself up with the duvet, signalling to her that I was in no mood for her drama.

"Make I tell you ehn, na that your sister when him pikin no resemble her husband God go expose."

That made me jump out of bed. Was she hinting at something, insinuating anything? I had to ask her directly.

"I'm not insinuating anything Ebinimi. But the next time you see your

nephew, if woman never blind your eye before then, take a good look at his face and you will see who the boy really resembles.”

Blessing was out of the door before I could stop her.

All through the morning, and even afternoon, I tried crushing the seed she had planted in my head about Anda by concentrating on fixing the cars brought in for repairs by my customers, but the *table* she had *shaken* wouldn't stay still.

Even though I was busy with one vehicle after the other, and Tiekuro had agreed that we meet in the evening at Ayalla Hotel to finalise the issue of his balance, my mind kept going back to what Blessing said about my sister and her son.

When Blessing asked me to take a good look at my nephew's face, was she stylishly confirming something about my sister, Ebiakpo, that I had been suspecting myself for a long time?

CHAPTER 16

S aka was singing again. In fact, he had been singing all day, to the delight of Biodun and BRD and the amusement of our customers.

“Pepper ri pe pepper dey pepper, no go dey do pass yasef, pepper ri pe pepper dey pepper, no go dey do pass yourself . . .”

For reasons best known to him, he stayed with Kizz Daniel throughout the day, but by early evening, he had switched to Wizkid, and that should have warned me that something was off because it was out of character for him to do that. If you knew Saka well, you’d know that he’s a one-song-a-day kind of guy.

“Eledumare bless you with body oh baby, star boy go bless you with money oh baby – saka saka, saka saka baby, saka saka, saka saka baby, oya gbesi lock up, lock up lock up lock up—”

“So for ya mind, Wizkid put ya name for him song oh?” BRD said, but his mockery didn’t deter Saka one bit.

“Saka, saka, saka . . .” Saka went on singing and making these strange moves with his hands and feet that could have passed for shaku shaku, but Saka wasn’t known for his dance steps. The people in the workshop were in stitches and if I didn’t have so much on my mind, maybe I too would have joined them in laughing.

I was torn between confronting Ebiakpo about Anda and letting it go, plus as the time for my meeting drew closer, I began to question the wisdom in letting that small boy Tiekuro threaten my family and walk all over me because he had some lady bouncers as bodyguards. So I’d be hustling and making money and he’d just be collecting it from me, abi? I thought to myself.

After everything I had been through, from the failed carjack and near assassination attempt, meeting Barnabas-Treatment, being betrayed by my best friend and girlfriend, to the successful frame-up of Aguero, if I hadn’t grown an extra pair of balls, thick ones for that matter, I never would.

At the close of work, I put a call through to Mr Freedom and when he

confirmed to me that his boss, Honourable Aaron, would see me that evening, I had no choice but to request a rescheduling of the meeting with Tiekuro. I lied to him about a family emergency and he didn't seem to mind since I had assured him that I had the money he was asking for.

While dressing up for my appointment with my "new boss," there was a knock on my room door. It was Saka. He said he had something important to discuss with me. I was going to tell him I had somewhere to be, that if it was about him and Agnes, I didn't want any part of it, but I decided to hear him out.

"Oga Ebinimi, I been hear something for radio this afternoon oh."

"Ehn, wetin be dat?" I was already looking at the clock on the wall. I didn't want to be late for my meeting.

"Dem announce for radio three times today say Oga Aguero dey detention for police station because dem see gun and something like *kush* for him car."

I froze. Why would Aguero's arrest make the news? It might have been politically motivated, but Honourable Aaron and his people didn't warn me about a media blitz. In my head, I was thinking where this was going; I mean Aguero's arrest and Saka's strange interest in the story.

"I already heard about it this morning from Adinna." After a brief pause, I continued: "I didn't realise it was announced on radio as well."

"The news surprise me sha, because I sabi how tight the two of una dey. As I hear the news finish, I come call Agi."

"Wetin concern Sister Agnes with Aguero arrest?"

"She bin see something for under bed that day. That na why she bin collapse for ground *ayakata* ."

"She saw me under the bed, she was shocked. That was why she fainted."

"That na true, but she also see plenty guns."

I didn't like where this was going and I told Saka so.

"Saka, I think this is the point where you stop talking before you say something you don't know."

"Oga Ebinimi, I like that girl, and I go like marry her. But you know how things don be for this country since this new government take over. We

need money to put things together, plus the roof for my papa house for Ogbomosho don almost fall comot.” He stopped talking suddenly – there was no need for him to continue, the message had been passed.

“How much?”

“Something like 300k. Unless . . .”

Saka was blackmailing me. He had been planning this all day and that was why he had been singing and dancing all afternoon. I couldn’t believe the drama unfolding before my very eyes.

“Unless wetin?”

“Nothing oh, Oga. I just dey tell you because I no know who fit be my helper.”

I dismissed him, with a promise to look into his request.

When I met Honourable Aaron in his room at Ebis Hotel, I asked him about the publicity the arrest was getting, and he brushed off my concerns. I also told him there might be trouble with an eyewitness in my compound and he laughed off that as well. He said he was sure I could handle my apprentice without causing trouble for everyone. I had no choice but to assure him that I could deal with the situation without his intervention.

I hadn’t thought of the *how* , but I was sure if Saka needed three hundred thousand naira for his silence, then maybe it wasn’t such a big problem after all. We discussed Tiekuro and how to put a stop to him and the advice I got from Barnabas left me feeling happy, in fact happier and more relieved than I had felt in months.

The next evening, I made sure to get to the obscure bar along PDP road before Tiekuro and his girls did. The change of venue from Ayalla Hotel to this new location was an idea that came about from my discussion with Honourable Aaron. Luckily for me, Tiekuro didn’t object to it. As I saw them approaching the isolated corner I picked for the meeting, I turned my iPhone face down and slid it between my thighs where no one could see it.

Tiekuro spoke first. “How e dey be na? So, do you have my balance now?”

“I do,” came my response. I brought out a wad of notes from my pocket and placed it on the table.

“This doesn’t look like 500k.”

“No, it’s not. It is 85k, the exact amount I owe you.”

“See this guy oh, e be like say you no like your life abi?” Tiekuro barked. “You wan take me play reggae music? I go light you, I swear. I go light your sister, her husband and their pikin if you no give me my money complete, I swear. Oyintari, oya ask this nigga how him want make we smoke them – bullet or knife?”

“This one when you dey threaten to light person so, you go first tell me wetin we do to deserve am na.”

“You see money for car when no be your own, you spend am. When I say make you return am, you begin dey do me turn turn.”

“But I return 415k out of the 500k, so your balance suppose be 85k. So make I ask you now oh, na because of 85k you wan kill me and all my family members?”

“Who dey talk about that kind of small money? Look my friend, anything when I been don collect from your hand before now na interest. You never give me back my original 500k.”

“Tiekuro abi wetin be your name, you sure say you no dey high on some mary jay?”

“See this guy oh, wetin come dey give you morale like this? I go wipe you out of the surface of this earth and nothing go happen. Even if I say you go dey give me 500k every month from your workshop sef, wetin you go fit do?”

At that point, I felt I had heard enough, so I brought out my phone from between my legs. I placed it on the table so everyone could see it was on, and that the speakerphone mode was activated.

“Mr Freedom,” I spoke to the phone. “You still dey there?”

“Loud and clear Ebinimi,” came the gruff voice of Aaron Barnabas-Treatment’s PA from the other end of the line.

“What is happening here?” Tiekuro asked, furiously pushing bottles and glasses on the table to the ground.

Since he needed an explanation, I offered him one.

“You see, you were on speakerphone and everything you said has been recorded by my friend on the other end of the phone, who by the way isn’t

very far away from here. He can see you and your girls very clearly so you want to consider your next move very carefully,” I advised. “Now that we’ve gotten that out of the way, I guess you know what would happen to you, if anything happens to me or anyone in my family.”

“Chai! Chai! Na me you do this kind thing to, me Tiekuro?”

“Thank you Mr Freedom, I can take it from here.” I ended the call, and then turned to a very subdued and deflated Tiekuro. You see my friend, I no be bad person. I go give you money, 100k, but you and your lionesses will have to work for it.”

“How do you mean?”

“I would need you and your thugs to take care of a certain nuisance for me.”

“Na who be dat when dey worry you, boss?”

The power dynamics had just changed. I was sure Tiekuro didn’t realise he just called me “boss.”

“He’s name is Saka; he is one of the mechanics in my workshop.”

CHAPTER 17

O yintari, AKA Jigger, AKA Sucking Blood, asked me what Saka looked like, and so I handed over to her the only copy of his photograph I had. It was from four years ago during Anda's dedication in Reverend Ebizimor's church. He was not alone in the picture. Back then, Broderick hadn't joined the workshop, so it was Aguero and me in the middle, flanked by Saka to our right and Biodun on our left. Biodun was tall and gangly, and a lot slimmer then, but Saka didn't change much. We were about the same height and build, but he was darker and his broad smile made him stand out in the photo even though I was better dressed and clearly the focus of the photographer – or so I imagined.

My decision to bring along a physical picture was because I didn't think it was smart transferring some more recent photos I had of him from my phone to Tiekuro's or one of his girls'. It wasn't as if they were going to kill him or anything like that, they would only teach Saka a lesson on my behalf, but still I felt exercising caution was not out of place. I didn't want anything or anyone linking me to whatever action Tiekuro decided to take. I was wiser now.

I did show them some more pictures from my phone though, but that was how far I was prepared to go even after they kept insisting they needed a clearer image of the target.

When I got back to the house, everyone was asleep. Thankfully, NEPA – or is it Port Harcourt Distribution Company they call them these days – decided we could join the rest of civilisation, so I saw an episode of Power, the one where Ghost was released from prison and his son Tariq was starting to become a villain.

It was almost a quarter past midnight when sleep came. I kept waking up intermittently because I was having the same bad dream about someone dying. The first time, there was a body on the ground but it didn't have a face. The second time, it had a face but it wasn't someone I knew. The last one was of a boy. I recognised him as one of the kids on Kalakala Street, but when he spoke, it was in Anda's voice. He said, "touch not my

anointed” two times and even in the dream, I found myself wondering how a dead man could speak.

I woke up to pray and drink some olive oil. It was the special one Reverend Ebizimor sold for three thousand naira to his congregants because of the bottle it came in and the anointing it possessed. And it helped.

The first thing I did in the morning was to call Ebiakpo. That dream about her son made me realise that we hadn’t seen in a while, not since Blessing dropped the bombshell about my nephew’s paternity anyway.

She sounded excited on the phone. Ebiakpo said something about her husband Benson being awarded a contract by the state government to build some classroom blocks in Ekeremor. The value of the contract made my jaw drop, but I quickly picked it up again from the ground to invite myself over to her house to “wash” it.

“Before you come, I go don prepare correct starch and banga soup dey wait you,” Ebiakpo said. We said our goodbyes and then I ended the call.

As an Ijaw man that can eat starch and banga soup for breakfast, lunch and dinner, I wasn’t going to Ebiakpo’s house because of the food alone. I needed to study Anda’s face so I could see for myself that he really looked like Reverend Ebizimor.

For some reason, it was a slow day at the workshop, and as at 11 o’clock only two cars had come in – one requiring a simple oil change and the other was to change the shocks. Since I was planning to see Aguero at the police station, I didn’t want to get my hands dirty so I let Saka handle the cars while I got dressed in my favourite etibor and matching black trousers.

They wouldn’t let me see my friend. I pleaded with them, but they didn’t bulge. I was already in the car I drove to the station when they sent a corporal to call me back. Against the backdrop of all that stench from unwashed bodies and three stained posters that boldly declared the police as my friend, that bail was free and that I should not give bribe to the police, I handed over five thousand naira to the sergeant who then ordered one of his men to bring Aguero out of the cell.

“How you dey na?”

A disheveled looking Aguero didn’t answer my greeting. He did try to smile though, but it was the smile of an innocent man in so much pain from

being tortured and forced to confess to a crime he didn't commit. I tried establishing eye contact, but he wouldn't let me see the tears welling up. A lone drop balanced delicately on his left cheek before trickling down. Seeing the usually upbeat and suave Waritimi so broken and cowed almost forced the truth out of me.

My five thousand naira qualified me for a seat on one of the benches behind the counter and Aguero was allowed to join me. His white singlet and sky blue Nike shorts were clean, one of the perks of being wealthy and having influential parents, I guess.

"Wetin ol'boy dey do na? Make him make some calls so you go leave this place na. Isn't that the point of having a father that is well connected?"

"You think he hasn't made calls? See, this thing dey come from the top I dey tell you."

"Adinna told me about her aristo, that money-miss-road, the old man when get one leg for grave and the other one for—"

"I no even know when dem open the boot." Aguero ignored my rant. It was like he was in a universe where it was okay to talk to himself. "The next thing I dey hear na gun, gun, gun." Aguero was whispering now. I guess he didn't want Sergeant 5k and his men listening in on our conversation. "Only those guys for the checkpoint know how the guns take enter my car I swear. This thing na heavy setup and Adinna is right. That her boyfriend hand dey inside." Aguero dropped his voice even lower, "and you know wetin dey pain me pass? Even as my pops dey make all these calls to Commissioner of Police and his friends in government, he doesn't believe that I didn't do it."

"Because of the bunkering thing?"

"That, and other things that have happened in the past. Anyway, the DPO here says they've finished their investigation and that I would be arraigned next week Monday."

"Oya oga e don do! Your money don expire. If una still wan talk, you go see our oga again," one overzealous policeman at the counter called out to me.

I had some extra cash on me, but I thought using it to buy boli and fish for Anda was way better than letting my *friends* in the police station have it.

So, I apologised to Aguero that I had to go but I promised to see him again before his Monday court date.

When I got to my sister's house in Edepie, Benson was out and Anda was asleep inside. I joined her in the kitchen as she warmed the soup and prepared the starch. Ebiakpo was usually talkative, but this news of the impending millions coming into her husband's account added a whole new level of volume to her garrulousness.

“. . . I'm telling you Ebinimi, a new car, one correct jeep with AC. That's the first thing I am buying once Benson gets the mobilisation. I wouldn't have to follow you to Lagos to buy it, abi?"

"No, you wouldn't have to. Just tell me the kind of car you want and I'll take it from there." I was tempted to interrupt her and ask right away about Anda's paternity, but something told me to eat the food first. I didn't trust Ebiakpo not to throw me out if she didn't like what I was saying.

As if on cue, Anda came out of the room just as I was swallowing my last morsel of starch.

"Uncle Ebinimi!" He jumped on me and we immediately got into our usual ritual of questions and answers. I asked him some random questions about school, friends and his parents to which he returned with the funniest responses a kid his age could give. He in turn asked if he could play a game on my phone and I told him no. Next thing he wanted to know why I wouldn't let him play with my phone and my reply to him that the phone wasn't charged led to a barrage of questions that ended with me giving him the phone so he could play his favourite game – Candy Crush. All the while he was playing, I kept examining his eyes, his nose, his mouth, his ears, his eyebrows . . . and I think I found the answers I was searching for.

Seeing as I hadn't finished eating because of the fish still in my plate of soup, his mother ordered him to get off me and back into his room to continue playing there.

"I told you I had another exciting news," Ebiakpo said, joining me in the parlour after she cleared the plates.

"Yes. You mentioned Benson's contract and something else you'd tell me after the meal."

"Ebinimi. God has finally done it again. This is really my month of double

double like Papa said in church two Sundays ago.”

“Out with it, big sis. You know I don’t handle suspense very well.”

“I’m pregnant. I’m going to be a mother again.”

For the second time in one day, my jaw dropped. There I was trying to unravel the mystery of the first one, and now Ebiakpo has gone and done it again. If there was some suspicion about Anda’s father, could my sister and the Reverend still be involved in an adulterous affair?

I summoned courage and just blurted it out. There was no point beating about the bush. Besides, I figured that a direct confrontation might rattle her into coming out with the truth.

“Is Benson responsible for this one? Because I know that he isn’t Andaowei’s father.”

The shock in her eyes and the tremor in her voice told me that she was caught off-guard, just as I had intended.

“Who told you that?”

“Apparently a number of people in church know this already and they are whispering things.”

Ebiakpo was silent for maybe ten or fifteen minutes. Perhaps it was less than that though, but I could understand why it would seem that it was longer. Finally she spoke up.

“Benson must never know about this. Not now when things are finally working out for us again and he’s even promised to buy me a car and give me money to travel to Dubai to buy goods to trade.”

It was my turn to be stunned. Blessing was right. I was silent for seven minutes. I checked. And then, I spoke.

“You know he has to close down his church and move out of our compound now, don’t you?”

“Who?”

“Reverend Ebizimor.”

“Why would Reverend Ebizimor close down his church and move out of the compound?”

“Because one day, your husband is going to see how much Anda looks

like him and when that day comes, Reverend Ebizimor wouldn't only be moving out of Kalakala Street, he'd be tied up, beaten into a pulp and maybe even killed."

"Ebinimi, what are you talking about? There's no way Anda would grow up to look like the Reverend when the man isn't his father."

"If Reverend Ebizimor isn't Anda's father, then who is?"

"I thought you said people were whispering things?"

"Sister Ebiakpo Jacob Emeledo," whenever I called her by her name and added the prefix 'sister' to it, she knew it was serious. "Who is Anda's biological father?"

"Your friend . . . Waritimi Aguero Kimikeama."

CHAPTER 18

What have I done? That was the first thought that crossed my mind. I didn't know how, but I knew for sure I had to undo the wrong I had done to Aguero. The how, when and why Aguero was Anda's biological father wasn't important anymore. What was important was that if Anda was his son, then we had something beyond friendship linking us. And irrespective of the many ways he had wronged me, I couldn't possibly wish him harm because of that. Since Ebiakpo didn't bring it up, I knew she hadn't heard about his incarceration and I wasn't about to be the one to break that news to her.

In spite of my resistance, Ebiakpo insisted on telling me her version of events, so I sat back down on the couch and listened.

"It was the year we moved to Ovom, nine years after we lost mum to that strange heart disease. Daddy had just died in the boat mishap that left us orphaned and his aged parents offered to take us in since we weren't so close to our late mother's people and there was nowhere else for us to go. I was nineteen and Waritimi was about sixteen or seventeen at the time. Grandpa and grandma were away in the village that weekend for a burial I think, so it was just you and me in the house. Waritimi had come visiting, but you were out playing football *or something* with your new friends in the neighbourhood."

She had been on the sofa reading one of those romance novels she was fond of back then when he walked in. The content of the book plus the loss of our father, made her ask him to stay. She offered him a bottle of Coca-Cola, then one thing led to the other. They did it in her room that afternoon. It was her first time and she didn't know a lot about protection then. Her friends from school helped her with the abortion and that experience kept her away from men and relationships for a long time. They, she and Waritimi, didn't date and never ever discussed what transpired between them that afternoon. They moved on their lives and three years later, my sister and her husband got married.

Four years into their marriage, she realized her husband was impotent and

three years later, she decided to take matters into her own hands. She finally summoned the courage to approach Waritimi again. He had his misgivings about her proposition, but she was able to convince him that impregnating her wouldn't complicate his life in any way as long as he stayed away from theirs. Yet when she confirmed the deed was successful and she had conceived she felt dirty.

Guilt pushed her to Reverend Ebizimor who was her *spiritual everything* because she needed someone to talk to, and he convinced her to keep the baby. He said murder was a far more grievous sin than fornication. He counselled and prayed with her all through the nine months of the pregnancy and promised to keep the secret.

"And yet he revealed the secret to Blessing and Sister Agnes."

"I don't think he did. Maybe they came to that conclusion by themselves because of how close the Reverend and I became over the years. Besides, the man doted on Anda, I guess it was because of what he knew about the circumstances surrounding the boy's birth."

"And the resemblance? I could have sworn I saw it this afternoon."

"You all saw what you wanted to see. Reverend Ebizimor has never been inappropriate with me and that is the truth."

"Then what is this hold he has over you?" I asked perplexed.

"Ebinimi that's not true. He doesn't have a hold over me."

"You let him stay in our compound for free, you cook for him, you wash his clothes, you give him money, you are responsible for his groceries, and you sacrifice time you should spend with Benson and Anda just to cater to his needs. Ebiakpo, you are at his beck and call . . . if he doesn't have a hold on you, then I don't know what having a hold on someone means."

She stayed quiet for a while. "He knows . . . Ebinimi . . . he knows everything." Ebiakpo broke into a sob. "If I don't do these things for him, and he decides to tell Benson what he knows, I'll be ruined. My marriage would be over, I wouldn't be able to stay in this town anymore because people would be pointing at me and laughing. I won't have any face in church and maybe even one day Anda would grow up and hate me too—"

"Wow! Four years! This man made you go through this torment for four years and us . . . no, I foolishly kept him in my compound all these years.

No, he won't get away with this."

"Ebinimi, don't go and do anything stupid. He is a man of God."

"He is a man of God; he is not God, that's what I hear all the time. What kind of man of God would keep you in bondage for four years and counting?" I retorted.

"Remember Ebinimi, 'touch not my anointed—'" I froze at my sister's words. It was just like in the dream. "Don't bring a curse upon yourself and our family," she pleaded with me. "Reverend didn't force me to do anything. I chose to subject myself to that level of submission as penance for my sins. Every time Benson calls Anda his son, my heart drops and I have to buy something for the church, scrub a floor, clean a toilet, donate some money, cook Reverend a meal, buy him a shirt . . . do something, anything just so the guilt doesn't kill me."

"And yet you're pregnant again?"

"You're not a woman, you won't understand these things."

"Understand what things?"

"That Anda needs a brother or sister. Ebinimi, I'm not a whore. I don't sleep around. I just wanted to be a mother, have a child of my own, plus I didn't want to be that woman who left her husband because he can't make her pregnant."

Was that a compelling argument? I don't know. But I didn't want to stay on and have that conversation with her. I also didn't think it was necessary probing further if Aguero had a hand or any other body part for that matter in this new pregnancy, so I left. I had gone to see my sister with one problem, and now I was going back home with two. First, I had to figure out how to help Aguero out of his predicament, and then I had to decide whether to let Reverend Ebizimor stay or evict him from our premises. I was so confused; I just didn't know what to do.

As I walked out of Ebiakpo's compound, something caught my attention. It was the brown timberland leather boot the guy across the street had on. It was the third time I'd be seeing someone wearing those same shoes in one day. What I couldn't tell, because my mind had been preoccupied, was whether it was the same guy popping up everywhere I went, or if there were three different people.

The first time was along Kalakala Street; the second occasion was outside the police station; and now, in front of my sister's house, I saw the same expensive pair of boots again. If it was the same person in all three places, then someone was tailing me. But if that wasn't the case, then I had to get a pair of those boots myself. Apparently they are the shoes in vogue and I like to keep up with trends.

CHAPTER 19

A call from one of my customers around six-thirty in the morning woke me up. He was an engineer working at the soon-to-be-commissioned Bayelsa Airport project site at Amassoma. He told me that he couldn't afford to be late for work because they were expecting the state governor at eight a.m for a site inspection and he couldn't find his car keys. He sounded really frantic on the phone; I had no choice but to jump out of bed to the rescue.

I asked Broderick to accompany me in my car and we sped off to his house along PDP road to help him force his Toyota Tundra door open. I bypassed the ignition, worked my magic and started the car within minutes. Engineer Doubra expressed his gratitude with the sum of two thousand naira, promising to add "something extra" when we came to pick up the car from his office later in the day.

On our way back, and even while working on the car, I noticed Broderick was sluggish and distant. I suspected he had gone out drinking again last night, or worse still, he was high on weed or some form of prescription medicine.

I chose not to confront him in the car because I knew he'd deny it anyway and get all defensive and whatnot, like he usually did whenever I brought up his bad behaviour and nonchalant attitude to life.

The company he kept was becoming a problem for all of us in the workshop and I was worried for him. His parents had such high hopes for him and I didn't want to see him disappoint them while under my care. When we got home, I asked him to follow me to the living room. I then sent for Saka and Biodun to join us.

"Saka, I don tell you tire say make you dey put eye for this boy, but you no wan do am. I no blame you sha, after all, everybody here sabi say na only woman matter dey your head dis days," I accused him.

"Wetin the boy don do again na, Oga Ebinimi?" he asked avoiding my eyes.

“You no see as him dey do body and the way him eye dey shine like Nokia torch? Me, I know say no be ordinary drink dey cause this one. This guy don dey take codeine or tramadol,” I insisted.

“But if him dey take tramadol or codeine sef, that one no bad na. No be Tiwa Savage dey sing say she dey on a codeine diet?”

“Saka, if codeine na good thing, why federal government come ban the medicine for chemist?”

“That one na their own oh.”

“So if federal government announce something and Tiwa Savage talk another thing, na Tiwa Savage own you go take?”

“Oga Ebinimi, before nko? You no see how that girl dey whine her waist for Don Jazzy every time?”

I could see Saka was a lost cause, so I turned my attention back to Broderick. I called out his recent attitude and told him that I had my eyes on him. After my long speech, I dismissed them so I could take a shower and get about my day. While Saka and Broderick went into their room, I noticed Biodun walking behind me. Clearly, he had something he wanted to say to me.

“Yes Biodun, anything?”

“Oga Ebinimi, no vex oh, I be wan to ask you something.”

“Go ahead.”

“That guy when dey come worry us for shop, you still dey owe am money?”

“What kind of busybody question is dat one? Wetin be your own if I dey owe person money?”

“No vex, I just dey ask because I notice some kind of funny movement for the street yesterday. It’s like some strange faces don enter we area.”

I paused to think for a minute. “Did you notice anyone wearing brown shoes yesterday?”

“Brown shoe with green shirt. I first see the guy dey buy akara and bread for Mama Akpos shop for morning. Later for evening, I come see am again for junction dey buy roasted corn and boiled pear.”

As soon as he left, I reached for my phone to call Tiekuro, but his phone

was switched off. I made a mental note to call him again after I showered but as soon as I got out of the bathroom, I heard singing in the backyard. Reverend Ebizimor had resumed work for the day. I hurriedly put on my work clothes and stormed into his tiny church office without knocking.

He was startled by the intrusion, but he smiled when he realised I was the one. “Haaa! Brother Jacob, I don’t think I saw you in church on Sunday, and you haven’t been attending midweek services either.”

“I’ve been very busy.”

“Is it school, because I haven’t been seeing you in the workshop that much either. It’s like you’ve been going out a lot in the last couple of weeks?”

I wanted to tell him to mind his business, but I had to stay focused for the serious task at hand.

“I came to discuss something important with you.”

“Oh I see,” he replied, still smiling. “Do you need prayers or special blessings?”

“I didn’t come for prayers or special blessings,” there was no need for pleasantries. “I came here for the rent.”

I saw the bible he was holding drop from his hands to the floor, but he caught it before it touched the ground. His reflex was so swift I figured he must have been a good goalkeeper in his younger days.

“Rent? Which rent?”

“My sister and I have decided that you cannot be staying here for free.”

“Sister Ebiakpo agreed to that?”

“She also agreed that as it stands, you already owe us one year rent. It could have been more, but since we are like family now, we decided to write off—”

“No, it can’t be. It is never done. In the bible, when—”

“In the bible, it says do not eat the bread of your children. This compound our grandparents left us is our own bread and butter. So Reverend, please, we started counting from 1st January this year. You know you should have paid in advance, so you owe us four hundred and fifty thousand naira as it is.”

“Ha four hundred and fifty thousand naira? Where will I get that kind of

money in this Buhari economy?”

“But Reverend, don’t you have faith again? With God, all things are possible. I will give you until the end of this month to pay up, otherwise you will have to dismantle your canopy, remove your blocks and signboard, and take them somewhere else. We want you to vamoose from our compound.”

“What is this, Ebinimi? What is this? What is causing this one now eh? God has not spoken to me to leave this Canaan.”

“Well, he spoke to me and he said 450k by the end of the month or another church would come and occupy Canaan.” I left him with his mouth agape and went out to join my workers at the other end of the compound.

Before picking up any tool from the box and going under any vehicle, I tried Tiekuro’s number again, but it was still switched off. With everything that had happened in just one day alone, I decided to let Saka off the hook, there was no point teaching him any lesson. I was calling off whatever hit Tiekuro might have ordered on my behalf. Saka was like a brother to me, and as it often happens with men, he would not remain a fool for Agnes forever. One day I knew that the spell she cast on him would be broken.

When I couldn’t reach Tiekuro, I decided to call Mr Freedom. I needed to see Honourable Aaron about Aguero. It was important I reached him before the arraignment on Monday.

“O’boy, wida you na?” Mr Freedom was screaming on the phone. “Show! Show! Show! Everybody dey for house now, the one for Onopa. Na there all of us dey shack.”

“Shack? This early morning?”

“Yes na, abi you’ve been living under a rock? Didn’t you see the announcement for news and for social media everywhere?”

“Which announcement?”

“Oga don get Abuja appointment, check Facebook, check Facebook!” He cut the call.

I went into the house and changed into a T-shirt and matching tracksuit. I didn’t have data on my phone so I got into the car and raced to the house in Onopa. There were canopies and empty chairs on the lawn. I could also see empty bottles and plates with remnants of food littered everywhere. Mr

Freedom said it was an all-night party, with music supplied by Junior Robert and Asu Ekiye. I was led into a lush and beautifully furnished lounge to meet with the boss.

“Ebinimi, I no see you here yesterday night. Abi you no happy for my appointment?” Honourable Aaron Barnabas-Treatment said in the sluggish way he spoke. “I am now the Honourable Minister of State for Defence, Federal Republic of Nigeria. Abi you never hear?”

“Congratulations, sir.” There was no need telling him I was hearing it for the first time.

“As he don be now, I don move to federal level. ABT don elevate. I no dey play local politics again. Sir Thomas Kimikeama and his useless supporters can die inside this Bayelsa politics. Make them put pepper, put salt, put mangi cube, turn am well well and take am cook rice. Make dem come chop am well well until them belleful, because me, I don leave Bayelsa politics. Na from Abuja level I dey operate now.”

I was shocked at his statement and curious to know what that meant for my friend, Aguero.

“What will happen to his son in police custody? The one facing charges of gun and drug possession.” I reminded him in case he had forgotten about the plot he masterminded and I executed on his behalf only a few days ago.

“Ebinimi, it’s like you have not been listening to me. Let me say it again. I have just been appointed Minister of State for Defence, Federal Republic of Nigeria. If I go fit tell Police Commissioner to lock the boy up when I be common PRO of South South People’s Voice and former Caretaker Committee Chairman of Yenagoa, na now when I be Minister of Defence I no go fit order that same commissioner abi even the IGP himself to release the boy?”

I left Honourable Aaron’s house happy but confused. Wonders shall never end in this Nigeria sha, I thought to myself. How can a man like Aaron Barnabas-Treatment be Minister for Defence? What would he be defending?

INTERLUDE

For the task at hand, Izuo ditched the timberland boots in exchange for a simple but classy-looking pair of black leather sandals. From the detailing on the straps, it was easy to tell they were Gucci. They looked original and expensive. The well-tailored and impeccably pressed all-white kaftan he wore completed his casual but trendy look. Perhaps the horn-rimmed glasses, Tom Ford fragrance and band on his ring finger was an overkill, but it was important he nailed his appearance if he was to pull off the plan he and the others came up with for the abduction.

The Toyota Avensis with the fake number plate he drove into the mechanic workshop was also white. The big books stacked on the back seat of the car were deliberately placed there to give the impression he was scholarly and a responsible member of the society.

Izuo stepped out of the car. Avoiding the muddy potions of the compound, he walked straight to the mechanic from the photograph. He knew there was no mistake because he had looked at the picture one last time before setting out. Oyintari had warned him not to “fuck up” and he didn’t have such plans because he needed the balance payment for his mother’s hospital bill.

The other guys in the workshop didn’t hear their conversation, but they saw when he dropped his spanner and heard him say he was accompanying the stranger in his car for a test drive. Izuo was in the front passenger seat while the mechanic drove the car outside the workshop and into the street.

“The sound is coming from the driver’s side and you really have to listen hard to pick it. In fact it gets worse when you’re on the highway,” Izuo explained as he turned off the car radio.

“In that case, make we enter express na?”

They drove in silence from Ovom all the way to NNPC filling station, negotiated the roundabout under the flyover and hit Isaac Boro expressway. The mechanic was listening for the sound; he thought he heard something, but maybe not.

“Please can you just enter Mike Okpokpo Street,” Izuo was soft-spoken and polite. “I need to quickly drop some of these books with my colleague

down the road.”

“Okay, sir.”

The mechanic followed the direction, stopping in front of a black gate as he was directed.

He pulled over, a lone vehicle in a vast compound. Izuo picked a couple of the books from the back seat and said he’d only be away for a minute. Before going into the house, he walked up to the fellow that opened the gate for them and whispered something in his ears.

The mechanic thought he heard him say something like “prepare the nigger,” but the windows were wound up so he wasn’t so sure.

When Izuo came out of the house, the white kaftan and sandals were gone – they had been replaced with brown boots and jeans. Also gone were the glasses and ring, and the white Avensis too. In its place was a black Camry. The guy that opened the gate was standing with two other guys – all bearded and mean-looking. One of them had blood on his fist and on the bottom left corner of his sky blue shirt. Izuo was too preoccupied with meeting up with the others waiting for him in Imiringi.

“Una don put the guy for boot?”

“Confam,” the gate opener replied.

Izuo entered the Camry and drove to the meeting point along Imiringi road without any incident. It was the back of an unpainted and abandoned two-storey building off the main road. Tiekuro and Oyintari were already waiting for him when he arrived.

“Mission accomplished,” he said with a big smile on his face. “Now I can get my balance.”

“You put am for boot like we talk, abi?” Tiekuro asked. He also had a grin on his face. “I hope say your guys no touch am oh?”

“No na. They just tape him mouth, tie him hand and cover him face like we agree,” Izuo said, walking like a man with no worries to the back of the car so Tiekuro and Oyintari could see that their instruction was followed to the letter.

When Izuo opened the boot, it was Oyintari that screamed first.

“This guy don die na?”

“What have you done?” Tiekuro bellowed. “Una don kill the nigger.”

Izuo hurriedly lifted the bloodied mechanic from the car and unto the floor. He didn’t know that his boys had roughened him up. He struggled to untie his hands and legs, before taking off the black socks used as a blindfold over the mechanic’s swollen face. “E be like say him still dey breath,” he said, but there was no conviction in his voice.

Tiekuro moved closer to see for himself, but it was evident from the way he was shaking his head, that he didn’t like what he saw.

“Ha Izuo, wetin you do so? This no be the guy we send you to bring come.”

Five minutes later, the three of them drove off, leaving Ebinimi for dead at the back of the abandoned building along Imiringi road.

PART TWO

CHAPTER 20

My name is Ebinimi, Ebinimi Jacob. Call it my unapologetic peeve, but I detest it when people call me anything other than my first name in full. I like that the alphabets – E, B, I, N, I, M and I – that make up my pretty common Ijaw name are all pronounced together, just the way my late dad intended when he christened me after his paternal cousin and closest childhood friend who drowned in the waters of the Tungbo River at the young age of fourteen. Same age as my dad had been at the time.

You see, this isn't a narrative I get to tell often; in fact I don't think I've told anyone how my parents came about that name choice since I only got to know myself, when I turned fourteen.

I believe my dad, Ebikabowei Bibliography Jacob, God bless his soul, chose that particular time to tell me his story because he felt it was a milestone age for me to be taught some important lessons about life and how to live it with caution, and especially why he never let my sister and I visit the beach or learn to swim, even though every Bayelsa boy or girl was thought to be a natural creature of the sea, river, stream or pool and could swim like a fish.

That other Ebinimi, the one I was named after, his parents had allowed him accompany my dad and my grandparents to the village for the Christmas holidays that year. It was the first time they would let him go on such a trip. The fact that my grandfather and his father were brothers, and that they were going on a holiday in the village where they both grew up, made it easy for his parents to let the boy join his uncle and cousin home that December.

In the end, the tragic death of the lively teenager caused a rift between the two families. That rift became a family feud that long outlived both men.

If that Ebinimi had lived longer, he could have been a great fisherman or a sailor; my dad said he loved water. I have thought about how ironic it was that he would lose his life in the river that ran through our village, his village. My dad also told me that he loved to make things with his hands

and fiddle with cars and metal objects, so perhaps he would have made a good mechanic or even an engineer, designing and building cars. My grandfather believed I got my love of cars from him.

As I prepared for my journey by road back to Yenagoa from Abuja, where I had spent more than two weeks with Mr Freedom recuperating and waiting to see the boss, Honourable Aaron Barnabas-Treatment, the newest addition to the President's cabinet, I wondered why that particular story came back to me. I guess it was because I forgot the advice my dad gave me all those years ago. I threw caution to the wind when I got entangled with bad people and almost lost my life.

The memory of that day – almost two months ago now – still haunted my nights, and I didn't know if it was the fear of missing my bus and not getting a refund from the management of God-is-Good Motors or the uncertainty of not deciding whether to forgive Teikuro and put the whole mix-up behind me that kept me up all night. I was still torn between letting go and arranging a counter hit on him just to make it clear I wasn't someone he could mess with.

Every time I closed my eyes, the sequence played back with an exactitude that denied me the rest I craved. I remember the neatly dressed guy that came to the workshop to get his car fixed. I'm not sure I'd recollect his face if I saw him now, and that really bothered me because it meant he could walk right past me on the streets of Yenagoa and I wouldn't be able to knock his teeth off. I remember driving his white Toyota Avensis and him telling me to take the turn into Mike Okpokpo Street and into the gated compound where he got off to get something.

Everything after that was a blur. First, it was the door being forced open and someone dragging me out of the car and unto the floor so violently a body part snapped – I'm not sure which. I was immediately gagged and blindfolded, and then came the blows to the head with sticks and knuckles of steel. There was more dragging and punching, and even though I was blinded by the pain and the *thing* tied around my eyes, I could sense bleeding. I remembered the darkness and the confinement; it was as if I was in a coffin or some box with a lid on it. I also remembered being in motion because of the nausea and the horns from the cars around us that blared like the much talked about trumpets on the last day.

The pain from the beating was excruciating, but I willed myself to stay

conscious. I was convinced the rapture had come and I was being driven straight to hell. I wanted to be wide-awake when I was ushered in so I could personally plead my case to my maker.

There was Tiekuro's voice. Yes, he was there. He was saying they had the wrong guy or something like that. I remember being rescued by some errant schoolboys. I don't know what brought them to that deserted part of Imiringi road, but they were there, like little angels sent from heaven to save me. One of them had a phone and they helped dial my number. As it rang, I prayed that someone in the workshop would pick up my phone, which I had left charging somewhere in my rush to attend to the well-dressed gentleman that needed my help. Saka picked up the phone, and the rest as they say is history.

At the Bayelsa Specialist Hospital, the doctors discovered after reviewing the scan results from the Diagnostic Centre at Imgbi road that my condition wasn't as bad as it looked. Nothing was broken and there was no internal bleeding. Apart from a dislocated shoulder and a deep gash on my head that was of some concern to the doctors, the rest were minor cuts and bruises that required stitching. I was discharged from the hospital after two weeks and by the fourth week the sling and cervical collar were gone. Of course, during that period, I had to stay off work and all kinds of heavy lifting, so Saka was in charge of business at the shop.

Everyone was curious to know what really happened that day, but there was no way I could tell anyone I was the victim of an attack on Saka gone wrong. No one could ever find out the truth, not even Blessing or Ebiakpo, the two people that tormented me the most for the full gist.

My decision to travel to Abuja was partly to run away from the questions that wouldn't stop coming while I recuperated, and also to discuss with Honourable Aaron about relocating to Abuja and working with him full-time. I could be a second PA to the Minister, I could be his driver, anything at all just to get away from Yenagoa and start a new life.

Mr Freedom was gracious enough to let me stay in his room in Transcorp Hilton even though most nights I was forced to sit in the lobby or by the poolside pretending to be pressing my laptop because of the light skinned women he brought back to the hotel. Sometimes he'd come back with one and just as she was leaving another one was calling from the reception. He says a man has never really lived until he has slept with a light-skinned

Abuja babe.

However, after being in Abuja for almost three weeks and not seeing Honourable Aaron because he was either in one meeting with the President or being briefed by the security chiefs about the latest Boko Haram bombing in the North East, a sleep deprived me knew that my life was in Yenagoa. I was a Yenagoa mechanic. Simple.

To be fair to the Minister, when Mr Freedom told him I was going back home to Yenagoa, he gave him three hundred thousand naira to give me. I promptly sent him a text message thanking him for his kindness and praying for more blessings and favour in his new position.

The journey from the federal capital territory was smooth and uneventful. After about eleven hours on the road, the bus dropped me off at the GIG Park in Kpansia just before 6 p.m.

As I highlighted from the *keke* that dropped me off at the entrance of Kalakala Street, the first thing that caught my attention was the signboard. Reverend Ebizimor had rebranded.

From afar, I sighted the big bright signboard announcing his ministry. It no longer read “Reverend Ebizimor and the Jerusalem Warriors International Church.” It was now “Fire For Fire Liberation Ministries.” I hadn’t been back for one minute and it was already clear to me that my tenant was spoiling for a fight.

There were only a handful of buildings on Kalakala Street and everybody knew everyone else. Most of the houses weren’t fenced and there were families sitting out either on their varandas or in front of their compounds in the evenings, so the instant I came off the tricycle and started walking home to number 9, it was as if the entire neighbourhood knew I was back.

“Oga Ebinimi, good evening,” some of the children chorused in unison even though their voices were coming from different directions of the street.

“Oga Ebinimi, you don return?” it was Mama Akpos. She ran one of the two mama-put joints on the street, but hers was by far the most patronised of the two because she sold on credit. She also had more varieties of food and she served bigger portions of everything. In the afternoons, her daughter Akpos made *bole* and fish which was her own specialty, although the jury was still out as to whether the boys and even the the older men in the neighbourhood came for the roasted plantain and fish or for her pretty face

and thick waist. Whatever it was, the family was making so much money from their food business, so much so that Akpos' elder brother and the first child of the family was studying for his masters degree in Malaysia at his mother's expense.

At number 2, Adamu, the Aboki in charge of the compound who also doubled as a shoemaker waved at me. He flashed his kolanut stained teeth and I smiled back. Seeing him reminded me that I owed him some money from the last time he fixed my shoes. That was just before I left for Abuja and I made a mental note to send one of my boys to him with the money. I didn't want him to ask first.

"Oga Ebinimi, how your hand? I hope say the thing no dey pain you again oh?" Nnamdi, one of the tenants in number 4 asked. He was a cashier with First Bank, or that was what he claimed because most of us found it hard to believe that someone working in a bank as a teller would be indebted to almost everyone on the street including Mama Akpos from whom he bought food on credit and would not pay until she embarrassed him publicly.

As I got closer to number 9 and the untarred road of Kalakala Street got narrower and more undulating, there were more greetings and people calling out my name from inside their houses. Though I couldn't see all the faces and recognise every voice, I acknowledged all the greetings.

Saka, Biodun and Broderick jostled to carry my bag inside and bring me dinner after I took my bath and freshened up. I could see that they had missed me. I missed them too and I was glad to be back in Kalakala Street. Although the residents gossiped and quarreled a lot and the road wasn't as smooth as the roads in Abuja and we didn't have water or frequent power supply, and the biggest and meanest mosquitoes in Yenagoa resided in Kalakala Street, it was still home and there was no place like home.

CHAPTER 21

Reverend Ebizimor summoned me to his office in the morning. I wondered what he wanted to discuss with me that couldn't wait for two or three days after my return to Yenagoa. Whatever the meeting was about, I wasn't enthusiastic about it. The last time we had a meeting in his office, I had gone to give him an ultimatum about his church and the new rent regime.

So much had happened since then. I don't want to come across as superstitious or anything, but one thing I was certain of was how quickly things spiralled downwards for me following my confrontation with the man of God.

"Good morning, Reverend."

"Good morning, Ebinimi."

The first thing I noticed was the way he addressed me. He didn't say "Brother Jacob," as he did before, and that bothered me a bit. Perhaps in his mind I was no longer a member of his church or even a Christian at all. Had I been excommunicated because of my bad behaviour towards him?

"You asked to see me," I said to him.

He cleared his throat with a loud gruffy sound like a car engine backfiring. "Welcome back. I hope you feel better now and that your wounds have healed."

"Yes, they have. I think I'm ready to get back to work again."

"Well, we have been taking care of things and watching over the compound for you while you were away."

"Thank you for that, Reverend. I noticed the new name for the church."

"Fire For Fire Liberation Ministries. Yes, God spoke to us to rebrand."

"I like the new name better."

"Yes, it came directly from God after one month of praying and fasting. We need to teach some people small lesson in this town."

Not knowing whether I was one of those to be taught a lesson made me slightly uneasy. “Did God say anything about the rent or moving to a new place?” I summoned courage to ask him.

“Yes, Brother Jacob.”

I noticed we were back to being brothers in Christ again.

“In fact that was why I sent for you.”

I *sort of* had a sense of what was coming next, so I remained quiet because for the first time since meeting Reverend Ebizimor, I felt something really powerful coming from him. I felt a genuine anointing, or was it fear?

“Brother Jacob, you crossed a line the last time,” he said to me after a long pause. “In fact, you crossed many red lines and God is not happy with you.”

“I’m sorry if I said things I shouldn’t have said to you about the arrangement the church has with my sister and me. I’ve also had time to reconsider my position. I don’t think you should be paying rent to us. You have been kind to Ebiakpo and her family, plus the patronage I enjoy in the workshop from all the big big people that come here for prayers because of you cannot be quantified in monetary terms.”

Reverend Ebizimor appeared touched by my words. When he spoke, the aggression was gone from his voice.

“I know I shouldn’t be saying this, but I think your ordeal these past two months was God trying to caution you. Brother Jacob, you do not threaten a man of God na. You don’t! It is scriptural. From what Sister Ebiakpo told me, you could have died if God hadn’t brought those small school children to deliver you.”

“My deliverance was a miracle, sir.”

“Don’t play with fire oh.”

I sat still like a naughty schoolboy being scolded by his principal.

“You see what happened to you? It was God saying He still has plans for your life. Anyway, your sister and I have talked things over and there’s no more talk of rent. In fact, she wants me to extend further into the backyard because the ministry is growing. Our number is fast increasing.”

I wasn’t sure about that, but I didn’t want to get into an argument about his membership strength, so I concurred. “I believe we still have time to look

into your expansion plans, but for now maybe you should lay your hands on me and pray for me. This bad luck that is following me about, e don do . . . make e no cross enter next year.”

“That is very true oh, Brother Jacob; we will get to that right away,” I could see him getting excited. “But first, let me show you this new product – I mean this our new water of Babylon I got for the owner of one of the big supermarkets in town. One of my spiritual fathers sent it to me from Israel just last week. It is only ten thousand naira for the big Eva bottle and five thousand naira for the small one,” he explained.

Reverend Ebizimor told me to kneel down and he prayed with me for about fifteen minutes. When he was through, I gave him five thousand for the small bottle and went out to join the guys in the workshop.

I didn’t realise how much I’d missed Kalakala Street and my three *crazy* colleagues until I wore my favourite extra-large grease-stained blue overall and walked into them arguing about a song.

“If you no get money, wetin you gain oh! Gain, gain, gain ah! That na wetin I sing na.” Saka sang at the top of his voice, not minding the two customers already in the shop to get their cars fixed. I decided not to comment on his singing yet because it seemed he had forgotten to blackmail me, or he had pitied me because of my attack, whatever the case, I didn’t want to find out.

“I no follow you argue that one,” Broderick replied him. “Na the part when you sing say ‘ . . . if no be chicken na something dey chop oh,’ I dey talk.” BRD proceeded to sing the correct lyrics of the Victor AD song, “. . . if no be billing, na something dey sup oh—”

“Ah! Okay, na now I dey get am – ‘sup,’ like when person say ‘what’s up.’ But wetin come bring *sup* inside the music na, Broderick? Abi na your normal sabi sabi leg you don bring inside this matter again?”

“Saka, no mind the boy jare,” Biodun joined in on the conversation. “Whether na sup oh or na chop oh, the one I sabi be say Oluwa must bless us with this money this year; if not wetin we gain?” The three of them burst out laughing.

“I don tell una say I no be Michael Jackson or Sunny Ade, make una leave me make I just dey sing the one wey I sabi.” When Saka said that, I knew he was about to do something really hilarious so I brought out my iPhone

and pressed record.

He sang the whole second verse of Victor AD's song, and even though he murdered the lyrics with unrecognisable words, when he got to the chorus, Broderick and Biodun chimed in, dancing happily as they sang along.

"If we no get money, wetin we gain oh . . ."

It was a crazy performance that had me in stitches even as I played it back to their amusement. Maybe that was why I made a mental note to capture that moment for him and upload it on Instagram when I had the chance later in the day.

The rest of my day consisted of yelling out instructions to Saka, Bioidun and Broderick; fixing a new fan belt for Reverend Ebizimor's car; replacing two tyres for the Fidelity Bank manager; supervising the patching up of a broken radiator for my neighbour across the street; and answering calls from some of my customers that had insisted on waiting until I got back to town before having their cars fixed.

Not once did my mind go to Tiekuro and his goons. But when I was done for the day, with nothing else to do because Blessing was away in Port Harcourt to do make-up and tie gele for one of her clients getting married there, I decided not to put off confronting him any longer. In that moment, I felt that I needed an explanation for why he and Oyintari chose to leave me for dead when they could have simply taken me to the hospital.

Tiekuro's number wouldn't go through, so I decided to drive to the Judges' Quarters at Opolo myself. At the gate, I told the security men I was looking for Justice Digha's residence. After telling me the street name and house number, one of them gave me a gate pass with the number fourteen painted boldly on it.

Although Reverend Ebizimor had prayed for me earlier in the day, and even admonished that I shouldn't get myself into any unfortunate situation; on account of my own foolishness or stubbornness, I still felt I needed answers to the questions I had been asking myself for weeks. I had to hear from the horse's mouth why I was picked up, instead of Saka, and why I was left for dead.

A matronly lady opened the door when I rang the doorbell. I took it she was Tiekuro's stepmother since I was aware his biological mum was no more. I noticed the funny way she looked at me when I asked to see

Tiekuro. Pointing to a chair, she went in to fetch him without saying a word to me. When minutes later a figure emerged from one of the many hallways in the exquisitely furnished mansion, I knew immediately that the bulbous grey-haired man was not Tiekuro, but his dad. The resemblance was uncanny.

“Young man,” he said, sitting down in the chair farthest from where I sat. “You say you want to see my son?”

“Yes sir.”

“Are you friends with him?”

“I . . . I . . . I am his mechanic sir. But . . . but we are friends somehow, because I have repaired his car before.”

“You don’t live in Yenagoa?” The questions were coming at me as if I was being examined and cross-examined in his courtroom.

“I do, sir. Well not . . . not really sir. I have been in Abuja for some time now.”

“So you say you are his mechanic? Was he owing you any money?”

“No, sir; he is not. I was just in the neighbourhood and I decided to greet him because I haven’t seen him in a while,” I lied.

“Well, the reason you haven’t been seeing him around is because he is missing—”

“Missing?”

“Or dead. The police don’t know which. No one has seen or heard from him since he left the house on the morning of the 22nd of August.”

“22nd of August?” That was the same day he left me to die.

CHAPTER 22

I uploaded Saka's video three days after I shot it. I spent most of my time in those three days trying to figure out what could have happened to Tiekuro, and how the mystery of his disappearance could be resolved so his family would know one way or the other if he was dead or alive.

It broke my heart when his dad said he prayed every day that nothing bad had happened to his son. I had been praying the same prayer too, but if it was a prayer that couldn't be answered, then let them at least find a body so the process of mourning and healing could begin for his father and siblings.

The judge admitted to me that evening that Tiekuro was a handful, but a living Tiekuro could change. A dead one couldn't, and that wasn't the memory any father should have of his first son. Honestly, if I hadn't met his father that day, I wouldn't have known that Teikuro was to have left for the UK in September to restart his degree programme following his rustication from the last Nigerian university he attended.

For me, I'd give anything to chat with him or his ghost or even an apparition of him. This time not to ask about him abandoning me, but to get the full story of what happened to him and Oyintari and that other guy after they left me bleeding. The most annoying thing was that I had lost Oyintari's number. It used to be in my phone, but it must have somehow disappeared when I went to have my handset fixed at Banex Plaza in Abuja.

Like most of my recent problems, it was really frustrating that I couldn't confide in anyone about what I was going through, and especially what I knew. I was probably the last person who saw him that day and speaking up would probably advance the investigations into his whereabouts. But then again, letting out what I knew could open up a can of worms, and that wouldn't be good for me at all. So, the question I have been asking myself since I spoke with Justice Digha was whether or not I should go to the police.

"Ebinimi, wetin happen? It's like you're not happy to see me." Blessing, hitting me with a pillow, brought me back to the present. "No tell me say you don go jam one babe for Abuja when don turn your head oh?"

“Why would you even think that, eh Blessing?”

“Why I no go think like that? I don dey with you for this house since yesterday and you never touch me better touch. Abi the beat when dem beat you two months ago affect Johnny?”

The way she said it made me chuckle. “Na who dey teach you all this nonsense talk sef? After you go dey do *robobo . . . rababa* with Reverend Ebizimor like say na you holy pass.”

“Me I dey go baff. When I come out of baffroom, na only perfume go dey my body—”

“You even still get time to spray perfume? After, you go say you don miss me. Abeg hurry come back jare, make I show you in five sweet rounds how much I’ve missed you.”

Just as Blessing left for the bathroom, Aguero called to accuse me of not letting him know I was back in town. I apologised and promised to see him in the morning. That was another situation that still filled me with guilt. I hung up the phone, and while waiting for Blessing to join me in bed, I started fiddling with my phone and stumbled on the video recording of Saka, Biodun and BRD doing their crazy remix of Victor AD’s song. After three days, I still thought it hilarious.

I wanted to post it on my Instagram page, but then I thought it was better to create a new account and that was what I did. Within minutes, the handle, ‘*Mechanics of Yenagoa*’ had its first post. I tagged Tunde Ednut, Instablog, Ono Bello, Linda Ikeji and Bella Naija. I also tagged Victor Ad and myself.

Blessing was still in the bathroom and *small Johnny* – oh sorry, I meant to say *big Johnny* – was getting really impatient so we both decided to pay her a visit in the shower. If I was to get through five rounds before morning, the earlier I started the better.

As it turned out, my woman was convinced after two rounds so we collapsed under the duvet and called it a night. But Blessing wasn’t ready for sleep. She cleared her throat and called me baby.

“You never sleep?” I asked, pulling her closer, still hoping for a third.

“Something dey bother me,” she began. “I don dey struggle with myself for the past four days whether make I tell you, abi make I just mind my business and let the matter rest.”

“What is that?” I sat up. Because she sounded really serious, for a minute I thought she knew about the Tiekuro saga.

“Ebinimi, this one strong. Ha! E heavy me for mouth!”

“If Omawumi fit talk her own finish even though e heavy her for mouth too, how your own come take heavy reach? Talk jor, you know say I no dey like make person dey keep me for suspense.”

“Where I want to start from?”

“You might want to tell me if this is about us or something else.”

“It’s not about us; it’s about your sister,” Blessing turned to face me, but in the dark I couldn’t see her face.

“Ebiakpo?” My heartbeat quickened. “Blessing, I hope this isn’t another conspiracy theory about her and Reverend Ebizimor again oh?”

“Why are you talking like this ehn? This is exactly why I didn’t want to bring this up with you in the first place because you probably wouldn’t even believe me. But this time I have pictures.”

“Pictures of my sister and her pastor?”

“No, pictures from the marriage I went for.”

“Now you’ve completely lost me, Blessing. Please tell me what you want to tell me so it makes sense. I no fit begin dey solve riddle this night.”

“Remember I was away in Port Harcourt for the weekend? I had a make-up and styling job to do there for a friend of a friend of a friend who was getting married.”

“You’re not that close with this person, I get it,” I interjected to speed up her story.

“Yes, you’re right. The bride isn’t really my friend, so I didn’t know anything about the arrangement for the occasion or the person she was getting married to. So Ebinimi, you can imagine my shock when the groom arrived at the venue of the ceremony with his friends and it was your brother-in-law.”

“Benson? Benson Emeledo?”

“Sister Ebiakpo’s husband.” She reached for her phone and showed me the pictures. It was true. Benson wearing a black bowler hat, a red *namatebe* – you know those woolly fabrics with lion heads everywhere and matching

black trousers, locked lips with a light-skinned big-bosomed girl wearing a red and white colour-coordinated wrapper, blouse and gele. Except Benson was now an actor in Nollywood or a model for Niger Delta attire, then Blessing was right. But Benson was not an actor or a model. He was my sister's husband and he had blindsided her and taken all of us for a ride.

I asked Blessing to transfer the picture to my phone. It was important evidence I needed to confront Benson with.

CHAPTER 23

When I woke up in the morning, Blessing was gone and Saka had become an internet sensation. The Instagram handle, *@MechanicsOfYenagoa*, had 374 followers. My first post had 1294 views, 386 likes and 79 comments all about Saka. My boys had captured people's attention with their impromptu singing and dancing. Almost everyone who saw the video on social media asked for more.

I jumped out of bed to break the good news to the guys, but none of them was in the sitting room or out in the workshop.

"Saka! Saka! Biodun! Broderick!" I called.

Saka ran out of the bathroom to join me in the veranda. He was covered in lather and had water dripping from his body on to the tiled floor of the front porch. The brown towel around his waist used to be white, but it wasn't my place to tell him how long he should use it before trashing it and buying a new one.

"Oga Ebinimi, wetin happen? The house dey on fire?"

"Mehn, the only thing on fire right now is you guys on social media! See, see . . ." I passed him my phone and he glanced at the screen; a blank expression enveloped his face. I noticed from the look he gave me that he couldn't understand my excitement. I could tell also that he didn't appreciate or comprehend the import of what he was looking at.

"You bin dey video us with your phone that day?"

"Over one thousand views in just about 7 hours Saka, I know people who would give up their hands and legs, and even go completely naked for that number of likes on Instagram. And the comments, you should read the comments. People really like you guys."

"Which people like us?"

"Saka, why are you like this? Abeg give me my phone jare. Where Biodun and Broderick dey sef? Na them go understand the implication of wetin you dey look so."

Just then, Biodun walked in through the gate with what I suppose was his breakfast – a large bowl of noodles and nice scented stew with boiled eggs he must have bought from Mama Akpos at the junction. I showed him the post.

“Wow! Oga Ebinimi, make we go record another video *sharperly* .” The way he jumped up and down beating on his chest, anyone would have thought he just won something at the Olympics.

“Na so. You no sabi say some of these things na luck?”

“But see na, dis one pass luck oh, even Tunde Ednut sef comment and him even regrann am.”

“Make I see,” I collected the phone back from him. “Chai, I no even see this one oh! Ol’boy, 9,763 views and 445 comments in one night!”

Instantly, Biodun had ideas for a new video, which he began sharing with me while Saka went back in to finish washing up.

“Make we sing dat Tubaba song with Perruzi – Amaka disappoint me, dat song na heavy banger. Abi make we do Fake Love when Wizkid and Duncan Mighty sing? Me I feel say dat one go better pass. Saka go dey for front dey sing him nonsense, den me and Broderick go lie down for ground —”

“Na true oh, where Broderick dey sef?” I interrupted him to look around for my youngest member of staff. “I no think say I been see am for night when una been dey watch that Juventus match for parlour.” When I said that, I noticed Biodun’s countenance change. He wasn’t smiling anymore and he had his eyes to the ground.

“Oga Ebinimi, Broderick matter don tire me oh!”

“What has he done this time?”

“I no sabi di kain bad guys when him don dey follow dis days oh. Di oda day wen you been no dey around, na so dem come pack all him fine fine shirt and jeans. Dem even carry him phone go, remain small thing dem for beat am if to say Reverend Ebizimor been no come out come beg. Dem say him dey owe dem plenty money for something wen dem supply am.”

“I hope say this guy never go join cult sha?” I wondered out loud.

“Oga, I won’t be surprised if he has oh. Yesterday evening, he still follow some other guys like that comot. Dem say dem dey go Asters for Express.

Na three o'clock this morning Broderick jump fence enter house. His tongue was all blue and I could see he was as high as a kite."

It had to be Swinol. "So where is he now?"

"The guy still dey sleep for room."

I was worried for Broderick. I knew it was time I spoke to his parents about the change in him that was making all of us in the workshop uncomfortable, but how do I do that? It was easy to blame it all on adolescence, but I knew it was much more than that. I too was 20 years old once and never for a moment succumbed to the pressure of joining cult gangs and doing drugs. Now suddenly, here I was with a huge problem on my hands.

I had met Broderick during my undergraduate days in NDU. His parents were my landlords in the dilapidated *face-me-I-face-you* one-room off-campus apartment I rented in Amassoma all through the four years of my stay there, plus the nearly two extra years of ASUU strikes. Back then, Broderick and his younger brother, Funakpo, did my laundry and ran other errands for me and my two other roommates, Kendrick and Amabebe.

Even then, Broderick would skip school. And while his kid brother today was a freshman studying History and International Relations in the University of Africa, Toru Orua, Broderick was still struggling with WASCE and JAMB.

Three years ago, his mother begged me to let him join me in Yenagoa as an apprentice in the workshop. Under my care and mentorship and with her prayers, she hoped her son would turn out a better man, much better than his father who was a security guard in the university by day and a *kai-kai* drinker by night.

Thankfully, Broderick now had four credits in WASCE after three attempts, and with luck he would make it five by the next attempt. As for the JAMB examination, it had been a steady but laborious climb to the 200 points mark demanded by universities, but I had made plans to fast track the process next time around. My only fear now was that with the way he was going, that day may never come. I knew I had to begin preparations on how to summon courage to tell his mother that I had let her down and failed to take care of her son.

The sound of someone banging the gate interrupted my thoughts. Biodun

and I exchanged glances. I wondered who the early morning caller was. My first instinct was to think Agüero. He had told me the night before that he'd be coming to see me, but then I doubted he'd drop by so early in the morning. Then again, I thought it was probably someone from the church coming in early to pray or maybe even a customer desperate to get his or her car fixed before the place turned into a mad house.

I was certain it was the latter though. Why some customers wouldn't read the notice outside the gate that announced our resumption time as 8:00 a.m. was beyond me.

"Oga Ebinimi, you dey expect customer?" It was as if Biodun read my mind, but he was already on his way to the gate before I could respond to his question. When he got back a couple of minutes later, he had a mischievous grin on his face.

"Who be that?" I asked him.

"The new apprentice," his smile broadened and I wondered why he was being so coy about whomever it was he met at the gate. "You nor even tell us say we don get new member of staff."

"New member of staff?" What the hell was he talking about? I was about to accompany him to the gate to see things for myself when I remembered. It must be the person the owner of the place I honed my skills as a mechanic a few years ago in Agudama spoke about when he called two days ago to complain about the floods that had submerged his workshop and chased his customers away.

When Oga Emma asked if I could temporarily accommodate an intern in my workshop, until the floods receded that is, I couldn't say no. After all, he taught me everything I knew about repairing cars and I still consulted him secretly whenever there was a tricky situation I couldn't handle myself. So, I agreed to take in his trainee. I figured I needed the extra hand as well, especially now that BRD's future in Kalakala Street was uncertain.

"Oga Ebinimi, make I open gate for am?"

"Yes, yes, let him in."

This time Biodun didn't walk, he ran. No, he didn't run; he flew. Walking beside him as he returned to join me on the balcony was the most beautiful girl I had seen in a long time, and I mean that quite literally.

“Good morning sir. My name is Oputi,” she said with the voice of an angel and a smile that rivalled the sun. “My Oga spoke to you about me.”

Come, come, come oh, Oputi isn't a guy? Damn! Why didn't he tell me Oputari was a girl?

I stretched my right hand for a handshake, and the instant hers touched mine, I knew we had a connection. Though I didn't believe in it, I knew in that moment what people meant by the expression, love at first sight.

CHAPTER 24

It had been three weeks since Blessing showed me the picture of Benson and his new wife, and I still didn't know what to do with the information. Many times I'd thought to confront him and Ebiakpo about it, but something told me to mind my business because I could already tell how my sister was going to react. Most importantly, I too had major personal issues of my own I'd been struggling with in the last couple of days.

It had also been three weeks since Oputi walked into the workshop and into our lives. Three weeks was only twenty-one days, but it felt like twenty-one months. Her beauty captivated me, but it was even worse for Saka, Biodun and Broderick. Even Reverend Ebizimor who hardly ever crossed over to our side of the compound had in the last two weeks found reasons to pop in every now and then to ask irrelevant questions and make dubious enquiries. The last time he dropped by, he wanted to know if any of us had seen his Bible. The question I wanted to ask him was whether his Bible had legs, but I just smiled and said *no*.

Everyone was happy about the new addition to the workshop – everyone except Blessing. She didn't like Oputi, and when I asked her why, she said it was because of me. She said she didn't trust me around beautiful women.

Another person that didn't like Oputi was Sister Agnes. And it wasn't only because she didn't trust Saka. Her reasons were also pecuniary. The other day, she and Saka matched into my room during my lunch break and she said the most outrageous thing I had heard the months.

“Oga Ebinimi, I want to manage your block.”

“My block? Which block are you referring to? Do you like mean engine block or block of flats?”

“The block when I dey talk about na the one when that new girl dey manage for una, wetin be her name sef?”

“Oputi,” Saka interjected.

“Whether na Opu-T oh, abi na Opu-H, or Opu-M, dat one no concern me.

Wetin I know be say she no go fit come from nowhere come take over our block.” I still didn’t know what she was talking about, so I turned to Saka for help.

“Oga Ebinimi, no be you talk this morning sey you want make she manage our social media block?”

I finally got it. “First of all, no be block; it’s called *blog* . Secondly, we don’t even have a blog yet. It was just an idea I was discussing with her because I know she’s good with all these social media stuff and also because of how well she has managed our Instagram page.”

“That one come be wetin, no be just to dey post picture every day? Abi you never see my own Facebook page?”

“Look, Agnes, I don’t know what your boyfriend has told you, but it’s more complicated than that. In the two weeks since Oputari started managing our page, she has grown it to almost seven thousand followers. Plus she is an English graduate, so she knows how to spell words correctly.”

“But Saka tell me sey she come here because of the flood when take over her former working place. But the flood water don dey dry na; wetin she still dey do here till this time? Abi she no go return back to where she come from again?”

Good question. But it was one to which I lacked an answer. I just didn’t want Oputi to leave, and I sensed she didn’t want to leave either. So when Oga Emma called to tell me he had reopened his workshop, I begged him to let her stay on in Kalakala Street for a bit longer. The reason I gave him was that she was handling our growing social media presence, and if she left it would all fall apart.

“Sister Agnes, I still no understand your point.”

“My point be sey, Saka tell me sey una dey contribute money to buy data for Opu-G—”

“Oputi,” Saka corrected her.

“Because sey she need data for her phone for una *block* .”

“Blog,” I corrected her again.

“Now, I dey ask Saka for money to take repair the borehole for my papa compound, na tori I dey hear.”

It took BRD coming – with the two gallons of engine oil and the breakpad I had sent him to get me to service a customer’s car – as my cue to allow them settle their lovers’ tiff while I went back to work.

The car in question was a Peugeot 306, just like Tiekuro’s and it made me realise that it had been three weeks since I learnt of his disappearance as well. And even though I made a promise to myself to uncover the truth about that situation, I still hadn’t made a move.

Trying to find Oyintari without raising any dust or drawing attention to myself in the process proved way more difficult than I had initially anticipated. Without a phone number or even a picture, it was hard to pull off a James Bond in the streets of Yenagoa and uncover the truth behind a female thug who just might have information about a missing or dead person.

Many times, I’d been tempted to go back to Tiekuro’s father with what I knew, and find out from him if he could link me up with any of Tiekuro’s friends, but I held back. It was possible they even knew Sucking Blood and how to reach her, that is assuming she was still alive.

Knowing what happened to Sucking Blood that day was vital, but I guess the old man would be curious as to why a mere mechanic who wasn’t quite friends with his missing son was so interested in helping him resolve the mystery behind Tiekuro’s disappearance.

On many occasions I had thought of involving Mr Freedom, but lately he’d become too busy to even pick my calls. The last time we spoke about it though, he advised me to forget about the issue and move on with my life. But how was I supposed to do that when Biodun told me the other day that he’d been noticing strange faces on Kalakala Street again?

Call it paranoia, but what if the unfamiliar faces were on our street because of me? What if it was the same guy from the 22nd of August and his men on a mission to finish what they started because, like me, they believed I knew too much and silencing me once and for all would erase everything linking them to the incidence of that dark day?

“You recognise any of them?” I asked Biodun when he came to me with his concerns.

“They are not familiar faces. They stand out because of the way they dress and look. I first notice dem when you been dey Abuja and that first week

when you return, and den two days ago I see dem again.”

“For where?”

“Dem just dey hang around for street. Dem no dey enter any person compound oh but you go just see dem for like Mama Favour joint or for Mama Akpos place or for dat aboki store wey dey repair shoe before the junction. That na why I begin dey suspect something.”

“Something like what?”

“You know say I been tell you something dat last time when dat tin happen to you. What if something wan happen again?” I could see the worry in his eyes. I was worried too, but I couldn’t let him know that.

“How many of them you don count?”

“I no know oh, Oga Ebinimi, because dem dey wear black cap and black T-shirt and you know say some of these guys for area dey dress like that sometimes and because of the cap I no fit really see any of their face. But I know say dem reach three or four because sometimes the person dey fair, sometimes e dey black, sometimes na short person dey come and sometimes too na tall person I dey see.”

“Have you told anyone this?”

“No, Oga Ebinimi. Na only you I don tell. You sabi Saka na, him no dey take things serious and BRD always dey dey high these days. I dey even suspect sometimes say maybe na because of him all these funny faces dey show for our street.”

“Okay, Biodun. I don hear you. For now, please I beg you, keep this thing you just told me to yourself. I will get to the bottom of it,” I said, hoping I came across as confident as I tried to sound.

“Make you fast oh, Oga. The guys no pure.”

What I learnt from Biodun got me really scared. My mind told me that these guys, whoever they were, knew about Tiekuro and Oyintari. They knew I wasn’t dead when they left me that day, and now that Tiekuro and his sidekick could not be found, they may have decided to set up surveillance at my house to see if I would somehow resurface, which I had. Scared of what I may or may not know and whom I may or may not be talking to, they could be making plans to permanently stop me from talking.

That was one theory. But what if there was another? What if these guys

have nothing to do with Tiekuro and the incident along Imiringi road and this was something else?

When I felt a tap on my shoulder, I almost jumped out of my skin.

“Ebinimi.”

I didn’t need to turn around from the car I was servicing to know who it was. It was a voice I was very familiar with.

“You startled me,” I said, as calmly as I could.

“Walk with me, Ebinimi. We need to talk.”

CHAPTER 25

“E binimi, you’ve not been picking my calls. I’ve been trying to reach you for over an hour now.”

“Sorry, Benson. I left my phone charging in the room. There’s no way I wouldn’t have returned your calls if I had seen them,” I said as we walked together towards the main house.

“Can we go somewhere a bit more private?” Benson said, looking around the living room as if he expected to see someone eavesdropping behind the curtains.

I led the way to my room and locked the door with the keys to reassure him and also to make sure Saka or any of the other guys didn’t barge in on us as they sometimes did whenever they knew I was alone in the room.

I sat on the bed, while Benson stood. “So, you want to talk to me about something?” I asked, even though I felt I already knew the reason for his unexpected visit to Kalakala Street.

He didn’t beat around the bush. “Does Ebiakpo know?” a very sombre and obviously worried Benson asked.

“That you took another wife? No, she doesn’t—” I was going to tell him how shocked and disappointed I was at him but then it occurred to me to ask, “Come oh, how did you even know that I know about the marriage?”

“I saw Blessing in a couple of the photos when I was going through them with my . . . my other wife. From what Ebiakpo tells me about your girlfriend, I figure she must have already told you what she knows and I know how close you and your sister are.”

Blessing had told me she didn’t want to create a scene or cause any embarrassment to the friend that got her the make-up and styling gig, so she made sure to stay away from the main hall used for the party. Quite uncharacteristic of my girl, she didn’t want Benson running into her and getting uncomfortable because she thought it was his *big day*. I’m sure she didn’t know she had been photographed.

“Well, Blessing told me everything, but I haven’t told Ebiakpo anything

yet. You know my sister, she'd go ballistic if she finds out and I don't think I want to be the one to break this particular news to her."

"That is why I came to beg you not to tell her anything. Please, Ebinimi, I want to break the news to her myself. I just haven't found the right time to do it."

"You know what, Benson? The right time would have been before you married this other person. That way, you would have spared her the embarrassment and pain of being the last to know." I gritted my teeth so I didn't raise my voice. "Benson, my sister deserves to know about your betrayal of her love and trust in you and that there's another Mrs Benson Emeledo out there. She needs to know today, not tomorrow or the day after. Tell her today, otherwise . . ."

I knew by the look he gave me that he got my message. "My brother, there are certain things I can't get into with you today, but your sister betrayed me too."

When he said that, I couldn't help but wonder if he knew about Anda's true paternity. If he did, I didn't want him knowing I was in on that particular secret too so I squeezed my face even harder.

"Na beg I dey beg you bros, in this era of social media, let the marriage pictures not pop up somewhere your wife would see them. She will kill you."

"I will tell her tonight."

"What exactly do you want to tell her sef, Benson? Perhaps I should even ask what this step you have taken means for my sister."

"What do you mean?"

"She told me you were going to buy her a jeep when government paid you for the job you did in Ekeremor. Now the money has come, you went and married a small girl while my sister and her son are still using *keke* to move around this town because you won't even bring money to replace the engine in her *tuketuke* . Tell me, are you kicking her out of your house? Are you divorcing her?"

Instead of answering my question, Benson asked for water. When he insisted on it being room temperature instead of cold, I gave him one of the two small Eva bottles on my dresser. It wasn't until he had finished drinking

that I realised I had given him the wrong bottle. The one on the table still had the tamper proof seal intact so I knew the water my brother-in-law drank was not ordinary. It was the holy water from Reverend Ebizimor.

Since Benson wasn't exactly a member of FFFM, I was going to notify him of my snafu, but then I remembered the backstabbing way he treated my sister and thought he needed the cleansing.

By the time Benson and I left my room, it was almost nightfall so I asked the guys to call it a day. There was still the Commissioner for Environment's car that his driver brought while Benson and I talked inside, but there was nothing we could do about the malfunctioning door locks at that time of the evening. Most of the spare parts dealers closed at 6 p.m. and it was almost 7.

After Saka, Biodun and Broderick went into their rooms to freshen up, I noticed Oputari still lingering in the parlour so I asked her to join me in my room.

"Oputi, someday when we're not so busy with cars, I'd like to hear the very interesting story about how you ended up as a mechanic. It's a dirty job you know, and it requires a lot of physical strength?"

"I should be making dresses or baking meat pies, I know. I've heard that a thousand times. But this is what I love and that's what it is. Sorry to disappoint you, Oga Ebinimi, but there's no interesting back-story here, except to say that it runs in the family. I was told about this uncle who died young. They say even as a teenager, there was nothing he didn't know about cars."

"I see. So you don't want to teach English or get a proper job someday?"

"My dream is to open an all-female virtual car repair and maintenance shop where people can contact us from all over the world with problems about their cars and the best places to shop for parts."

"That sounds interesting."

"Enough of my boring story. I would like to know how you ended up here after you left school. BRD has told me a few things, but there's no harm in hearing it directly from the horses mouth."

"Mine is even more boring than yours. I was this kid who started fixing cars right from his mother's womb."

“You lie!” Oputi laughed and I couldn’t help but join her.

“Of course that isn’t even possible, but the truth is I have always been interested in cars from when I was little. If I wasn’t fiddling with something in my dad’s car as a child, I was building toy cars with anything I could find. In secondary school, one of my teachers noticed how I would only read books and magazines about cars and he encouraged me to study engineering in school but because my JAMB score wasn’t that great I had to settle for a course in the management sciences.”

“So you’re not doing this because you couldn’t find a corporate job?”

“I never saw myself doing anything else other than this. As a matter of fact, I started apprenticing while waiting to start at the university and every holiday while in NDU I would go back to Oga Emma’s workshop to work for him. By the time I was done with the university there was hardly anything I didn’t know about fixing cars or running a workshop. I started this workshop immediately after my NYSC in Benue State and I want to believe that I haven’t done so badly.”

“Considering the fact that it pays your bills and that you even have other people working for you as well, I would say that you’ve done very well.”

“And do you want to know the best part?”

“Tell me.”

“The surprise on people’s faces when I tell them I am a mechanic because on a good day they wouldn’t expect to see someone like me working as a mechanic. There’s also the disappointment from some quarters though, you know those people who are disappointed that I am underachieving and throwing my degree away.”

“I get that a lot,” Oputi said, shaking her head. “Do you know my parents almost disowned me? What saved me was Facebook. I got a lot of commendation from people on facebook when I posted my story a year ago or so. TVC even sent one of their star reporters, Ovieme George to come and interview me and I was featured in the news and in a short documentary. That was the turning point for me. My parents didn’t see the clip or watch the documentary when it first aired but some of their friends did and told them about it. In fact they got so many calls commending them for supporting me it left them with no other choice than to fall in line.”

“Interesting. I too I’m amazed at how much positivity I receive from my Facebook and Instagram friends. They were always quick to like my pictures and drop encouraging comments that made me feel like it was cool to be a mechanic afterall.”

“That’s why I love this whole social media thing you are doing with the guys. You won’t believe the traffic we get on a daily basis.”

“You mean people are still engaging?” I asked, surprised.

“They are. Just this evening, someone from Axel Auto Oils wanted to know how he could reach Saka to feature him in an advert for their new engine oil product.”

“That’s great news. Have you told him about it?”

“I was waiting to tell you first, but you were with your brother-in-law. That was why I stayed back.” She smiled at me and I smiled back. “Whatever the outcome, I think this calls for a celebration.”

“I agree with you, Oputi. Do you have anything in mind?”

She smiled again. “I saw on Facebook that you’re a fan of Michael B. Jordan. His new movie is out in Nostalgia Cinema tonight. If you’re not too tired, maybe we can go see it together . . . my treat.”

“Yeah, I saw the trailer last week and I’d really love to see it. Give me a minute to freshen up and then we can go.”

“I’d also need to do the same thing and get into a nice dress so I don’t embarrass you,” she smiled again. “How about we meet there at about 8:30 p.m. That’s when the movie begins.”



At the concession stand, we got popcorn and soda and then went in to see the movie. It was worth all the hype and the premium we paid to be amongst the first set of people in Yenagoa to see it.

After the movie, I invited Oputi to join me back home and she agreed without hesitation. I opened the passenger door of the Commissioner’s Prado which I borrowed from the workshop for the occasion, and watched her climb in. I made sure to drive slowly so we’d have enough time to review the movie and make jokes about the parts we thought were really funny. When we got back to Ovom, the house was quiet and all the lights were out.

We got into my room and started to kiss. I could already imagine what the rest of the night would look like, although I was confident in my ability to make the reality even better than the fantasy. When my phone rang and spoiled everything, we were almost in second base. At first I ignored it, but the persistence bothered Oputi so she insisted that I find out who it was. I was going to turn off the phone instead, but then I saw it was my sister, Ebiakpo; so I called her back.

“Ebinimi, why you no dey pick your phone?”

“Sorry—”

“Where you dey? Benson is dying. Please come to FMC now. The doctor says he may not make it through the night.”

By the time Oputi and I got to the hospital, Benson was in a terrible state, and it was as the doctor said – he didn’t make it through the night. Benson died at about one a.m.

CHAPTER 26

Hearing Ebiakpo go on and on about how Benson was such a good man – and how much he loved her and Anda – and how he did this and did that for her and their only child made me very uncomfortable. Clearly, she had no idea that in a very public and lavish traditional marriage ceremony conducted in Port Harcourt three weeks before his death, her beloved husband had taken the hands of another woman – a much younger one at that – in marriage.

I knew it was my responsibility to quickly break the news to my sister before someone else did, but it was difficult pulling her away from the throng of sympathisers already waiting outside her home by the time we got back from the hospital. In that moment, I regretted not telling her weeks earlier when Blessing first told me what she had witnessed first-hand.

If my reason for holding back then was because I thought I knew how Ebiakpo would react to the news, her husband's sudden death just tipped the Richter scale to an unprecedented high.

Some of Benson's relatives that rushed to the house as soon as they heard the news of his passing had pleaded with Ebiakpo to go in and rest. But seeing as more neighbours, friends and church members trooped in, she was compelled to stay and receive them in the sitting room.

Every time it looked like Ebiakpo had stopped crying, new groups of visitors were ushered into the small parlour of the Emeledo's home. Most of them said they learnt about the sad news on Facebook and because of how nice Benson and Ebiakpo were to them; they just had to come and see things for themselves and offer their condolences.

With each set of callers, the wailing started all over again; each time louder and more heart wrenching than with the previous set of visitors.

"Ewoooo , Mama Vincent, I am now a widow," Ebiakpo lamented when she saw one of her neighbours and closest friends. "Ha, my own has finished. Who will change light bulbs in this house? Who will go and *off* the generator in the night when NEPA *bring* light? Who will pay Anda's school fees when the new term begins? Who will follow up on the jeep Benson

assured me was on its way from Cotonou since last week? Who? Who? Who?”

It was painful seeing my sister in anguish like that, but perhaps more painful was the possibility that I had something to do with her husband’s death. If what the young doctor said about food poisoning was true, and if Ebiakpo’s recollection of the final twenty-four hours of Benson’s life was anything to go by, then it was very likely that to the best of her knowledge, the only thing he consumed before he was taken to the hospital was the water I offered him in my room.

“Benson loved me. Ha, that man loved me with all his heart! Even when I couldn’t have children for him after years of marriage, he was patient with me and wouldn’t even agree to marry another woman.”

“That’s not true,” I wanted to scream, “this man you wouldn’t stop crying for went behind your back and married someone else!”

“Please take it easy, Mama Anda, please,” a neighbour said. “Please try and be strong for your son Anda and the baby you’re carrying.”

“So a woman should not cry when her husband dies because she is pregnant abi, Mama Pelere?” Ebiakpo asked rubbing her stomach, her voice almost a whisper. “Isn’t it enough reason to cry that this baby would be born without a father?”

In that moment, my awareness of the lies and deception on the part of my sister and her late husband diminished any sense of responsibility I felt to grief genuinely. As far as I was concerned, everyone in that room, including my sister was just acting. I so desperately wanted to put an end to all the drama, but the sensitivity in the timing and subject matter we were all dealing with restrained me.

“Sister Ebiakpo,” one elderly lady, a deaconess from our Fire For Fire Liberation Ministries looked kindly at my sister and said, “this child in your womb may no longer have an earthly father, but he still has God – and Reverend Ebizimor who is a father to us all.”

I was about to ask if Reverend Ebizimor was available to pay school fees and do school runs, but the chorus of Amen made me choose silence over protest. It also reminded me that my sister’s pillar and spiritual guide was conspicuously absent in the hospital and hadn’t showed up in her home also. Although he had been in touch with Ebiakpo through phone calls, I

thought it was fishy he wouldn't show up to offer actual comfort to one of the most committed members of his church.

Anxious to get back to Kalakala Street to confront Reverend Ebizimor about his plot to kill me with the poisoned water that had now claimed another life instead, I stood up and announced that my sister and her son, who was now awake and running all over the place in blissful oblivion of the tragedy the adults in the room were dealing with, really needed to rest. I thanked everyone for coming and asked that they respected Ebiakpo and little Anda's privacy.

By the time we cleared the parlour and the compound of sympathisers, it was almost noon and I could no longer hold off calls from my customers already waiting for me in Kalakala Street, so I also had to take my leave. However, before I did that, there was one final thing I needed to do.

"Sister Ebiakpo, it will be well oh," I said as she smoothened out the bedclothes so she could try and catch some sleep.

"Thank you, Ebinimi." We were alone in her bedroom and it was the dreaded moment of truth. I couldn't hold off telling her what I knew about her late husband anymore.

"Ebiakpo, before you rest, there's something I think you need to know about Benson. A number of people are aware of it already and I'm afraid if I don't tell you now someone else would and it might really, really upset you, especially now you're supposed to be mourning him . . ." I noticed the blank, faraway look in her eyes and it scared me.

"You want to tell me Benson has another wife?"

She started laughing, quietly at first, and then it became really loud. For a minute, I thought my sister had lost her marbles. I was expecting tears, shouting at the top of her voice, a torrent of curses, maybe even a shirt grab, and I was prepared for those. I wasn't prepared for laughter; it certainly wasn't the reaction I was hoping for.

"You knew about the other woman?"

Ebiakpo stopped laughing and stared at me with an intensity I had never seen before.

"Why wouldn't I know that my husband got married about a month ago? Look Ebinimi, don't worry yourself, and contrary to how you may have

imagined it, Benson wasn't very discreet about the whole affair. I listened in on his phone conversations and I read his chats."

"His phone wasn't passworded?"

"The foolish man's password to all his devices was *gunners4life* ." I studied his finger movements intently for months until I figured it out."

Suddenly, it was beginning to look like I was the one who needed to lie down. My legs wobbled and my stomach rumbled.

"Did you confront him with what you knew?"

"Ebinimi, you still be small boy," she said ominously. "Someday when you get married, you'd realise that confrontation doesn't resolve all matrimonial issues. Sometimes, a person has got to do what a person has got to do."

"Ebiakpo—"

"Please, bring a glass of water from the kitchen for me. You people say I need to rest so let me take these sedatives and see if it helps."

The conversation was over.

I left my sister very confused. There I was, convinced that Reverend Ebizimor was complicit in Benson's death, but with what my sister just revealed to me, I wasn't so sure anymore.

CHAPTER 27

“Reverend, I am not accusing you of anything. I’m only saying that the hospital says my sister’s husband died from something he ate or drank.”

“And that something he ate or drank came from me?” Reverend Ebizimor didn’t look up at me as he spoke. He appeared distracted by something he was looking for on his dishevelled table, and it didn’t help that his three phones kept ringing at the same time, interrupting his search. I didn’t need to look at his face to know he was mad as hell, but it didn’t deter me from stating my mission to his office that afternoon.

“I can’t say anything about what he ate, but I know he drank the water I bought from you some weeks back and then he died, just like that.” I waited for him to say something, but he remained silent, a faraway look in his eyes. “Sir, is it out of place for me to wonder about the coincidence?” I asked, hoping to grab his attention.

“What coincidence are you talking about? Look, Brother Jacob, this rubbish thing you are telling me, please don’t go and say it outside here oh, because it can land you in serious trouble before the law.”

“How do you mean it can land me in serious trouble before the law?” I summoned the courage to ask, but even before he answered I knew where he was headed.

Suddenly, I felt uncomfortable sitting there and quizzing him about Benson’s death. It made me wonder whether coming out to meet with the anointed man of God in his office was even a good idea. Something about Reverend Ebizimor had changed since my return to Yenagoa, but I couldn’t place my finger on it. He oozed power and arrogance, and I was terrified by his presence and rage in a way I had never been in the past. But as terrified as I was, I needed answers I believed only he could provide.

It bothered me that I couldn’t get Ebiakpo’s oblique words out of my head. That was why I felt compelled to embark on an expedition of discovery to the Reverend and general overseer of Fire For Fire Liberation Ministries four days after she and I spoke in her bedroom, not realising that I too could

be in the frame for what was starting to appear to me like a case of premeditated killing.

“Ebinimi, didn’t you just confess to me that you were the last person Sister Ebiakpo’s husband visited before his unfortunate demise? Don’t you think you would be a person of interest if people decide to probe further? After all, you even have motive.”

“I have motive?” Now I was really perplexed. I had gone to him for answers but instead of the clarity I sought, Reverend Ebizimor was making me look like the bad guy.

“I believe you do,” he stopped ransacking his table for a minute, looked me in the eye and added, “Blessing told me you knew about the marriage ceremony in Port Harcourt.”

“Blessing told you what?” I was shocked my girlfriend would run her mouth to the whole world even after I begged her not to tell anyone about Benson and his new wife. I was angry Blessing couldn’t keep it a secret between us just as we agreed and it made me wonder if her loyalty was with me or with the Reverend. It was a question I looked forward to asking her in person when she came over later at night.

“Ebinimi, you will try and leave my office now so that I can concentrate on what I am looking for. I don’t think I have time for your baby Sherlock Holmes antics this afternoon.”

“But—”

“But what, Brother Jacob?” he barked at me. “Didn’t you read the instruction taped to the bottle?” he reached for one from underneath his table and pointed to something written in very small prints somewhere near the place NAFDAC registration number should have been on the improvised paper wrap that carried the name of his church. “It says clearly here, like it does on all of the bottles I sell to my members, that its liquid content loses its efficacy after seven days of purchase and must be discarded. Ebinimi, you kept it for three weeks, three weeks!”

Our eyes locked, but it wasn’t until he looked away I noticed something in his body language I had never seen before – fear.

I left the Reverend’s office with my tail between my legs and headed straight to the workshop to join Saka, Biodun, BRD and Oputari. However,

with what had just transpired between Reverend Ebizimor and me, there was no way I could concentrate on fixing anyone's car. So when Aguero called to say he was on his way to the workshop, I dropped my tools, gave Saka and the other guys some instructions about the jobs on ground and the customers we were expecting, and went into the house to wait for him. I really needed the distraction.

Aguero and I hadn't seen each other in a long while so we had a lot of catching up to do, but before we talked about cars, women and money, he asked after Ebiakpo. Like most people in Yenagoa, he also heard about her husband's death on social media and even though he called immediately to offer his condolences, which I accepted on her behalf, he still promised a follow-up visit. And *boy*, was I glad he showed up when he did?

"So, have they fixed a date for the burial yet?"

"Date *ke* ? You know how our people are about burials. It's not something to be rushed."

"But your brother-in-law wasn't that old na, so I don't think they should keep the body in the mortuary for too long."

"When I spoke to Ebiakpo this morning, she said the family has fixed a meeting for Sunday and she wants me there with her. I think it's in that meeting they would fix a date for the service of songs and the burial proper."

"Oya na, make you let me know when una fix date so I go fit send my own contribution to you. And Ebinimi, if there's any other way you'd like me to pitch in, please feel free to let me know." When he said that, I couldn't help but wonder if his offer to assist the family was because of me his friend, or really because of his son, Anda. I thanked him for the offer and promised to fill him in as the picture became clearer.

Not wanting to dwell on Aguero's dalliance with my elder sister so I wasn't tempted to give anything away, I quickly changed the subject.

"So, are you in touch with any of our lecturers?"

Aguero gave me an update on the latest happenings in school. He told me that the protracted ASUU strike meant that things were really slow and that our masters' programme in NDU was *sort of* on hold. But my friend had become friends with almost all our lecturers and supervisors, so we had

nothing to worry about. He said he sent them money every now and then, and that whenever he did, he made sure to inform them it was from both of us. To say the least, I was touched by his thoughtfulness and generosity. Even though we hadn't seen or spoken to each other in a long time, it was nice to know Aguero still had my back.

On the issue with my ex, Adinna, since I had taken my pound of flesh, there really was no point holding on to past grudges. All was forgiven. When I asked Aguero about her, he told me she was fine – and then he dropped the bombshell.

“You know she left me, right?”

I couldn't believe it. Adinna was back in play! When I told him I was sorry to hear about the break-up, I didn't mean it. I tried, but I wasn't successful in wiping the smirk off my face so I turned it into a question.

“What happened? You guys were so in love with each other.”

“We are still in love with each other, but she had to marry the old man.”

“What? You mean Adinna is married to Justus Woyinpereowei?”

“It was the condition he gave her for my release.”

The smirk returned, and this time I didn't care whether Aguero noticed or not. This self-acclaimed “player” and his “playee,” had been played by the 64-year-old commissioner for Employment, Rehabilitation & Social Welfare.

I knew the truth but I couldn't tell him.

CHAPTER 28

Blessing didn't show up. She didn't pick or return my calls either, even though I must have tried her number more than ten times between 8 p.m. and midnight when I finally gave up trying. Whenever she gave me the silent treatment, it was either because she was mad about something I had done that day or I didn't give her money she asked for.

A number of times, it was because she suspected some hanky-panky with some other chick, and those times she'd put up cryptic messages about men and unfaithfulness on her WhatsApp status in addition to going quiet on me. Her messages were never lost on me.

Since I couldn't think of any way I had offended her in the last couple of days, I brushed aside the disappointment of spending another cold December night alone on my big bed. I told Siri, the *iPhone messenger*, I wanted Alicia Keys' "*Try Sleeping with a Broken Heart*" on repeat, and then I selected two of my softest pillows, wrapped my arms around them, and went to sleep.

I woke up still thinking it was weird for Blessing to give me an attitude when I should have been the one mad at her. Against my advice, she had gone to Reverend Ebizimor about my late brother-in-law's secret marriage in Port Harcourt. She had also not called or visited Ebiakpo since her husband's death and I thought that was immature on her part, considering they both worshipped in the same church.

I knew Ebiakpo had apologised to her after the fight they had when we all erroneously thought she had abducted Anda some months back. Apparently, *Sister Blessing* still carried a grudge over the humiliation she suffered in the hands of my sister.

In the past, whenever Blessing wouldn't talk to me, I was always the one desperate to reach out to her for a resolution of the issues – real or imaginary. This time though, I decided to borrow a leaf from her playbook. After all if I survived nights without her, I would surely survive daytime if I didn't see her or speak with her on the phone.

Putting aside Blessing's behaviour from the night before, I quickly

prepared to begin my day which from all indications would be hectic because we had three vehicles from two days earlier that had to be worked on and delivered to their owners before lunch time.

When I got to the workshop, my workers were having morning devotion, one of the innovations introduced by Oputi when she joined us on Kalakala Street. After we said the grace and I had assigned all of them their tasks, Oputi raised her hands to grab my attention. She said she had something she wanted to discuss with me privately so I asked her to follow me back into the main house.

“Oga Ebinimi.” Oputi was all smiles.

“Madam Oputi.” I smiled back even though I knew my dentition would never land me a spot in a toothpaste commercial. “I’m so sorry I haven’t had time to thank you for the other night – the movie – and then afterwards – at FMC.” I didn’t know why I skipped the part in my room before Ebiakpo’s call came through and interrupted us.

“It’s the least I could have done,” Oputi answered shyly. I think she suspected where my head was at that moment, but she didn’t go there. Instead she asked, “So, how’s your sister holding up?”

“It hasn’t been easy, but I know she’s a trooper; she’ll pull through, mostly because of my nephew, Anda.”

“Thank God she’s a strong woman.”

“Trust me, she is,” I concurred. “Okay, Oputi, let’s hear it because I know you didn’t ask for this meeting just to discuss my sister’s strength,” I said, pointing to the sofa. “So what is it I can do for you this morning?”

“It’s Saka. I think you need to speak with him.”

“Saka? What has he done this time?”

“I really don’t know what has gotten into him lately,” she began, “we haven’t posted anything new on Instagram for days now because he has refused to sing with Biodun and BRD.”

“Why wouldn’t he sing, isn’t that what he likes doing?”

“Every time I tell him we need fresh content for the *Mechanics of Yenagoa*, he tells me to go and speak with his manager.”

“Saka has a manager now?” I would have laughed out loud, but then I

didn't know how Oputi would take it, so I kept a straight face and listened.

"Yes, his girlfriend Agnes. She says she's his manager and she's really, really, really getting on my nerves."

I could see the frustration on Oputi's face as she spoke.

"She keeps making unreasonable demands and giving us impossible conditions."

"She has conditions?"

"Plenty conditions. First, she says she must be in every short video we shoot."

"As what?"

"*Waka pass, video vixen, siddon look* . . . anything. She says she too must become popular on social media like her boyfriend Saka."

"Well, if that's all she wants, I guess we can somehow accommodate her in the videos."

"I thought so too, until she showed up all made up like a masquerade. When I told her she had too much makeup on, she flared up and even threatened that her client would boycott all future shoots if I didn't stop ordering her about like a small child."

With all the things troubling my mind, I didn't think I wanted to add Saka and Sister Agnes's revolt into the mix.

"See Oputi, just give them whatever they want."

"Oga Ebinimi, that's not all she's asking for oh!"

"What else could she possibly want?"

"70 per cent."

"Of what?"

"Remember the guys from Axel Auto Oils I told you about the other time?"

"Yes I do?"

"Well, it turns out the company's PR people are really serious about using Saka for a commercial and they are willing to pay up to 500k in fees. I told Saka this and he tells his 'manager' and now she says they must take 70 percent of the money and any other money we make in future from his

singing and appearances because Saka is the brain behind the *Mechanics of Yenagoa* .”

“But I am the brain behind the *Mechanics of Yenagoa* . I started this damn thing,” I almost yelled in disbelief.

“I think what Agnes meant to say is that Saka is the star of the show or something like that.”

“And does Saka know about his girlfriend’s meddling?”

“He does, in fact he was standing right there the whole time.”

“Look, Oputi, I think it’s too early in the day for me to get worked up over percentages and boycotts, so let’s deal with this later. I think you should fix a meeting between his *womanager* and me for tomorrow or the day after. There’s just too much work for us here at the moment to allow ourselves get distracted by Agnes and her demands.”

“Okay, Oga Ebinimi.” Oputi didn’t get up so I knew there was more. “I brought you a sandwich and tigernut juice.”

“Hmmm,” I smiled, “movies, sandwiches, fresh juice . . . you’re turning me into *ajebutter* oh.”

She laughed. “Speaking of *ajebutter* things, have you heard of the Ink Potters? They are a group of young Yenagoa-based poets and creatives – one or two of them were in the university with me.”

“I’m listening.”

“They organise this monthly poetry slam at Davem and the Christmas edition comes up this weekend. Would you like to attend?”

I wasn’t expecting that, but I was happy someone as pretty, classy and exposed as Oputi wanted to spend time with me because I was really getting to like her. She was focused, innovative, smart, loving, calm, attentive, sweet, gentle, soft-spoken, loyal—

“Oga Ebinimi, would you like to come along?”

“Poetry, you say? I’ve never really attended anything like that before, but if you promise it’d be fun, then I’m game.”

“Okay, Sunday is a date then.”

“Sure thing.” I had an extra spring in my steps as I walked with her back to the workshop.

The next two days went like a breeze; it was all work, work and more work, which was a good thing because it helped take my mind off a lot of things. I even forgot about my meeting with Sister Agnes until Oputi brought Saka and her to the parlour that evening. She said she only had fifteen minutes to spare because she didn't want to be late for the communion service with Reverend Ebizimor.

"Sister Agnes," I began, "what is this thing I am hearing about you demanding 70 per cent of the proceeds from the *Mechanics of Yenagoa* . I don't know if Saka hasn't told you yet, but I started this thing. It is my brainchild and since I handed it over to Oputi, she has taken it to a whole new level."

"I no dey argue that one with you, Oga Ebinimi. My own point be say if not for Saka, the thing for no go anywhere. This *internet sensation* when people dey call am now, no be by pressing phone oh," she turned and made a face at Oputi. "Na by talent and Saka be the person when get the talent pass for this thing."

"Nobody talk say Saka no get talent. My own be say na me start the thing, and I no go because of that one, begin give everybody condition or begin dey ask for lion share of any money when we make."

"Brother Jacob, but make you sef reason this matter na. Yes, maybe na you start am, but na Saka be the main man. Na him dey bring hold up—"

"Traffic," I heard Oputi mutter under her breath.

"Na my customer be the reason why this thing blow."

"Customer?" I asked, confused.

"I think she meant to say client," Oputi clarified.

"Whether na customer oh or na client oh, na una sabi. The thing when me I sabi be say na Saka be the koko and that na why the Axel Oil people ask for am."

At that point, I thought it was necessary to hear from Saka himself. It was important I knew where he stood in all of this, but I really shouldn't have bothered questioning him or asking for his opinion. I should have known.

"Me I support anything when Agi talk oh."

"Saka, so after everything I have done for you in this house and in my workshop, you seriously want to throw all away because of ordinary 600k?"

“600k no be ordinary oh. That kain money go solve plenty problem,” Saka pointed out to me.

“Still, Oputi here is very talented, she can make you a household name in this country and you’d be making that kind of money steady. Agnes on the other hand is only looking at the present and how she will control the small money that has come. She can’t help you make more money or even grow your brand.”

“Oga Ebinimi, you dey take style dey insult me abi? Saka, make we go. Las las na dem go come beg us.” Agnes stormed out of the parlour but to my greatest surprise, Saka didn’t join her.

At that point, I couldn’t help myself. I knew I sounded worse than a frog when I sang, but since Saka was on strike, someone had to do the singing. I thought the words of Davido and Kizz Daniel aptly captured the moment.

*“See baby, if you want leave o, biko leave,
No do shakara, no dey carry your shoulder oh
As you see me so baby, na because of you I don kolo
See I don dey go, one ticket to obodo oyibo.”*

Oputi caught my drift and started laughing but Saka didn’t get the joke so he squeezed his face some more so I had to explain to him why I was singing that particular song.

“Oga Ebinimi, me I no too care about the money oh, but you know na, I have to make my woman happy otherwise she go lock up and las las na me go suffer am.”

Oputi cleared her throat loudly and left the parlour so Saka and I could discuss privately. I tried talking some sense into him, but I didn’t make any headway because it was evident from everything I had seen that Sister Agnes was the one calling the shots in their relationship and Saka didn’t really have anything to say about his own future.

CHAPTER 29

The family meeting didn't start until about one o'clock in the afternoon. It was a good thing it held in Ebiakpo's house and that I arrived there quite early because it gave me a chance to play with Anda while waiting for her in-laws to show up. My sister also made starch and banga soup with dry fish, prawns and periwinkle so I had the opportunity of filling up as well.

I would be lying if I said I didn't feel bad eating in the house of a man who had just died under what I would classify as mysterious circumstances. But in my defence, I hadn't tasted a decent home cooked meal since the last time Blessing spent the night with me. Another thing is that I'd never been known to show much resistance when it came to Ebiakpo's cooking, but that's just by the way.

Now that I think about it, I didn't realise the great thing my elder sister did for me when she insisted that I ate and fortified my stomach before the meeting began. Until her husband's relatives started showing up one by one and the meeting finally began, I didn't realise it wasn't going to be a meeting but a shouting match.

Probably because I was still young when we lost our parents, I didn't realise informing immediate and extended family members was such a big deal and that traditional Ijaw burials were steeped in so much cultural practices and rites that had existed for generations. Getting everyone on the same page and to agree on where Benson was to be buried, fixing dates for laying-in-state and interment and arriving at the amount each family member was to contribute to his final journey home took almost three hours.

I had known Benson's family for a number of years now, so it was really shocking to me how much money they were willing to spend on acquiring a coffin, clothes, food and entertainment for a three-day ceremony. From my sister's description of them to me in the past, I knew there was no way on earth they would have agreed to raise even one-tenth of that amount in celebrating births and weddings or in settling hospital bills or school fees

for one of their own in desperate need of assistance even if their lives depended on it.

It was as if the meeting was never going to end and I kept looking at the time because of my evening out with Oputi.

Finally, after hours of going back and forth on the same points, and very intense arguments and near-fights, I saw the men shaking hands and smiling happily at each other for what they had accomplished.

“Benson is going to be buried in style,” his elder brother Captain Jerry, retired, whispered to Ebiakpo, as if it was any comfort.

“Sagbama people go see something.” A younger member of the family couldn’t contain his joy at the plans they had agreed on. He high-fived the person sitting next to him.

The next thing I knew, as if from a rehearsed performance, Captain Jerry stood up, cleared his throat loudly to grab everyone’s attention and declared that there was one last item on the agenda.

He turned to face Ebiakpo, but when he couldn’t look her in the eye I knew what that final item was. He began by telling my sister how much Benson loved her and Anda and how he was a good man who did his best to provide for his family, immediate and extended. And then he went on to say that no man was perfect and that every now and then even the most faithful of husbands try other women’s cooking and that it wasn’t anything strange for real Ijaw men.

Captain Jerry announced with a tinge of pride that was not lost on my sister and me, that his younger brother only recently ate outside and that he did the right thing afterwards by bringing the food home.

“So, we thought you should know this as we begin working towards the burial ceremony because his second wife, Amara, also has a role to play in this burial.”

There was a long silence after he spoke. Everywhere was quiet. If a toothpick had landed on the tiled floor, it would have made a bang. Ebiakpo was quiet for the longest time and all her in-laws in the room had their eyes on her. I could tell they were wondering what was going through her mind, but I didn’t have to. I already knew.

Ebiakpo stood up slowly, pulled down her long black and navy blue

ankara print mourning dress so it touched the floor, and then she did something totally unexpected. She lunged at her brother-in-law, grabbing him by the neck and knocking off his medicated glasses from his face before any of us knew what was going on. There was commotion everywhere as old and young men scrambled without success to loosen her grip.

“Liar,” Ebiakpo screamed. “Liar! Liar! Liar!”

More people joined the rescue party and this time they were able to free the captain from the vice-like grip that was Ebiakpo’s hands.

“See this mad woman oh, do you want to kill me?” Captain Jerry was almost at the door as he spoke. Someone ran to him with his glasses that was missing the nose pads, one temple and the left lens, but the retired army officer couldn’t be bothered. He had seen enough.

“It’s not a lie oh our first wife. Your late husband, Benson, has another wife. We went to marry her a few weeks ago in Port Harcourt,” another relative spoke.

“I say it’s a lie yeeeeee! How can you tell me that a man that loves me the way Benson did can marry another woman behind my back?”

The next thing I knew, Ebiakpo was crying uncontrollably.

“Ebiakpo, please don’t do this.” I added my voice to those of the other men begging her to stop crying.

“How can I stop crying when I’m just finding out that Benson was a betrayer, a liar and a cheat? Haaa! Benson, wherever you are, it will not be well with you I swear. God – why am I calling God sef? Satan will baptise you in that hell fire you are burning in right now,” my sister cursed.

“Ebiakpo, please don’t talk like that about the dead.”

“Ebinimi, I will talk anyhow I like about that bastard and his bastard relatives who all conspired to make me a laughing stock in this Yenagoa.”

“Our wife, it is not like that,” the same relative that spoke earlier tried explaining to her. “Benson may have married a younger girl, but it doesn’t mean he didn’t love you again. We are men, that’s how God made us.”

“Oh, so that is why you all conspired with Benson to bring in a roadside prostitute to come and reap where she did not sow, abi? Let the same God that you just brought into this matter punish all of you to your children and

your children's children."

At this point I was really confused. In my private conversation with Ebiakpo a few days ago, she admitted to knowing about the marriage so I couldn't for the life of me understand the drama unfolding before my eyes and why she was pretending like she only just found out about the new wife situation.

"Now you are taking this thing too far," another elderly relative of Benson's cautioned her.

"You call this taking things too far?" Ebiakpo shouted, not minding that by this time all her neighbours had come into the house to see what all the noise and commotion was about.

"Yes woman, you are taking this thing too far," the same relative said again.

"You call this taking this too far, abi? You people haven't seen anything yet. Just wait, I will show all of you what taking things too far really is. Ebinimi, please come and help me pack my things out of this cursed house. I will leave this house for you people, but all of you should mark my words, this is only the beginning."

My plea to my sister to rein in her anger fell on deaf ears. Her mind was made up and even though I wasn't in support of her decision, I found myself assisting her and her son move a few of their things. That was how my sister and her son followed me back to Kalakala Street that Sunday evening and by the time I was done helping them unpack and settle in, I had missed my date with Oputi.

CHAPTER 30

*“My nigga wo zi go
Gee wa go or de be?
The girls dem hmmm hmmm hmmm
I no feel die for you
Oluwa burn am
Ye, ye, ye, ye, ye, ye, ye, ye...”*

If I hadn't heard the “ye, ye ” part of the song, there was no way on earth I could have known that what Saka was singing was the Burna Boy hit song, *Ye*, that I like so much. But what do I know? It was what his growing fans wanted, and it was what brought the likes and comments to the Instagram page I created for him, Biodun and BRD in the first place.

That was why it struck me as odd that Saka was singing by himself and the other guys were nowhere in sight. It was the first time I would see Oputi working with Saka alone and I didn't like it. Suddenly, it seemed like the love and camaraderie that existed in Kalakala Street was no more, and it bothered me. I waited for Oputi to finish editing the video and posting it online before pulling her aside to discuss my concerns.

“Why aren't the other guys doing this with you today?”

Oputari shrugged her shoulders in a manner that suggested indifference and it bothered me that she wasn't smiling either. It would be the first time I would see her keep such a straight face when we were alone together.

“I thought we agreed that Biodun and Broderick added some extra *stew* and humour to the videos?”

Instead of talking, Oputi shrugged her shoulders again. I didn't need anyone to tell me she was giving me the silent treatment.

“I thought Broderick was the one always asking for this particular song, how come you didn't ask him to join Saka in singing today of all days?”

“Oga Ebinimi, if you really want to know what's going on with those

three, you'd have to ask them yourself. Me, I cannot come and kill myself."

Oputi's somewhat rude response surprised me and I thought I knew why she was in a foul mood.

"Oputi, I thought I had apologised for Sunday evening; why are you suddenly acting cold towards me and giving me all this attitude?"

That was the truth. I had apologised to Oputari twice since that evening of the disastrous meeting with the Emeledos, and I thought she meant it when she said I was forgiven.

The first time I apologised was when she called that evening to find out if I was still coming to the poetry event. It wasn't really convenient answering her call at the time, with all the quarrelling and bickering going on. So instead of picking, I sent her a message on WhatsApp, explaining the situation with Ebiakpo and asking that she forgave me for disappointing her. She replied with a sad face emoji and a broken heart, and when I promised to make it up to her, she sent me the dancing-lady-in-a-red-dress emoji, which could have only meant one thing – all was well with our budding friendship.

The second time was when I saw her at the workshop the next morning and she actually told me to my face that she wasn't mad at all. She assured me that she understood why I couldn't leave my sister and nephew all alone after the nasty fight with her late husband's people. Though Oputi refused to give me the hug I asked for that morning, she was all jokes and smiles, and very excited about my offer to take her clubbing on Friday night.

What could have gone wrong all of a sudden?

"Oputi, are you still angry with me? Please talk to me na?" I pleaded with her.

"Ebinimi, whatever is going on with me has nothing to do with you, trust me. It's just some family issue I'm trying to come to terms with."

"And you don't want to talk to me about it? I thought we are now friends? I mean, I tell you stuff about my own family. For crying out loud, I even shared my plans for this workshop with you the other day."

She started to speak, and then she held back. The next thing I knew, she was crying. I held her in my arms and she rested her head on my chest. "It's my sister. I just found out this morning that she would never walk again."

I didn't want to pry or prod, so I just let her cry. When she stopped, I told her she could take the day off. She thanked me profusely and left.

When Oputi had gone, I called Saka, Biodun and Broderick to my room for a meeting. Anda was engrossed with something on Cartoon Network and Ebiakpo was fast asleep on the sofa. I didn't want to wake her because I knew she hadn't been sleeping well, so I cautioned all of them to walk stealthily into the house and keep their voices down while we discussed.

"I don't like this bad energy I've been sensing around here lately. You guys used to do things together at work and after work, but these days I don't see that anymore. It's like all man for himself now." I waited for who would speak first, but they all stayed mute. "Saka, Biodun, Broderick – una no wan talk abi?"

"We hear say him wan go solo," Broderick said, pointing to Saka. "Something when all of us start together, now we dey hear say him want ninety per cent of any money when come out of anything when we do together."

"No be me oh, na Agnes been tell me to ask for seventy per cent." Saka was swift in coming to his own defence.

"That na why me and Broderick say we sef no dey do again. After all if PSquare when be twins from the same mama belle fit break up, na this our own tintini *Mechanics of Yenagoa* when never even reach anywhere I go come carry body die put?" Biodun asked, speaking directly to Saka.

"Ask am oh, Biodun. For him mind now, na only him fit make person laugh," Broderick sniggered. "Saka don turn Frank Donga abi Lasisi Elenu."

"Broderick, na me you dey talk to like say I be your mate? I no blame you. Since you begin follow boys wen dey smoke igbo and dey wear trouser when no dey even cover that your dirty boxers, for your eye now, me and you don be mate abi? I no blame you oh, na because we dey Oga Ebinimi room. If not, I for don show you say you be small pikin for where I dey."

"Stop it, guys! No one is showing anyone anything inside here or outside this room," I said to Saka. "And for the two of you, there's no breaking up or going solo, not when the three of you are still under my roof and working for me."

I spoke to them about unity and not letting their small success get to their heads, before ordering them back to work.

It was a few days to Christmas and lots of cars were lined up in the yard for us to work on. I didn't realise how fast the day had gone until I got out from underneath the car I was working on and saw that night had fallen. Being the workaholic I am, I still stretched myself to put in one more hour of work just to ensure that the owner of the last car in the workshop drove it home satisfied.

Back in my room, the urge to call Oputi was strong but I fought it, long and hard. Sometime around past 10 p.m. though, I lost the battle. I was half hoping the line wouldn't connect or that she wouldn't pick up if it connected, but the girl didn't even let the first line of her caller tune end before saying hello.

"Hi, did I wake you up?" I had to be polite even though I knew she wouldn't have answered so fast if she had been sleeping.

"Oh no, you didn't. I was actually seeing a series on my phone – Insecure."

"Never heard of it."

"You've never heard of Issa Rae or Yvonne Orji or seen Insecure?"

"Nope. Who are they and what's the show about?"

"Dating and sex in America."

Her response made me laugh really hard. "So let me be sure I have the correct picture of what's going on in your house right now. You're somewhere in Yenagoa learning about dating and sex in America. Oputi, you are watching American porn?"

"Ebinimi, it's not porn. It's comedy and you really should see it some time. I promise, you'd like it."

"This your mission to polish me up *ehn*, are you sure you will succeed? As far as female celebrities are concerned, top on my list is Mercy Johnson, followed by Omotola and then Genevieve. In that order. You know how my boys and I do it in Ovom na? Naija for life *mehn* ! I'm not interested in watching those small small girls in America that when they talk I don't even hear what they are saying."

This time, it was Oputi who laughed hard. I was glad I was able to make

her laugh considering how sad and distraught she had been when I last saw her at the workshop that morning.

“You guys love Naija jams sha.”

“And you don’t?”

“Before I joined your workshop, you’d only find like Ella Mae, Khalid, Calum Scott or James Arthur on my playlist. But these days I’m shocked at myself. Because of Saka and Broderick, I’m listening and dancing to Zlatan, Teni, Simi and Timaya.”

We talked about music, movies and a little about her sister who had just undergone an unsuccessful surgery in India. The operation was to make her regain the use of her legs after surviving a brutal gunshot attack in Yenagoa that left her hips and gluteal cleft region badly damaged. The doctors did their best, but her mother who was with her sister in New Delhi called home to report to their dad that their daughter would never walk again.

Talking about her sister made Oputari sad, but then our conversation moved back to other things that were not so depressing and before long we weren’t talking anymore. We were just listening to each other breathe, and that was really deep and intense. Neither of us was able to say goodnight or end the call. My body was feeling things, and even though she wasn’t there in the room with me, I could sense she was catching feelings too. When I asked her if she could come over to my house, I wasn’t trying to shoot any shot or seduce her. It was a joke, but surprisingly, Oputi said yes.

“Ebinimi, I’m not sure I can get a *keke* in my area at this time of the night oh.”

“Don’t worry about that. As long as you can leave the house without getting into any trouble with your dad, I’d come and get you myself. There’s a Lexus, a Toyota and a BMW in the workshop right now. Which would you like me to come with?”

“The fastest,” she laughed and hung up, to get ready for me I believe.

I jumped out of bed and hastened to my closet. I pulled out a shirt and a pair of jeans. Within seconds, I was dressed up and already at the door.

The knock and my hands on the knob *kind of* happened simultaneously. For a whole sixty seconds, possibly more, I was tongue-tied. It would have been better if it had been a ghost, but it wasn’t.

“Ebinimi, where you dey go this night?”

It was Blessing!

I didn't smile or give her a hug, or do any of the things a guy would do when his girlfriend he hasn't seen for days suddenly shows up in his bedroom. I just left the door ajar so she could walk in.

CHAPTER 31

“**Y**ou don’t look happy to see me?”

“Why you dey talk like that na, Blessing? I’m just surprised to see you here at this time. That’s all. Besides, you didn’t call to tell me you were on your way here.”

“So I now need invitation to visit my own boyfriend again?” Blessing asked, throwing her overnight bag on the bed and planting herself firmly in front of the door, so I couldn’t leave the room.

“Boyfriend when dem no dey tell before dem waka go wherever dem go, that one na the real boyfriend abi na the side bobo?”

“But wetin you dey try talk na, Ebinimi? Abi you think say na man house I go or wetin dey your mind sef?”

“Nothing dey my mind. I just know say you disappear and you no tell me where you dey go, and I was worried about you.”

“But now that I’m here you’re not showing it. Your body just dey pinch you as if to say I dey stop you from going somewhere dis night.”

Blessing was spot on, but I couldn’t tell her that. I should have been on my way to pick up Oputi who had agreed to spend the night with me after our last two botched attempts at getting some quality time to bond physically, spiritually and otherwise. But here I was stuck with *Madam* Blessing when I wasn’t even expecting her.

Gauging from the way her eyes roved from under the bed to the wardrobe and back to me, and the manner in which she grilled me, there was no way Blessing was leaving my house no matter what I told her. Sadly, because of her sudden reappearance in my house, there wouldn’t be any *bonding* between Oputi and me, at least not tonight. So, as a sharp Bayelsa guy, I did the most sensible thing under the circumstance – I switched off my phone and accepted what I hoped Blessing came to offer.

After we made love, I followed her into the bathroom and we took a *long* shower together. Eventually, Blessing tired out and we went back to bed to rest for the night.

Because we were both spent, I thought Blessing would fall asleep the moment her head landed on my chest. Little did I know, I hadn't done enough to take her mind off her suspicion at seeing me all dressed up and looking set to go out when she came in unannounced.

"So, Ebinimi, you never tell me where you been dey go before I open door." Her question almost caught me off guard, *but e don tey small when we enter the world.*

"I wasn't going anywhere. I was actually just getting back from Agudama. One of my lecturer friends from NDU called me to help him start his car where he went to drink with his friends." I lied with so much conviction, I almost believed it myself.

"Hmm."

"Wetin make you dey do face like that? You when I don call tire for how many days now. You no pick my call or respond to any of my messages. I even send BRD go your house the other day. Your neighbour tell am say dem sef never see you for some time and dem no know where you go."

"And you no care to know whether I don die sef or if I still dey alive?"

"But I no be magician na, if you no tell me wetin dey happen, how I want take know? Besides, I dey see your whatsapp status update almost everyday, so I know say you dey okay. Me, I was even thinking I had done something to make you vex but you never ready to discuss am with me yet." I had tactically changed the subject and she didn't even realise it.

"But you've been behaving yourself since you came back from Abuja, so why would I be angry with you? And, if you must know, I hear say that Adinna girl don marry one old man last month."

"Come oh, Blessing, who dey tell you all these things? You know everybody story for this town, but nobody know your own. Abeg, since you say I be your boyfriend, girlfriend, please tell me where you carry your leg go all these days when nobody see you for Yenagoa."

"Ebinimi, no be small thing oh."

"Wetin don happen again?" I asked, wondering what bombshell she was about to drop this time.

"Na Reverend Ebizimor oh!"

"Is he dead?"

“Shebi na you wan kill am?” she asked, hitting me playfully with a pillow.

“So tell me, what has Reverend got to do with your disappearance for days?”

“He told me you are not my husband,” Blessing blurted out in anger. “Imagine!”

“But he is right na.” I knew it wasn’t meant to be funny, but I couldn’t help laughing. “I am not your husband yet na.” I quickly corrected myself.

“Ebinimi, be serious jor. Wasn’t he the one who encouraged me to go out with you in the first place because he saw us in a vision raising children together, so what has changed? Abeg, me I dey respect the man oh, but this new prophesy abi vision when him see get as e be.”

“He saw a new vision?”

“Yes na. He said he saw a vision where he was conducting a wedding ceremony for you and me but when it was time for you to kiss the bride, my face changed and it was another woman’s face he saw.”

“What does that mean?”

“He said it was either you are not my husband, or that someone was trying to snatch you from me, and that I needed to pray and fast and wait to hear from God. That was why I had to go to the mountain. No food, water or physical interaction with any other human being until God spoke.”

At this point, I was too scared to ask her if He did and what He said. I couldn’t help myself; I had to know.

“And did you hear anything?”

“Nothing oh, not even a whisper. So I came back and told Reverend Ebizimor my experience and that I wasn’t breaking up with you just yet. The way he sounded, Ebinimi, you would think we had eloped or something. Suddenly, he doesn’t think marriage between the two of us would work?” The way she said it, I couldn’t tell if it was a question or a statement of fact. “I just feel like there’s something more, something he isn’t telling me. That is why I came here to see you, and being around you feels right.”

I had never seen Blessing so emotional since we started dating. I kissed her on the forehead and assured her that I wasn’t going anywhere.

Blessing left at five-thirty in the morning. My day didn't start until 9 a.m. I was exhausted.

When I came out to see what the guys were up to, I saw Saka, Biodun and BRD already busy at work. Biodun and BRD were working together on a dark brown Government of Bayelsa State Ministry of Information Hiace Bus that wasn't there when we closed the day before so I knew it must have come in while I was sleeping. Saka was alone in one corner of the workshop. From where I stood, I couldn't quite figure out what he was doing with the battery in his hands, but I could hear him clearly because he was singing really loud.

"No more sufficient fund, ati shee se

"No more sufficient fund, ati tope

No more sufficient fund, aboki ti je dola

No more sufficient fund..."

The last time I checked, what Chinko Ekun was singing was "*no more insufficient fund*," but was there any point trying to correct Saka? I didn't think so. He was busy working on something a customer brought in and making money for me, which was the most important thing as far as I was concerned; that and the whereabouts of Oputi who was conspicuously absent.

"Where's Oputi?" I shouted so my voice could drown out Saka's.

"We never see her oh! She never come since morning," BRD shouted back.

"Have you guys tried to call her?" That was when I reached for my phone and realised it was still turned off from last night. I quickly turned it on so I could call Oputi. I had no idea what to say to her or what story to make up for why I didn't show up after asking her to wait for me.

I don't think the phone had quite come on when Mr Freedom's call came in.

"Ebinimi, wetin happen to your phone na? I don call you tire?"

"Sorry, we been no get light for night so I no charge am—"

"Where you dey? Where you dey?"

"I dey for workshop but—"

“See, I no fit talk now, make you just come meet us for Matho Crystal Hotel immediately. Honourable wan see you.”

I hung up the phone and went in to change for the meeting with my boss.

CHAPTER 32

The parking lot at Matho Crystal Hotel was filled to overflowing with every make of SUV and luxury car imaginable, and I found that surprising because it was a weekday and still early in the day. Business in hotels in Yenagoa were typically slow before lunchtime, unless of course there was a major conference going on nearby or it was the venue for a big government or social event. As I approached the hotel gate, one of the security men signalled to me from the gatehouse: there was no space for the rickety Kia Cerato I drove there.

Matho Crystal was like a car shop and a military base rolled into one because of the number of people milling around its grounds when I arrived. Everywhere I turned, there were men in army, air force, navy and police camouflage uniforms. Besides the menacing-looking soldiers and policemen, there were all sorts of people inside and outside the hotel building, and there was no prize for guessing whom they were all there for.

I was lucky to have been at the gate just as an unmarked army green coaster bus with tinted windows was pulling out of the car park. I deftly manoeuvred my car into the premises and grabbed the vacant spot it left before anyone else could beat me to it.

Apparently, the Minister had taken up the entire first and second floors of the hotel because of the large entourage he travelled with and the number of people that were on appointment to see him. Fortunately, I was on the list of those on appointment, so I was allowed into the lobby to wait my turn.

That wait lasted five hours, five whole hours of waiting to see the Honourable Minister of State for Defence, Aaron Barnabas-Treatment. Seeing the number of people that got there before I did made me wonder what the urgency in the summons by Mr Freedom was all about. But that was all I could do – wonder. I dared not interrogate him or leave the hotel, even though my phone buzzed nonstop from the guys at the workshop and customers trying to reach me about their cars.

Out of respect for the environment I found myself, and the calibre of people waiting with me, I decided against responding to any of the calls,

including that of Oputi who must have called me like twenty times.

Not that I was avoiding her or that I was ashamed of my line of work, but in that instant, it just didn't feel right discussing brain boxes, back axles and a botched date when every other person waiting in the hotel lobby with me was either talking about contracts and proposals or making international calls to business partners over deals that may or may not have ran into millions of dollars.

Among those waiting to see ABT were notable politicians from Bayelsa, traditional rulers, opinion shapers and some very pretty girls in very revealing dresses. I wasn't quite sure if his aides were calling people in based on time of arrival or what the order of protocol was, but it seemed like the girls were given priority over everyone else waiting in the lounge. I noticed that the more revealing the dress a girl wore, the quicker she was ushered up to see the minister.

"Oya, Ebinimi make you enter inside, Honourable go see you now." Mr Freedom's voice woke me up from what I think was a nice dream involving one of the scantily clad girls. I didn't know for how long I slept, but considering the night I had with Blessing, the rest was truly refreshing and deserving.

"Na my turn?"

"Yes. Just follow the stairs to the second floor. When you get there, you'll see a policeman standing in front of room 204. Tell him you are next to see the boss man."

I thanked Mr Freedom and made my way to the staircase. I was surprised to see that ABT hadn't changed a bit since the last time I saw him. Though he wasn't looking as relaxed or as friendly as he did when I was first introduced to him, he still looked youthful, maybe even boyish in a garish way because of the bedazzled Fendi t-shirt and sweat pants with matching shiny slides he wore.

His dressing made him look more like a showbiz promoter than a minister of the Federal Republic of Nigeria, and it was hard for me to accept that the simple and unassuming guy before me was the reason the hotel looked like it was under siege and why all the big men downstairs were rehearsing their pitch and muttering silent prayers to themselves intermittently as if they were meeting with God.

I respected ABT because the moment you were in front of him, you forgot how rich and powerful he was. He didn't have airs, and maybe he was dressed so casually because he was home in Yenagoa for the Christmas and not attending a meeting of the Federal Executive Council in Abuja.

"Doo sir," I greeted him in Ijaw.

"Ebinimi, how you dey? I don tell you make you come work with me for Abuja, you no gree."

"Honourable, no be like that oh," I didn't know if he was serious or just pulling my legs so I did like Mr Freedom told me to do whenever I found myself in the wrong side of Honourable Aaron Barnabas-Treatment. "You know say na you be my boss for life. I dey at your service any day, any time sir."

"See this boy oh," he said, in the sluggish way he spoke. "Why you come dey kneel down for me again? Please sit," he said, pointing to the chair opposite him. "I have something I want to discuss with you. I think you are the best person for the job."

I put on my best poker face so he wouldn't know how troubled I was at what he just said. The last time we had a similar conversation, my best friend was jailed, my most reliable worker tried to blackmail me and I almost lost my life.

"Sir, please don't be angry oh, but will there be guns involved this time."

"Ebinimi, I am the Minister of Defence. There's no shortage of people to carry guns for me if that is what I want." I didn't know if it was an admonition or said to make me feel at ease, but I apologised all the same for my impulsiveness.

"Just let me know what you want me to do for you sir and I will do—"

"I will be returning to Abuja tomorrow, but I hope to be back next week." Honourable Aaron brushed aside my apology and continued as if I hadn't even spoken. "You know us politicians, we like to remain relevant and do things that will keep us in the news all the time and give people the impression that we are loved and that we have plenty supporters. So, I want you to arrange a gathering of people that will receive me at Tombia roundabout on my way from the airport next week."

His request, or should I say directive, caught me off-guard. "But sir, I am

not a politician and I do not belong to any youth or political group in this Bayelsa,” I said in protest, but it seemed his mind was made up about assigning the task to me.

“I know. That is why I think you are perfect for the assignment. You see, Ebinimi, I am already looking at the future, and I want Bayelsans to begin to see me as a man of the people. I don’t want the usual rented crowd of women and youth groups that will come and dance for me today and tomorrow they will just change wrapper and polo and go and dance for my opponents. I don’t want the welcome party to look procured or contrived that is why I want fresh faces, real people.”

“But Honourable, where will I get these fresh faces from? I may know one or two people, but not enough to form the kind of crowd you have in mind.”

“Ebinimi, use your brain na. Are you not a mechanic? Don’t you have an association of mechanics and other artisans in Yenagoa again?”

“Oga, we get—”

“Or you don’t know keke riders and taxi drivers that bring their tricycles and cars to you for maintenance and even some of the traders in the market you buy spare parts from?”

“I do—”

“Those are the kind of people I want to come and welcome me next week when I arrive and I know you can arrange it for me. You have handled more serious responsibilities for me in the past and you did not fail me.”

“And I will not fail you now, sir. I go try my best. When I leave here now, I go talk to some people when I sabi for Yenagoa. I promise you sir; I no go let you down.”

“I could have asked my people here to do the arrangement for me, but from experience they will just pocket the money, gather a few bad boys and come and tell me story. Ebinimi, I don tire for these fraudsters wen dey call themselves my political advisers. All they want is money, but you are different. You are trustworthy, that is why I want you to handle this one for me personally.”

“Honourable, I have heard everything you said and I will get to work immediately.”

Barnabas-Treatment shifted in his chair and looked at his phone, signalling

the end of our conversation. I stood up to take my leave, but it seemed the minister wasn't quite done with me yet.

"Ebinimi, you will be needing some money to pull this off." ABT scribbled something at the back of his call card and handed it over to me. "Give this to Freedom on your way out. He will arrange to transfer two million to your account today for logistics and an additional two hundred and fifty thousand naira when the task is completed. I want a mammoth crowd, don't forget that."

The alert came in just as I drove into the compound on Kalakala Street. When I saw the two million naira in my account I went crazy.

"BRD, Saka, Biodun, make una come oh!" I jumped out of the car screaming at the top of my voice, not minding that there were other people in the workshop. "Guys! Guys! Make una come oh! I don hammer, I don make am."

Their questions came at the same time and I didn't know which to answer first. I couldn't wait to tell them about this great opportunity opening up for me so I yelled for them to join me inside the main house. I couldn't give them the details of what transpired between the Honourable and I right there in the workshop. We needed to talk in the privacy of my room and away from the nosy customers that were already asking to know the cause of my excitement.

I think it was my exuberance and their curiosity that stopped Saka and the others from warning me, because when I entered the house, Ebiakpo, Blessing and Oputi were on the dining table eating and laughing out loud together like old friends, and it freaked me out.

I don't know how best to put this, but you see, my sister, my girlfriend and the girl I want to sleep with so badly couldn't become friends. They could never be allowed to form a sisterhood against me.

But that wasn't even what worried me the most. It was what Blessing said when she joined me in the room immediately Saka, Biodun and BRD left that made me believe she had some kind of super powers.

"Ebinimi, dis one wen you dey happy so, it can only mean one thing, money is coming. So, make I just tell you now before I hear say the money don finish, my rent for shop dey expire dis month end and I want to move to a bigger place. I been also forget to tell you when I dey comot this morning

say I dey go Lagos tomorrow to go buy some things for my shop. As e be say you don hammer, abeg make you try support my trip too. God go continue to bless you for me.”

I didn’t have a clue as to how she did it, but that girl just always knew and showed up whenever I came into money.

CHAPTER 33

“O ga Ebinimi, please think this thing through. You have to be very careful so you don’t end up disappointing this man that has so much faith in you.” It was Biodun. I had asked him and Broderick over to my room at the close of work to pick their brains on how best to go about mobilising the crowd for Honourable Aaron’s welcome party next week.

I didn’t have much time, and if I were to execute the task satisfactorily and make the minister happy, the earlier I started with the planning and mobilisation, the better for me.

I knew I should have invited Saka to the meeting as well, so he didn’t feel left out. But I didn’t trust him not to go and regurgitate everything we discussed and agreed on to his girlfriend and manager, Agnes.

It was bad enough that Blessing was already making demands when she didn’t even know what was on ground and how much money was involved. So, the last thing I wanted was another person coming into the frame with a direct or indirect demand for me to fund a lifestyle I wasn’t a beneficiary of, with money that was meant for something else.

“Oga, there’s nothing to think about. I dey tell you say we no need any mechanic association anything. Me and my guys go plot the whole maserati, *las las*, you no go even spend half of the robs when Honourable give you and we go still pull crowd. Believe me Oga, this one na God when just wan bless you before the year end.”

Broderick made a compelling argument with that last point, after all they say God works in mysterious ways and this just might be one of those ways. Come to think of it, I had paid my dues and my occasional tithes to Fire For Fire, so maybe this was God actually rewarding all my sacrifices with an unexpected breakthrough.

“A blessing that requires lies, deception, cheating and cover up to manifest can’t be from God,” Biodun pontificated.

“Biodun, leave that thing. You when no dey go church sef, yet na you like to dey form holy pass. Make I tell you, God can bless anybody any which

way. The same God when turn water to wine can turn pant to Benz.”

“Broderick, please stay on the subject.”

“Oga Ebinimi, that is what I’m trying to do, but Biodun just dey yan nonsense. Just tell me how many guys you want and where you want them to stand and consider it done. I will even talk to some of the correct guys that come to church here to join us. Abi no be to wear t-shirt and carry placard again?”

“But if they wear t-shirt then it will look too planned. I think they should come in their normal clothes.”

“Yes, Biodun, I think you have a point there. No t-shirts, just regular clothes.”

“My boss of life, I dey think of another thing oh.” Broderick’s eyes glistened with excitement as if he had just discovered oil beneath the earth in Kalakala Street.

“What are you thinking of?”

“What if we involve Blessing, carry her along? You know say this kain runs when dey ground so go make sense well well make some correct babes like Blessing and her friends sef join us. And as per say Blessing na makeup artist, I dey see the fine fine kpalas when dey follow her come church sometimes.”

“That’s a brilliant idea, Broderick.”

“Yes oh, Oga, you know na, politicians dey quick release money when fine chicks dey involved. In fact I dey even think another thing,” I noticed Biodun shift uncomfortably where he sat, but I wasn’t paying him any attention.

“Go ahead Broderick, I’m listening.”

“Oputi.”

“Oputi? What has she got to do with the welcome party?”

“Oga, that girl bad with gadgets, we need to bring her in too. As we dey sing and dance for your boss ehn, she go dey post am for Facebook, Twitter and Instagram from our Mechanics of Yenagoa handle.”

Even though we had lived in the same house for some time now, I was surprised at Broderick’s newfound confidence and the boldness with which

he tackled the problem at hand. I didn't realise he was that good at organising things.

On another day, I would have asked him if he was high or something, but not today. Today, I needed ideas and I gave it to BRD on this one; he had demonstrated nothing but brilliance all evening. I liked the way his mind processed the situation and the way he marshalled out his points.

"So, like how much you think say you go need for your side to take arrange your guys?"

"Oga, just give me 200k. You know say those my people no get wahala. Once we buy them drink and cigar and small something to shine their eye, plus transport money, dem go dey okay."

"Ha! 200k for those rough looking guys that come here to look for BRD?" Biodun sounded perplexed. "Oga Ebinimi, if those guys drink and smoke, they will not show up on that day oh!"

"Biodun, why you dey shout na? Body just dey pepper you like say na your money."

"Oya guys, e don do. The two of you can go to your room now. I need to think."

Immediately they left my room, I locked the door, disconnected my phone from the charger and called Blessing.

"BleBle, Blessing my love—"

"This one when you dey call my name like this, I know wetin dey hungry you. But me, I no fit come back to your house again this night. I tell you say I dey go Lagos for morning."

"Why your mind dey always go that side?"

"Sex makes the world go round, abi no be so una dey talk am?"

"Love makes the world go round, not sex. And, if you must know, I just wanted to hear your voice. Is that a crime?"

"Ebinimi, I know say na something you want, so just go ahead and ask me because I know say you no dey romantic at all."

"Okay, I need your help for something. Blessing, I need like 100 fine babes to attend a political rally next week. Honourable Aaron give me the contract and I no want to disappoint am."

“Ebinimi, but why you no tell me since for house say na that kind of job you get? You come dey do like say na secret something.”

“No vex. So you go fit arrange am for me?”

“That one be small thing na. I just need to make one phone call and them go appear when and where you want them to show. But it will cost you plenty sha.”

“How much is plenty?”

“I go need like 700k.”

“Ha, that one too much na, Blessing.”

“Oya make am 500k, abi no be fine girls you want again? Because if you want all those *worwor* babes, we fit even do like 100k or 200k.”

I thought about what Blessing said for a bit and made a counter offer. “In that case make I give you 300k so you go fit mix them up. Some fine girls and some ugly ones too. The fine girls go dey for front, then the ugly ones go dey for back.”

“Because na you, I go accept am like that. But abeg, make you transfer the money to me today plus another 200k for my shop rent and the shopping when I go do for Lagos. Make you no forget to greet Sister Ebiakpo and Anda for me oh.”

“Bles—”

She hung up the phone before I could get a word in, but I didn’t bother calling her back. Instead I opened the calculator on my phone and did the arithmetic. If I gave BRD 200k and I gave Blessing 300k, plus maybe another 100k as my contribution to her rent, I would still be left with 1.4 million plus the 250k ABT promised me at the end of the Job. I couldn’t believe my good fortune. With that money I could buy a scanner and some computers for the workshop.

Oputi had been pressuring me to go digital for some time now, and if I seized the opportunity of this largesse I could upgrade my business once and for all.

With that sorted out, my happiness knew no bounds and it prompted me to do something I had been running away from all day. I called Oputi. It was almost 8 p.m. and I knew she would be home. The phone rang twice, she picked and I said – “What is the position with the commercial Saka is

supposed to be shooting with the guys from Axel?”

“Really, Ebinimi, is that why you called, to ask about Saka and his Axel Auto Oil Commercial?”

“I—”

“So I spent the whole night wondering why you didn’t show up and if something bad had happened to you and the best you can do is ask about Saka?”

“Oputi, I’m truly sorry about last night. I wanted to apologise when I saw you earlier today, but you were obviously avoiding me, and I didn’t want to do it over the phone. I also noticed that you and Blessing and Ebiakpo have become chummy, and it freaked me out because I don’t know what you could have told them about us.”

“We didn’t even discuss you. Your sister asked me to help her in the kitchen and Blessing stopped by to see your sister. Apparently she hadn’t visited since your brother-in-law’s death.”

“Please, can I come to your house? Let’s go out for drinks. Let me make it up to you.”

“No. Ebinimi, no. Not until you tell me why you stood me up in such a humiliating manner. You know what I was dealing with and how I was feeling because of my sister, yet you decided to act like you didn’t care. I thought you were different.”

“Oputi, I am different, believe me. That was why I chickened out and decided to stay away. I was afraid of the hashtag *MeToo* movement—”

“What has the MeToo movement in America got to do with you standing me up?”

“You work for me. I don’t want it to look like sexual harassment *or something* .”

“Did I tell you about my last boyfriend?” Oputi asked unexpectedly.

“No, you didn’t.”

“He died. Two years ago. We were both posted to Warri for our National Youth Service. That was when we met and started dating. One day I invited him over to my apartment for dinner, but he never showed up. His power bike was involved in an accident around Effurun roundabout. It was crushed

by a fuel tanker, and Babajide was killed on the spot. That should tell you how I felt last night when you told me you were coming and you didn't show up."

"You should have called Saka or Biodun."

"And hear them say what, that you were not at home? I was too scared to make any such call. I didn't want to hear any bad news or relive the pain I felt when I learnt of Jide's death. It would have crushed me."

"Oputari, I'm sorry, very, very sorry. Please let me come and pick you up. I promise I will not chicken out this time."

We drove to Domaris Gardens and Suites along Sanni Abacha Road. I didn't want to take her home because I wasn't so sure how Ebiakpo would react to seeing her with me at that time of the night. Plus, I didn't trust this new friendship brewing between my sister and Blessing. I didn't want her running her mouth to Blessing and unintentionally spoiling everything. Ebiakpo was that kind of person.

Oputi and I kissed and then . . . wait a minute; I don't have to go into the details of what happened in room 216. A gentleman doesn't kiss and tell when he really, really likes the woman, but let me just say that it happened.

This time my phone didn't ring and no one showed up at the door.

CHAPTER 34

Ebiakpo and Reverend Ebizimor stopped talking when I barged into her room. I knew I should have knocked first, but Anda was being a nuisance in the yard, throwing tantrums and getting in everyone's way so I had to drag him to his mother. However, in my haste to rid my staff and me of the little boy's distracting antics so we could focus on the serious task of getting our customer's cars fixed, I must have forgotten my manners and entered the room without being asked in.

My sister jumped up from her bed like someone caught doing something they shouldn't be doing, and from the corner of my eyes I observed that the Reverend was fidgety. He was perched uncomfortably on the only chair in what used to be my grandparent's room. His eyes were on his chafed leather sandals and he didn't acknowledge my presence even though I was sure I muttered a greeting to make up for interrupting their conversation.

Staying longer would have made them feel even more uncomfortable and I didn't want my mind to conjecture anything when there was nothing, so I handed my nephew over to his mother and headed straight for the door.

"Ebinimi." Ebiakpo's voice stopped me before I could reach for the door handle. "Ebinimi, please don't go yet, I was just telling Papa about the message I got from Benson's people."

"They sent a message?" I was curious to know what they had to say. Ebiakpo and I hadn't really spoken about them since the last meeting that ended in disaster.

"Yes. They say the burial has been fixed for the last week in January and that I must be there because that is what tradition demands."

"There are certain traditional rites that the wives must perform according to Ijaw tradition and since your sister is the first wife, most of the responsibilities rest on her." Reverend Ebizimor spoke without looking at me still.

To make him feel comfortable, I sat on the bed next to my sister and asked her how she intended to handle the situation.

“There was a subtle threat in the message. They would come for Andaowei if I don’t partake in the burial ceremonies and I can’t let that happen. Ebinimi, I’m confused.”

“There’s nothing to be confused about,” I said to her as gently as I could. “You just have to let go of your anger and show up. He was your husband after all and you owe him that much. Or Reverend sir, what do you think?”

“I think you are right, Brother Jacob. Your sister must be there to pay her last respect to her late husband, as should Anda. He may be young still, but you never can tell what he would remember in future. I think the boy deserves to have that final memory of his father being laid to rest.”

“That is the point I’m making,” my sister said, standing up again. “Benson is not his father, so no one can threaten to take him away from me or use that as a way of forcing me to travel with them to the village if I don’t want.”

“You don’t intend to tell them that now, do you?” I asked, surprised that my sister was even considering it. I didn’t see what good revealing a five-year secret would serve at a time when she was supposed to be mad at her late husband for cheating on her.

“Why not? If push comes to shove, I will tell them everything because if I don’t, that is how those foolish people would be troubling me for the rest of my life. In any case, as Anda grows up he would ask questions and I think he deserves to know the truth.”

“Sister Ebiakpo, I hope you are thinking this thing through as you are saying it. Telling them would also mean that you are ready to introduce Anda to his real father because that question would come up. Otherwise your son would be called a bastard for the rest of his life.”

Reverend Ebizimor had raised a valid point. Besides, I wasn’t so sure how things are done in Ijaw tradition, but I had read that in certain cultures in Nigeria, the child of an adulterous wife belonged to her husband and his family, but I dared not say that out loud for fear of how Ebiakpo would react to any piece of information she found unpalatable.

“Ebiakpo, maybe you shouldn’t be hasty on this one. The burial is still a few weeks away, so there’s still time for you to think about how you want to handle this issue with your in-laws.

“I don’t want to lose my child or get into a nasty custodial battle with Benson’s people over a child that isn’t even his. Ebinimi, that is my point.”

“But the moment you go public with Anda’s paternity, there would be all sorts of questions and speculations about who the father of the child you are carrying now is. Are you sure you are ready for that now?”

“What does it matter to anybody who the father of my child is? The important thing is that I know and when my child is old enough I will tell him or her.”

“It matters to them because you got pregnant when their brother was alive. And if I recall correctly, the last time we had this conversation, even Agueru didn’t know that Anda is his son.” I was hesitant mentioning names, but Reverend Ebizimor was already in on the secret so it really didn’t matter.

“I will tell him,” Ebiakpo answered stubbornly.

“And ruin his already fragile marriage? Remember that his wife Preye still doesn’t have a child for him—”

My about-to-be-impassioned plea came to an abrupt end when we heard a loud thud from the far end of the room. All three of us turned towards the direction of the sound at the same time, only to realise that Anda had been in the room all along. He had tripped on one of his toys and hit his head on the floor. Although it sounded painful, he didn’t cry, but his tears or lack of it wasn’t the thing that bothered us. We didn’t know what the boy heard and how much of it he comprehended.

Reverend Ebizimor cleared his throat and hurriedly left the room without checking to see if Anda was all right. I too could have run, but Ebiakpo had one last question for me.

“Am I being a hypocrite?”

I was sure she knew the answer to that question even before she asked, so I left her to tend to her son.

Back in the workshop, it was really hot so I called for some cold water. It was Oputi who responded to my call. Instead of water, she came back with a bottle of ice cold Coca-Cola from the fridge in the house. As she handed it over to me, our fingers touched and she smiled. Since Domaris Hotel a few days ago, we had been stealing glances at each other and laughing

sheepishly like two secondary school kids discovering attraction for the first time.

“We should go out for drinks after work.”

“Today?” she asked, still smiling.

“Yes. Asters, and then we can go to the hotel afterwards.”

“Sorry, Oga Ebinimi, I’m afraid today would not work for me. I promised my sister I’d be home early so I can keep her company. I told you my mum had to go to Ibadan to see my grandparents.”

I brought out my phone from my pocket and sent her a sad face crying emoji on WhatsApp. As soon as her phone beeped, and she read the chat, she burst out laughing and I joined her.

“Please na, Oputi, just for an hour or two and then I’ll drop you off at home.”

“Okay sir, I’ll think about it, but even then it has to be tomorrow evening. I really can’t let my sister down today.’

“Okay. Tomorrow is not far. I can wait.”

“Speaking of things happening tomorrow, how are we going to cope when Saka leaves in the morning?”

That was true, the deal with the Axel guys had been finalised and Saka was leaving for Lagos in the morning to shoot the commercial for some new product they had just introduced to the market. I took two last gulps of the coke and gave the glass and empty bottle back to Oputi. On her way back into the house, I called her to ask for Saka to see me.

When he came a few minutes later, I had completely forgotten why I sent for him in the first place because of the number of customers on my neck.

“Oputi say you wan discuss my travel.” That was when I remembered his trip in the morning.

“So have you booked your flight?”

“Flight ke? Oga Ebinimi abi you wan make I get hypertension for inside plane when fit fall from sky?”

“But they gave you money for flight and airport taxi. That is what Oputi told me.”

“Yes, but Agnes advise me to go by road and give her the remaining money to keep for me, so that when I return we go start to buy the things when we need for our marriage small small.”

“I see. So you guys are really serious about this marriage thing?”

“Yes oh, next year na our year. In fact we don plan everything finish. Hashtag AGSA is loading, abi no be so Oputi dey talk am?”

“Na so,” I couldn’t help laughing out loud. “I no say make you no marry oh, but make you just remember say the people when dey do motor put break for every car for a reason, make you no crash land because of woman matter. Anytime when your eye open and you feel say you no want to do again, make you no forget to match break.”

“Boss, wetin I wan match break for again na, abi I be tipper or tanker?”

“Saka, you know the suffer when you suffer for this Yenagoa before you begin work here with me. Now when this opportunity don open for you and people don dey sabi you small small all over the country, make you no rush begin carry another person responsibility when your parents and brothers and sister dey struggle for village.”

“Oga, make you no worry about dem, las las dem go dey alright. Make you just put me for your prayers, so that this Lagos when I dey go so, go better for me and all of us.”

I dropped him off at Agofure Park in the morning. I waited until the 14-seater Toyota Hiace bus filled up so I could wave him goodbye as they pulled out of the garage.

I was genuinely happy for him. Something told me that a new door was opening up for him and even if he came back, he would never be just another mechanic in Yenagoa again.

CHAPTER 35

“I think I should go back to working with Oga Emma in Agudama. To be honest, it doesn’t feel right being in Kalakala Street and doing this with you anymore. This whole being the side chick thing and having to hide when the real madam shows up just isn’t me.” Oputi’s unexpected expression of unease at our situation hit me like a powerful jab. My heart sank that she was ending things between us so abruptly.

We had agreed to spend another night together in the hotel, but Domaris was fully booked because it was the venue for the annual conference of the Association of Nigerian Authors holding in Yenagoa. Because of the unavailability of rooms there, we had to settle for a less glamorous guest house nearby.

I had sensed Oputari’s withdrawal the last time we rendezvoused, which was only two nights ago. At the time, I decided against pressing her to talk about whatever it was she had on her mind because I was too busy begging for sex. In that state of intense arousal, the last thing a guy wants to do is pause and get into a long conversation about family history or personal woe that would weaken his libido so I didn’t push it.

“Why would you want to go back to your former boss? Aren’t you happy in my workshop? Did one of the guys offend you, disrespect you in anyway?” I asked perplexed. “Or is the work load getting too much for you?”

“It’s none of those things, Ebinimi, and I’m sure you know that. I’m happy when I’m around you and the guys, and I’m learning a lot from you, but things are changing really rapidly between us and I don’t think I can handle our complicated relationship status or these secret dates any longer.”

“Is it Blessing?”

“I’ve heard a lot about her and I’m scared of what she’d do when she finds out about us,” Oputari confessed. “I’ve been lucky so far, I don’t think I want to stretch it.”

“Oputi, if you leave now, what’s going to happen to me? What’s going to

happen to our social media strategy? What's going to happen to Saka who is in Lagos right now because of you? Did I tell you that when we spoke today he told me that the guy directing the Axel commercial is also shooting a music video for Timaya and Adekunle Gold's new song and he wants Saka to be in it?"

"He called to give me the good news too, and I'm happy for him and for you as well. I just know more doors would open even here in Yenagoa because of the visibility we have received because of him."

"Then stay. I promise you, I will make things right for everyone. Trust me on that one."

"I want to trust you, Ebinimi, but I don't want to get into any embarrassing confrontation with your girlfriend. And about managing Saka's career and the *Mechanics of Yenagoa*, I'm sure I can find a way of doing all that from Agudama while we figure out what we want to do about us." Oputi turned to face the wall so I couldn't read her countenance, but still I heard the question she muttered under her breath, "Is there even an 'us'?"

Thankfully, she didn't want answers so I closed my eyes and waited for sleep to come, knowing that in another hour or two she'd be in a better mood and we would transition from talk to activity, and all her guilt tripping would evaporate.

Sometime around 5:30 a.m., we checked out of our room and headed for the reception to drop off the key. When we checked-in, we were attended to by a male receptionist so I was surprised to see that the person behind the counter in the morning was now female. Perhaps there were two of them on duty but we only got to see one.

"Ebinimi!"

I recognised her voice instantly, even though I couldn't see her face or make out her figure because the light in the reception were still turned off.

"Agnes?" I was tentative in my response.

"Ebinimi, Oputi, wetin una dey do here for this early morning?"

"We . . . we—" I couldn't even lie; there was no need. We had been caught red-handed.

"I don dey tell Saka since say something dey happen between the two of una, but him no believe me. Hmmm, na wa oh, wetin person no go see for

this Yenagoa?”

“Sister Agnes, it’s not what you think.” I didn’t need to look at Oputari to know that she was wishing the ground would open up and swallow her. And because I couldn’t think of anything more to add to my feeble attempt at denial, I tried to deflate by asking Agnes what she was doing there as well. I know Saka had told me a few weeks back that she got a job in a hotel, but I didn’t remember him telling me which. Now I wish I had asked him the name of the hotel.

“I work here. I started two weeks ago,” she said, laughing gleefully in a way a politician would if he stumbled on an embarrassing piece of information about an opponent. “I hope the two of you enjoyed your stay in one room. Please come again.”

I ignored the sarcasm in her voice, and the emphasis on the word ‘one’. I dropped the key on the counter, and chased after Oputi who was already outside. I knew what she was thinking, Agnes would tell Saka, Saka would tell Broderick and Biodun and we would never hear the last of it. But actually, that wasn’t what she was thinking, because you see Oputi, her brain works faster than mine.

“Now she will go and tell Reverend Ebizimor and the Reverend will tell Blessing and Blessing will pour acid on my face,” Oputi said slamming the car door so hard, it rattled the windows.

In the car, she wouldn’t speak to me or react to my plea for her to reconsider her stance on training with me. When we got to her gate, she highlighted from the car without giving me a peck or saying goodbye. It was how I knew she was serious about not coming back to work in Kalakala Street.

The workshop felt different without Oputi and Saka, and it just wasn’t about the increased workload the remaining three of us had to take on. It was an emptiness that tugged on my heart and reminded me how much I missed both of them.

Immediately after communion service in the evening, Reverend Ebizimor sent for me and I dropped everything I was doing to meet with him. I was certain he wanted to rebuke me for my lukewarm attitude towards the programmes of the church so I began manufacturing excuses in my head. Fortunately, that wasn’t what he wanted to speak to me about.

“Your sister and I had a long talk when I came in this morning. I think I’ve been able to convince her that being confrontational with her in-laws at this time wouldn’t be in her best interest or that of her son in the long run.”

I couldn’t tell him how relieved I was that he was able to get through to her when even I, her beloved brother had failed. I know how difficult Ebiakpo could be once her mind was made up about something.

“Thank you Reverend. God will continue to bless you.”

“Oh, it’s nothing. I think she has made her point by moving back here, but continuing to insist on her position would be foolish.”

“What would even be more foolish would be her telling them that Benson isn’t Anda’s father. They will call her all sorts of names. Some people may even accuse her of killing her husband because maybe he found out the truth and she wanted to silence him and take all of his money before he exposed her and threw her out of the house.”

“Brother Ebinimi, you are very correct. That was exactly what I told her. Thank God she has agreed to take part in the burial and move back to her matrimonial home.”

“Ebiakpo has agreed to go back to that house?”

“Yes. She would be going back there this weekend because if she continues to stay here, her late husband’s brothers will share his property and not give her anything.”

“But that house is a rented apartment,” I reminded him.

“It may not be their personal house, but what about the cars and the money that is left from the contract he was doing before he died?”

“For me, the most important thing is that no one will call her names. This town is too small to be involved in any scandal. It would never blow over.”

“And it would be an embarrassment to this church because people know her as a staunch member of—” he stopped speaking abruptly and I had a sense that something else was bothering him, something very heavy.

I still had my theories about Benson’s death, but because it was such a sensitive issue that might involve my closest relative and a man of God, I made a conscious decision to suppress my suspicions and distract myself with my budding relationship and other things. I had raised it with him before, but Reverend Ebizimor dismissed it then, perhaps it was time to

bring it up again.

“Reverend, has my sister done anything else to embarrass the church apart from when she had Anda and now again that she is pregnant and no one knows who is responsible for it? Do you think she will tell you if she has a hand in Benson’s death?”

“Brother Ebinimi, Sister Ebiakpo is a good person. She didn’t kill her husband and she wouldn’t do anything that will deliberately embarrass my ministry or me. Unlike some other members, Sister Blessing inclusive.”

“Sister Blessing?” I asked, surprised.

“But Brother Jacob, why are you acting surprised? Don’t you know that Sister Blessing has been fooling around with other men for a long time now? Why do you think she has been travelling a lot lately?”

“She told me you sent her to the mountain top.”

“Brethren, if you don’t want to die young, end things now with that girl. She isn’t who you think she is.”

“But she’s still in charge of the choir here.”

“Not for much longer, she isn’t, because I have decided to suspend her from the choir and even expel her from the church if she doesn’t change her ways.”

“But she told me you told her you saw a vision—”

“I told her that you are a man with prospect and that she shouldn’t spoil your destiny with her own corner-corner lifestyle. Besides I have noticed how things are going with that new mechanic girl. That girl is nice and decent from what I have observed about her. She is the kind of girl you should be following.”

“You think so?”

“I know so. Trust me Brother Jacob, I’ve been around and I know a good woman when I see one. That Oputi girl is a keeper.”

“So, what do I do about Blessing?”

“I will talk to her and I’m sure she’d listen to me, but if she chooses to be stubborn, I trust I still have one last ace up my sleeve.” Those words were ominous, but I didn’t have the courage to ask him to expatiate.

I left Reverend Ebizimor’s office feeling confused. I didn’t know who or

what to believe. Blessing had told me one thing, and now he was telling me another. Clearly, Reverend Ebizimor was trying to sabotage my relationship with Blessing and the question on my mind as I went back to work was why.

CHAPTER 36

I found myself in trouble again – the kind of trouble in that popular saying, *when it rains it pours* . That was the exact position I found myself. You're thinking, 'is it not Ebinimi again? What kind of trouble can he possibly have found himself in that we haven't seen already?' Well, this one was different.

This one was worse and if not properly handled, could have grave consequences for my safety and wellbeing because it involved the Minister of State for Defence of the Federal Republic of Nigeria who had the entire military and security apparatus in the country at his disposal. One phone call from him, one order and I might have found myself spending the rest of my days in Kirikiri or Kuje prison, or worse still, some holding facility without a name.

It all started when BRD went missing. Well, he didn't go *missing* in the sense of being lost or anything like that, but *missing* because he chose to be incommunicado on the one day I needed him the most, the one day I had so much riding on him.

No one was able to reach him since the day before when he asked for permission to visit his parents in Amassoma to give them some money and the half bag of rice I bought for them for Christmas. The thing, though, was that BRD didn't go to Amassoma. I knew this because I called his parents when he didn't come home that night and they confirmed they hadn't seen their son in weeks.

My anxiety took me to Biodun. He had the 'I-told-you-so' look written all over his face as he opened up about Broderick's true whereabouts.

"Oga Ebinimi, make I talk true. BRD no go Amassoma; he told me he was going to Akassa. Apparently, he is one of the dancers at the Akassa Beach Festival this year, but he begged me not to tell you."

"And you think keeping the truth away from me all this time was wise?" I was miffed Biodun didn't think to tell me this earlier. "Did you forget that Honourable Aaron is coming into town tomorrow and that BRD is supposed to arrange the boys that would welcome him when he arrives at the city

gate?”

“Oga, I didn’t forget oh! In fact, I reminded him when he told me two days ago that he and his guys were travelling to Akassa to attend a Christmas party there. The only reason I didn’t say anything was because he assured me that he would be back in good time for your Oga’s rally and that he had everything under control.”

“Biodun, Biodun, Biodun, Biodun! How many times did I call your name?”

“Four times, sir.”

“You have finished me. See, if anything goes wrong with my arrangement tomorrow, I will hold you personally responsible. I hope you can hear me? Just know that whatever I do to Broderick; your own punishment would be two times worse because you of all people should have known better than to connive with Broderick to make me look foolish and incompetent.”

“Sir, I didn’t connive with anyone oh—”

“Shut up there,” I shouted. I knew I shouldn’t be taking out my anger on him but I couldn’t mask my fear that Broderick was somewhere in Akassa Island partying hard with the two hundred thousand naira I gave him to arrange a crowd for ABT’s welcome party.

That was yesterday. This morning I had been to his room three times already and still there was no sign of him. Biodun and I had also tried reaching him on the phone but his number was still unavailable.

BRD had disappointed me big time and I didn’t know what to do or where to begin. When I spoke to the minister’s PA last night, he told me their motorcade should be at Igbogene junction around 10 o’clock which meant that I had less than two hours to come up with an alternative plan for mobilising a crowd large enough to impress Barnabas-Treatment and justify the two million naira he gave me upfront for the job.

Coming up with a Plan B wasn’t the issue; the real challenge was where to get the money to fund whatever new arrangement I came up with at such short notice especially when I didn’t have Honourable Aaron’s money anymore. Thanks to Broderick’s perfect plan, it was all gone. From the money Honourable Aaron gave me, I had spent quite a bit on hotel bills and other incidentals so Oputi and I could wine and dine, and get to know each

other better in the privacy of the expensive hotels where we hung out. I also made a down payment of eight hundred thousand naira for a scanner that would run diagnostics in the workshop believing that when the final promise of two hundred and fifty thousand naira the minister made hit my account I would settle the supplier Oputi found on the Internet and collect my equipment.

I hadn't quite figured out how to deal with the problem of Broderick's disappearance and getting a new crowd, when Blessing stormed into the compound screaming Oputi's name.

"Where she dey? Where that boyfriend snatcher dey? If you know say you be woman, make you come out of where you dey hide."

The commotion was taking place in the workshop area. By the time I stepped out, a small crowd consisting of customers, neighbours and the few church members that worked full-time with Reverend Ebizimor had formed in my compound.

"Blessing, what are you doing here?"

"Where is Oputi? So she thinks she can just come from nowhere and snatch you away from me abi? So you didn't tell her how long me and you don dey friend."

"Can somebody please tell me what is happening here?" I turned to Biodun for answers but he remained mute.

"Sister Agnes tell me say you carry that new mechanic girl when dey do like say she no dey shit come her working place. Ebinimi, where she dey? Make I teach her lesson today, next time when she see another person boyfriend she go pick race."

Noticing how mad she was, I gently pulled Blessing into the main house so the street gossips and information seekers would disperse and allow us deal with our relationship issues quietly.

"Blessing, what kind of embarrassment is this one? Why are you shouting and threatening fire and brimstone this early morning biko?"

"I'm not threatening fire and brimstone. I am the fire and brimstone, and right now, I just want to teach that fake Genevieve abi Kate Henshaw small lesson so she go know say Blessing no be somebody when person fit mess around with. I don already send her text message say I dey come for her so

if she like herself make she just continue to dey hide wherever she dey now.”

“I don’t know what Sister Agnes told you, but there’s nothing going on between me and Oputi. In fact, in case you haven’t noticed, let me tell you now that she doesn’t even work here anymore.”

“Ebinimi, Ebinimi can you swear that she isn’t your girlfriend and that you and her haven’t done anything yet?”

“What do you want me to swear to, Blessing – the Bible, the Koran or an African Idol?”

“What were you doing with her in a hotel at that time of the morning? That is the question you should be answering not speaking grammar and lying to my face. Ebinimi, you think I’m a fool? You think because I’m not as educated as you and her, you can tell me super story? No na, Ebinimi, my mumu don do. After all Reverend too has said it that you are not the man for me, so make you follow her. In fact, make you marry her. Me, I’m done. I cannot be with a man that cannot control his thing.”

“Are you talking about the same Reverend that told me about the other men you’ve been sleeping with and warned me a few days ago to be careful around you?” I knew I had made a terrible mistake the moment I brought the man of God into the matter and even revealed to Blessing what he told me in confidence.

“Wetin you talk?”

“See Blessing, just go, just go. I don tire.”

“I no dey go anywhere. Wetin you say Reverend Ebizimor talk? Okay, okay, I sabi wetin I go do. Shebi the two of una don gang up against me abi? So we are now in the season of revealing secrets and exposing people abi?”

“Blessing—”

“No call my name oh! Make you know say no be only wetin you and that useless girl go do for hotel Agnes tell me about oh, she tell me other things too and when the time come me sef go talk wetin I know.”

“What do you mean, Blessing? Is that a threat?”

“It is not a threat oh, but when the time come the truth go come out and me sef I go talk well well. And as for that Reverend, I know wetin I go do.”

“Blessing, please can we do this another time? Right now there’s the very urgent and important problem of arranging the rally for Honourable Aaron tomorrow and you know you have a major part to play in it.”

If looks could kill, the one Blessing gave me when I said those words would have sent me straight to my maker.

“Can you hear yourself? I am talking about you sleeping with another woman and you are telling me about rally tomorrow. Wetin concern me concern that one?”

When Blessing stormed out of the house, I knew I didn’t have a Plan B anymore. As it stood, there were no guys coming from Broderick, there were no girls, beautiful or ugly coming from Blessing, and Oputi wouldn’t be around to provide social media amplification to ABT’s event. I was done for. I was toast and the only options open to me was to skip town or go for plastic surgery so I wouldn’t be recognisable to ABT and the men he would send after me.

At exactly quarter past nine, my phone rang. It was Mr Freedom. I was about to take cover under my bed but then I thought it was just a phone call. If the minister was going to kill me, he wasn’t going to do it through the phone. I summoned courage and answered the call.

“The Honourable Minister wants to talk to you.”

“Ebinimi.”

I almost urinated on myself when I heard Honourable Aaron’s voice through the phone.

“My leader—”

“See, I dey airport now. My plane just dey about to take off from Abuja when the Chief of Defence Staff call me. There has been another Boko Haram attack in Benue state. Plenty people don die, so the President wants to see me immediately. As it stands, I wouldn’t be coming to Yenagoa again today.”

“Sir, does that mean—”

“It means that you have to stand down whatever arrangements you have made over there to welcome me. You can disperse the people waiting for me at Igbogene, but please make sure you share money reach everybody when come because we might need them another time.”

“Sir—” I didn’t even know why I was saying sir. It wasn’t as if I had anything to say to him.

“Freedom will send the two hundred and fifty thousand naira I promised you to your account. You have tried eh, you have really tried. I am even thinking that you should come to Abuja so you can be assisting my PA. His workload is increasing every day.”

When he hung up the phone, I passed out. No, I didn’t pass out; I just went down on my knees and started thanking God.

CHAPTER 37

I didn't speak to Broderick about the money for two days. My intention was to ignore him for a couple more days so he wonders what I have up my sleeves – and the plan worked. Not knowing how I intended to handle the issue or deal with him was enough punishment for Broderick. The dude couldn't even stand up straight whenever I asked him to get me a tool or run any other errand for me in the workshop.

He was acting all sober and contrite around me. Broderick Degi had suddenly become nice and polite, and doing things nobody sent him.

He swept the whole compound, cut the overgrown grasses in the backyard, cleared the gutter in front of the gate, washed my clothes, cleaned out all the mess in the garage, mopped the church floor and even made breakfast for all of us. All these he did before 6 o'clock in the morning.

While his guilt and apprehension drove him away from me, it pushed him to everyone else in the compound. One by one, they came pleading on his behalf.

First to speak with me was his colleague and roommate, Biodun. When that didn't bring about the expected outcome, he reached out to my sister, Ebiakpo. Her entreaties fell on deaf ears so he approached Reverend Ebizimor, who rather than speak on the boy's behalf was more interested in knowing when I was going to pay my tithe on the money I got from Honourable Aaron into the church account.

I was certain Broderick had reached out to Blessing as well to intervene on his behalf. But knowing how things stood between me and her, and how it seemed like her mind was made up to leave me for good, she must have advised him to carry his cross and allow her heart heal in peace. The reason I came to this conclusion is because I even got a call from Saka who was still in Lagos with his newfound *agent*, Director Paul D, the same guy that directed the commercial and hooked him up with the Timaya music video gig.

Apparently, Paul D had taken Saka under his wings and had scheduled a number of auditions for him in Lagos, including one for a small speaking

role in an upcoming Kunle Afolayan movie that would begin shooting in Abeokuta in the New Year. We spoke for a couple of minutes about what he was up to and the antics of his girlfriend, Agnes, before he brought up BRD's transgressions.

"Saka, I don't want to talk about that stupid boy, please. You, just concentrate on what you're doing over there in Lagos and let me worry about managing the people in my workshop."

Afraid of ticking me off, and sensing that nothing he was going to say would make me reveal the punishment I had planned for BRD, Saka ended the call, but not before warning me about Blessing. He told me that he learnt from Agnes that Blessing was really bitter and that she might be planning to get back at Reverened Ebizimor and possibly me as well for conspiring to embarrass her before the entire Fire For Fire family and the whole Yenagoa.

I believe it was Saka who advised Broderick to change his tactics after our short conversation, because the next thing I knew, BRD played his joker. He called in his mother to intervene.

"My pikin, you don really really try for me and my children," Broderick's mother said to me when she ambushed me the day she came. She refused the drink Ebiakpo offered her, and she wouldn't even sit down. "The things you dey do for this my pikin and even him brother when no dey even stay here with you for this house, na only God go bless you and your sister."

"Mama, make you siddon na, I no dey comfortable as you stand and me and my sister when be your junior for age come siddon as if we dey judge case for court."

"Ebinimi, this one no be siddon or matter of who senior who. As my son phone me this afternoon come tell me the whole thing when happen between you and am, and the kind of trouble when you for enter with your big oga for Abuja because of him mumu and careless behaviour, I know say you don tire for am, and me I no blame you at all."

"Mama, make you no dey talk like this. I am the one that should be apologising to you for not being able to control Broderick. Maybe he was stubborn in Amassoma, but here in Ovom, he has become worse. Now he hangs out with bad boys, he drinks, he smokes, he carries girls and he does drugs."

“But you dey teach am something here, something when even him own papa no fit teach am because the only thing when that man sabi na *drink-drink*. But you, you don teach am this mechanic work and if him put him head down learn am well-well, one day-one day him too go marry and start him own family.”

“I be mechanic oh mama, but I go school. I be graduate and any day when this mechanic job no pay me again or e tire me, I go carry my certificate jeje go find another work. I fit even become politician and get better appointment someday in the future. That is what I have been trying to teach your son, but he wouldn’t listen to me. He just wants to end up dead on the streets of this town the way most of these cult boys do.”

“Ebinimi my pikin, Broderick go listen. He *have* learn his lesson, and he no go disappoint you again. I swear.”

My heart went out to her and at that point I had no choice but to compel her to sit.

“How are we sure he has changed?” Ebiakpo asked.

“I don ask am and him tell me say na here him wan stay. He *don’t* want to come back to we suffer-suffer life. Abeg, give am another chance, I go continue to talk sense to am and this God when I dey serve so, go change am for me. I no go stop to dey pray.”

With Saka and Oputi gone, I didn’t want to lose another member of staff. I just couldn’t afford to. So, I told Broderick’s mum that I wouldn’t be sending him back to Amassoma with her after extracting his assurances to be a better man, going forward.

Beyond the pressure of trying to cope with just one assistant and any new apprentices I took on to replace those that left, Broderick was now like the kid brother I never had. He was family and no sane person stays mad at family forever. I always knew I was going to forgive him because I just couldn’t cut-off or disown my blood brother no matter how much he hurt or wronged me, but I didn’t have any and Saka, Biodun and Broderick it would seem were all the brothers I had.

Since I had accepted the responsibility of mentoring him and helping his parents mould his character that first time I took him in, letting him go now would be admitting failure, so I decided to allow Broderick stay.

Because of the rice and other items I had for Broderick's mother, I offered to drop her off in Amassoma. On my way back, I called Oputari and she agreed I could stop by her house. She said it was time I met her family.

Oputi was waiting for me by the door. She led me into their well-furnished living room. It was my first time inside her home and I was impressed at her parents' good taste. I whispered this to her, and it made her chuckle.

"You don't have to whisper, Ebinimi. Mum and dad are out of town, so today I'm going to live out my Cinderella Complex and act like you are my prince charming and this house is the castle where we get to live forever happily ever after."

"You mean we have this big house to ourselves?" I asked, already imagining the wildness we would get up to.

"Not really, my elder sister is at home but she's a cool cat," Oputi said, sounding really excited. "Would you like to meet her now or after you've had dinner?"

"Dinner can wait. Let me meet her first. I can't wait to hear all the lies you've told her about me."

"I haven't had the chance of gisting her about you just yet, so she knows next to nothing about who you are, what you do for a living, where you're from and how mischievous and dangerous you are," Oputi beamed radiantly.

"Why haven't you told her about me, are you ashamed of me or something?"

"I am not ashamed of you, Ebinimi. It's just that my sister has been through so much, it just didn't feel right talking to her about boyfriends and relationships and how happy I am with you at this time."

"Are you sure? I have a feeling my being a mechanic has something to do with your decision to be secretive about us."

"Well, thank your lucky stars I haven't told her anything about you, otherwise I would have told her about the death threats I've been receiving from your ex, Blessing, and also about your insatiable appetite for sex?"

"Hmmm, I saw what you did there, Oputi. You rhymed ex and sex," I grinned at her and in response she did a mock courtesy. "On a more serious note though, why is Blessing still sending you those messages when we

have all moved on?”

“Maybe you have moved on, but I don’t think she has, because I got another message from her this afternoon.”

“Wow, I think it’s time I did something about her fixation. Perhaps if I let Reverend Ebizimor know what she has been up to, he can counsel her and make her stop.”

“I would like us to see him together, immediately, before things really get out of hand.”

“We can do that tomorrow. Today, I just want to spend time with my baby and meet my future sister-in-law.”

“Okay, let me go and tell her you’re here. Meanwhile, please make yourself comfortable. I’ll only be a minute.”

Oputi left me in the sitting room and went in to fetch her sister. While she was away, it hit me how much she had changed, and quite honestly, I really liked this version of her. She looked relaxed and happy and not at all bothered by the hounding from Blessing. Even though we hadn’t really spoken about our future together, it was obvious we were both thinking about it.

“Ebinimi!” I heard my name from the hallway. “Please, can you come over here, I might be needing help with my sister’s wheelchair!” Oputi called out to me.

Her sister was on the bed when I got into the room. I couldn’t make out her face because the room was pretty dark, but I didn’t need to see her under shining lights to know who it was, because the person on the bed had a very familiar presence. I would recognise those features anywhere in the world and at any time of the day or night.

“Oyintari?”

“Ebinimi, you know my sister?”

Oputari and Oyintari were sisters? Suddenly my head began to spin and I could feel my legs wobbling. I didn’t know if it was horror, terror or anger, but Oputi must have sensed something in the way I said her sister’s name that worried her too, because she started moving away from the bed in slow backward motion, like they do in films.

“Ebinimi, wetin you dey do here? You’re supposed to be dead,” Oyintari

AKA Jigger, AKA Sucking-Blood may have lost the use of her legs, but she didn't lose the timbre in her voice.

“What is going on here?” Oputi screamed at us. “Ebinimi, Oyins – can someone please tell me what the heck is going on here!” She looked at me and then at her sister and then back to me again. And because her sister wouldn't say anything, I was forced to speak.

“Your sister tried to kill me in August.”

CHAPTER 38

“**Y**ou tried to kill Saka?”

“Noooooooo . . . No na, Oputi! It’s not like that. Who will want to kill Saka? Who in his or her right frame of mind would wish death on someone as funny and carefree as him? I only told them to roughen him up. That’s all. You can ask your sister.”

“Even then, why would you do something like that?”

“I didn’t know what I was thinking. He tried to blackmail me and I just felt like I needed to protect myself and teach him a small lesson about life and loyalty.”

“Why would Saka of all people try to blackmail you? Aren’t you his boss and friend? What am I even saying? You guys are like brothers!”

“It’s a long story, Oputi, and I can’t go into the details right now, but I swear on the life of my unborn children, I just wanted them to teach him a small lesson. And even at that I even tried calling it off, but the call didn’t go through. I didn’t know things would take the turn they did.”

“A dangerous turn that has confined my sister to a wheelchair for the rest of life, and it’s all thanks to you.”

“I’m really sorry, Oputi.”

“What if Saka had died? What if you had died? What if my sister had died? What if somebody else had died?”

“Somebody actually died.” Oyintari was solemn and tearful.

“Teikuro?” Just mentioning his name made the hair on the back of my neck rise. “Don’t tell me Teikuro is dead.”

“Yes, *Tears* is dead. After we left you in the bush that day, we drove to another uncompleted building around Emeyal that was completely surrounded by trees to review the situation of things. To our greatest surprise, Izuo wasn’t interested in anything we had to say. He just wanted to be given his balance but *Tears* wouldn’t hear it.”

“Who is *Tears* and who is Izuo?” I asked, confused.

“*Tears* is short for Tiekuro, and Izuo is the name of the guy Tiekuro contracted to do the job,” Oyintari explained to me. “As I was saying, *Tears* refused to give him the money he was demanding because he felt Izuo didn’t do as he was told and his actions may have put all of us in danger. He was mad that Izuo kidnapped the wrong person for starters, and then went ahead and killed him contrary to what he was told, because at that point we all concluded you were dead.”

“I also thought I was dead.”

“It was terrifying to think that your blood was in our hands. Tiekuro was fuming and trembling at the same time because for all the toughness he exuded, he had never killed before.”

“Don’t tell me you have. Oyintari, have you killed before?” Oputi cut in, but her sister chose to ignore the question. The look on Jigger’s face was one of contrition so it was easy for me to draw my own conclusions. She didn’t have to answer that question.

“No one asked him to torture you or tie you up in the boot of his car,” Sucking Blood continued. “*Tears* was really mad at Izuo because he felt he went too far. I tried to calm him down, but he wouldn’t listen to me. The next thing I knew, they were fighting and *Tears* brought out his pistol. He fired at Izuo but missed. When he tried to shoot again, there was no more bullet in his gun.”

“I don’t believe this, Oyintari. You mean you were there when all of this was happening? I thought you told mum and dad that you were no longer into all this cult business. For crying out loud, you even started acting *churchy* at home.” The disappointment in her voice told me that Oputi didn’t know her sister very well. I was sure she didn’t know half of what Jigger was capable of. Clearly, Oyintari was one of those kids that was all decent and *ajebutter* at home and in their neighbourhood, but deadly and *gangsta* everywhere else.

Sucking Blood ignored her sister and continued speaking as if the point her sister was making didn’t matter. “Like play like play, Izuo brought out his own gun and opened fire on Teikuro. A couple of bullets hit him on the chest and he fell to the ground. Seeing that my capon was dead, I started running and ducking bullets aimed at me all at the same time, just like I had seen people do in American films.”

“So, you were being shot at and that was how you got injured? Oyins, I thought you said your injuries were caused by a hit-and-run driver?” Oputi stopped pacing the room. “You lied to all of us about what really happened to you.”

“I didn’t lie,” Oyintari retorted in anger. “Izuo’s intention was to finish me off but I was saved by the trees that provided cover for me. In my bid to escape being killed, I ran from the woods into the road. I wasn’t looking; I just wanted to get as far away from Izuo as possible. There was no way I would have seen the oncoming truck because I was running really fast and I doubt that the driver saw me either until it was too late for him to stop.”

“Oh my God! Oh my God!” Oputari exclaimed in horror.

“When I came out of the coma a few days later, I was in the hospital. Some kind fellow had seen me bleeding on the side of the road and took me to Gloryland Hospital. I was battling for my life so I really wasn’t thinking about *Tears* and what was done to his body. I also couldn’t tell my parents the truth about how I ended up being hit by a big vehicle in Emeyal, so I feigned amnesia to avoid being questioned by them or anyone else.”

After listening to Oyintari, I had to ask her how well she knew Izuo and where I could find him.

“I don’t know. He doesn’t even live in Yenagoa – of that I’m certain. I think he came in from either Lagos or Warri for another hit. *Tears* didn’t tell me how they knew each other and I didn’t ask.”

For the longest time, I had wanted to know what became of Tiekuro so I could inform his dad and put the old man out of his misery. But now that I had my answers, I was faced with a whole new set of complications.

Oyintari and I could get into serious problems with the law. Saka would know that I could have had him killed and Aguero would have to be told that I was responsible for this incarceration. Above all, I would most certainly lose Oputi, my woman and the love of my life. I couldn’t let that happen.

I contemplated the options before me, and in the end, decided I was going to do the right thing and come out clean to my friends and family and to the authorities as well, not minding the consequences. Oputi and Oyintari tried talking me out of it, but my mind was made up. They even suggested I sent an anonymous letter to Justice Digha, Tiekuro’s dad, so he’d know that his

son was never coming back home, but I told them I wouldn't do it. They weren't there when he shared the pain of losing his son with me.

When I stood up to leave, Oputi said she wouldn't be walking me to my car. She told me she needed some time alone to process the truth about her sister's condition and the part I played in it. She wasn't happy that her sister and I could be getting into even more trouble that might land us both in jail for a very long time because of my stubborn insistence on piety.

Two weeks into the New Year, and Oputi and I still weren't talking. She avoided me all through the Christmas and New Year celebrations and I was miserable.

While everyone around me was joyous and looking forward to the New Year with expectation of greater things, I was miserable and heartbroken because I didn't know what the police would do when eventually I went to them with the truth. I also didn't know if things between Oputari and I would ever get back to how they used to be. The last time any woman made me feel that way was in my first year in the university, when my very first real girlfriend started dating one of our lecturers and wouldn't have anything to do with me again.

My calls to Oputi were ignored and all my messages were unread. It was a frustrating couple of days I must confess. The way I felt most of the time, I knew if Ebiakpo had still been in the house I might have been tempted to confide in her about what I intended to do about Tiekuro's death, but she and Anda had moved back to their house immediately we crossed over into the New Year so she could join her in-laws in preparing for Benson's burial. She still left a few of her things in her room in Kalakala Street though because she wasn't sure which wife would get what after the burial and she didn't want to be taken unawares.

Mind you, it was the same burial that made me put off speaking with Tiekuro's father until sometime in February because I had to be there for Ebiakpo and help her get through it as her only sibling and close confidant.

Meanwhile, with all these going on, something else happened I couldn't quite understand and as at the time it did, it made absolutely no sense.

Aguero talked me into hanging out with him and a few friends on his birthday. Knowing the kind of crazy parties he threw whenever he had something to celebrate, I had told Biodun and BRD not to wait up for me. I

wanted to party hard, get drunk and do some really silly stuff because I hadn't done that in a long while. To my greatest surprise and disappointment however, this year Aguero decided to do something different. The celebration was low key.

My friend had given his life to Christ, so there were no babes, no dancing and no alcohol. Since I didn't fancy spending the rest of the night discussing cars and politics, I lied about having a stomach upset and excused myself. It was just a little past 10 p.m. when I got back to Kalakala Street. Biodun and BRD hadn't locked the gate so I didn't bother tooting. I got out of my car, opened the gate myself and drove in. I was going to scold them for not being security conscious, but that was going to wait until morning.

I opened the front door with my key and as expected, BRD had dozed off in front of the TV and Biodun was nowhere in sight. I was going to head to the kitchen to get a bottle of beer from the fridge before heading to my room, but a swishing sound coming from my sister's room caught my attention. I thought it strange – Ebiakpo had left days ago for her own house so no one was supposed to be in there.

When I opened the door, to my greatest surprise, Biodun was standing in front of my sister's wardrobe with a handful of her cloths. On his face was the expression people have when they have been caught doing something they shouldn't be doing.

“Biodun, what's going on here? What are you doing with my Sister's pant and brassier?”

I don't think I've ever heard Biodun stutter before, but on this occasion he did so uncontrollably.

“Or . . . Or . . . Oga Eb . . . Ebi . . . Ebini . . . mi, I go . . . I . . . go . . . I . . . I go con . . . con . . . con . . . fess. I go confess. I go tell you everything.”

INTERLUDE

The driver of the blood red Honda Accord wasn't in a hurry. He knew that if he drove consistently at 100 km per hour he would get to his destination before the offices closed. That was why he left Yenagoa at 5 o'clock in the morning.

It was important that he got to Abakaliki in time to make some withdrawals in the bank because he didn't have much cash on him. In his hurry to leave the office undetected the previous night, he didn't remember to transfer his ATM cards from the drawer into his wallet. He also didn't remember to pick up the flash drive from where it was hidden in his office. It was too late to go back for it now so he could only hope that no one finds it and even if someone did, it wouldn't occur to the finder to try to query the content.

He was starting to regret his decision to depart so abruptly but he checked himself. Given the situation that arose last night, he didn't have much of a choice. The reason he left the office the way he did, and the reason he set out before dawn was that he didn't want anyone to see him leave. He just wanted to steal away. He had a great run in Yenagoa no doubt, but it was time for him to go somewhere else, start afresh in a new city – maybe even a new country, if what his cousin in Canada told him was true.

Things had started off well in Yenagoa, just like they did in Ayingba, Kafanchan and later Ilorin, where he had his last church. But he always got greedy – greedy and careless. If it wasn't that, it was the women.

In Ayingba, where it all began, he hadn't quite mastered the trick of performing fake miracles so the blind boy whose sight he purportedly restored was recognised by an old lady in his small church as the son of the bicycle repairer from a neighbouring village. She was certain the boy had never been blind. In Kafanchan, one married woman and the 17-year-old daughter of the head of the prayer unit both confessed on the same day that he was responsible for their pregnancies.

The problem in Ilorin where he was almost lynched to death came up because he collected the sum of one million and five hundred thousand

naira from an aspirant for the chairmanship position of the state chapter of the Road Transport Workers Association who wanted special prayers for victory in the association's elections and he couldn't deliver. He was lucky to have escaped with his life, his Bible and his uncanny ability to hear from "God" where to go next.

That next stop was Yenagoa, where he had to start a new ministry from nothing because waiting to get his car and all his worldly possessions acquired in Ilorin might have been a costly mistake.

In spite of his very obvious Igboti accent and the fact that he couldn't speak a word of Ijaw, he adopted an Ijaw name made popular by a famous singer from Bayelsa State and concocted a fake story about growing up first in the East and then moving to the North before moving to Lagos as a teenager when both his parents and siblings were killed in a religious crisis in Kano.

The people of Yenagoa were quickly taken in by his rugged charm and impeccable dressing. They fell hard for his staged miracles and well-researched prophecies. Men and women sought his pricey anointing oil and booked well in advance for his special prayer sessions. People embraced his nuanced preaching and his mesmerising dance steps, and whenever it looked like their interest in him was waning, he consulted his Baba in Ijebu-Ode.

Yenagoa was a small town and the money wasn't that much but it paid his bills and left him with enough for the rainy day.

Sister Ebiakpo who was desperately in search of the fruit of the womb and Sister Blessing who wanted a husband at all cost were amongst his first congregants. Before long, Reverend Ebizimor and the Jerusalem Warriors International Church was firmly planted in Kalakala Street, courtesy of Sister Ebiakpo – and business was booming.

Unlike in his previous sojourns, this time everything went smoothly and he remained focused. Sister Blessing, Sister Agnes and even the older women in the church all threw themselves at him but he was very selective. His eyes were on the prize. Whenever he wanted relieve, he took his business far away from the church and Yenagoa city, sometimes travelling all the way to the neighbouring cities of Ahoada and Port Harcourt for sex with the chosen church member. He had a target in Yenagoa and he was determined

to meet it so it was important he remained discreet. But target or no target, he always had a secret recording and pictures, especially of the married women.

From experience, he knew how valuable such materials turn out to be. It was unfortunate that all those photos and videos were now lost in the flash drive he didn't remember to pick up in his haste to flee for his life and that he wasn't going to be around to collect the money from the latest victim of his extortion plot – a new member of the church whose husband was a councillor in Brass Local Government Area.

It was true that he once kissed Ebiakpo, fondled Blessing and fingered Agnes, but that was as far as it went.

When Blessing and Ebinimi started dating, it was providence. He did everything within his power, including making up visions and prophecies to speed things up in their relationship so they tied the knot. The obstacle was that Ebinimi wasn't ready to settle down and his head was too strong, because his plan was simple. When Blessing became Mrs Ebinimi Jacob, she became eligible to inherit Number 9 if anything was to happen to her husband. Blessing's second marriage would be to him and the property in Ovom automatically would become his.

That was the plan until Benson died.

Benson's death was providence, a gift from heaven that fell right on his laps. It wasn't the water he drank in Ebinimi's room that killed him. That water couldn't kill anyone because he drank it too. And for the records, there wasn't anything special about the water and it didn't come from Jerusalem.

What he wasn't sure of though was whether Ebiakpo poisoned Benson. If she did, she wouldn't say but he knew that a woman that could hide the paternity of her child from her husband could do anything.

What he was certain of was that Benson's permanent exit opened a door for him, and his intention was to forcefully – if need be – possess and fill up the vacuum before anyone else beat him to it. He knew that she already had a soft spot for him and if he really turned on the charm, which he had in abundance, a grieving sister Ebiakpo would run into his arms for comfort.

The only snag he foresaw was that there was someone else. Someone she wouldn't tell anyone and he didn't know how serious things were with this

mystery man. Unlike with her first child, whose real father he knew because she told him; with the pregnancy she was carrying, she was uncharacteristically tight-lipped and it gave him cause for concern. Was there a man out there she could decide to get married to immediately her mourning period for Benson was over?

His Baba in Ijebu-Ode told him that her clothes and undergarments would do the trick. That was all he needed for the enchantment that would make her marry him and make him the owner of the land on which his church was built. He didn't need Blessing and Ebinimi anymore.

If he had trusted his instinct and gone with BRD, perhaps things would have worked out as planned, but he went with his head that told him Biodun was the sensible one, the reliable person. It took a lot of talking to and convincing, but in the end, everybody falls for something. With Biodun, it wasn't money or anything material. It was his innate tendency to care for others that did it.

Biodun believed when he was told that in a vision, it was revealed to him that her in-laws wanted Sister Ebiakpo dead. He thought he was saving a life when he sneaked into her room to get her clothes for him for the point of contact prayer that needed to be done to keep her safe.

He was still waiting in the office for Biodun when Ebinimi returned unexpectedly. When he heard the shouting coming out from the main house, he knew that the boy had been caught and he would be implicated and disgraced if he didn't act fast. Fear crept in and it immobilised him temporarily. The louder the voices got, the more terrified he became. But courage came and he did what he knew he had to do.

Grabbing his car key, Bible and wallet, he immediately fled the compound before anyone realised he was still in the office. Afraid they might trace him to his house, he drove to a hotel in Amarata where he spent the night.

In the morning, he got into his car and started driving. "God" had spoken again and this time when he got to Abakaliki, he would be Reverend Benjamin Kwajok from Plateau State. Reverend Ebizimor was dead.

CHAPTER 39

It took four months for us to accept that Reverend Ebizimor had disappeared from Yenagoa for good and I can't begin to describe how crazy those four months were and all that transpired in our lives since that morning Biodun, Broderick and I arrived at his house and found him gone. I regret not going out immediately to look for the Reverend when I caught Biodun with my sister's things like Broderick had suggested, instead of waiting until early the next morning because I felt he'd still be home at quarter past five in the morning since Yenagoa isn't typically a city that rises early.

Although, I kind of had a hunch he might have sensed that his plans had unraveled when I asked Biodun to switch off his phone so he couldn't be contacted that night, I still felt that my strategy to ambush Reverend Ebizimor before dawn would work and we would beat the hell out of him until if he was lucky, his neighbours or the police came to his rescue.

So, there's no prize for guessing how devastated I was when the first thing I noticed was the empty spot where Reverend Ebizimor's car should have been in his compound. The security man at the gate told us that Reverend Ebizimor didn't come home that night, which he didn't think was unusual because the man of God could have been dealing with a crisis involving one of his members or still in an all night vigil in church. The only problem though was that the church was in my compound and there was no vigil going on there, so that immediately set off alarm bells in my head.

If Reverend Ebizimor didn't go back home and he didn't spend the night at Kalakala Street, where else could he be? That was the question on all our minds as we went back home to figure out our next line of action.

We were prepared to give him the benefit of the doubt and hope for the best; the best being that Reverend Ebizimor would definitely want to hear from Biodun how the task he asked him to carry out went so we asked Biodun to be on standby and to keep trying his number until he got a response.

Back in number 9, we waited and waited but there was no sign of the

founder and general overseer of FFFLM. Sometime around three o'clock in the afternoon when there was still no sign of him in Kalakala Street it began to dawn on us that our co-tenant of so many years might have skipped town because I couldn't remember a day when he resumed in his office later than 9 a.m.

Things eventually came to a head around 5 p.m. when his church members started coming in for the weekly sold out Thursday evening special anointing and prophesy service. Within minutes, the church was filled up and all the seats were taken. The choristers, band members, ushers, prayer warriors, elders and members of the technical crew were all in their respective positions, ready to commence the service but there was no pastor to lead them. Because I was determined to get to the bottom of the unfolding drama and hopefully be the first to see him walk into the church, I sat down quietly at the back of the church absorbing all the murmuring and whispering. Some of the members wanted one of the elders to step up and take Reverend's Ebizimor's place, while others were still optimistic their *papa* would show up.

Honestly, at this point I was tempted to call Blessing to find out from her if she knew anything about Reverend Ebizimor's whereabouts but it would have been a very difficult call to make because we hadn't spoken to each other in months and she had even stopped coming to the church.

The other person I could have called was my sister, but I decided against it because of her pregnancy and her husband's burial that was only a few weeks away. Besides, it was her things Biodun was caught stealing, so that alone would have got her really worked up and I didn't want that if I could somehow handle the situation on my own and contain the fallout among just us guys in the house.

If I didn't have too many things on my mind, perhaps I would have noticed the suspicious faces in the congregation. I guess the other members too were preoccupied with trying to figure out whether to get on with the service or not and what to do next since their leader's numbers were all unreachable and this had never happened before in the history of the church, so, they too missed the signs that something terrifying was about to happen.

The gunshot was really loud and totally unexpected. It sent all of us scampering to the ground. I closed my eyes for a few seconds to process the

sound and the scene I had just witnessed. It didn't immediately register that we were being attacked because the last place anyone would expect to encounter gunmen was within the sacrosanct walls of a church but when I opened my eyes it was apparent that was the situation we were in.

"Where the pastor of this church? I say who be the paster of this church?" It was the leader of the group. A masked mountain of a man dressed in black, as were the other three guys that burst into Fire For Fire Liberation Ministries that evening.

While he remained at the door of the church, the other three guys moved around examining our faces, kicking down random things and hitting us with the butt of their guns just to put more fear in our hearts. "E be like say all of una want to die here today abi? I say who be the pastor of this church?" The leader asked again.

I don't know why no one wanted to speak. The church was quiet, it was like a graveyard with only dead people on the floor, except that we were all alive – frightened to death, but still alive. I had expected to hear people mention the name Jesus or even plead his blood but I guess the fear immobilized everyone and made us forget our faith or that we were in the house of God.

"I no think say the man dey here," the masked man standing close to where I was taking cover said. Though he spoke quietly, I could hear everything he said. "You know say as I been follow monitor the man for some months I sabi him face well-well. I don look everybody face when dey here, the man no dey."

"Abi somebody hint am say we go strike today?" the leader asked.

"I no think so. Maybe na just luck," the other guy replied.

"So make we just go back like that?" the leader of the group asked. He was still whispering "We no kill the man, we no kidnap am, we no even collect the pictures, wetin we wan tell oga now?"

"You know say this street get some kain bad boys too and this one wen you don fire shot so, we get to bail before somebody involve olokpa for the matter and me I no dey for police wahala. We fit try again another time as e don be like this."

"What if this Pastor Ebizimor come post the picture on social media like

him tell oga say him go do?” the leader asked, still whispering. “The whole world go come see madam yansh. Oga no go like am oh.”

“Oh mehn, this church people ehn, dem just dey deceive innocent people everyday. How pastor of church go dey nack married women for him own church then come dey blackmail them ontop if them no pay am money? Baba, make we fall out abeg. Today compass na kain. Nothing go come out.”

We waited for almost ten minutes after they left before thinking to call the police. The police arrived one hour later after I transferred some money into the account of the station officer because they didn’t have fuel in their patrol vehicle.

After I finshed narrating everything that transpired but excluding the part involving Biodun and my sister’s undies because I didn’t want the poor boy to get into trouble with the law, the officer in charge of crime and the five other policemen that accompanied him to investigate the scene of the attempted assasination or kidnapping or however our ordeal could be described, forced the door of Reverend Ebizimor’s office open.

It wasn’t immediately apparent that he had fled but with all that had become exposed about him in less than twenty-four hours, I didn’t need anyone to tell me that he wasn’t coming back.

The one good thing that came out of the incident though was that it made Oputi come over to the house to condole with us.

We patched things up that day and the next day Ebiakpo was rushed to the hospital.

After sometime, this bearded guy that looked like he could be in his mid-thirties called me Ebi and asked that I follow him into his office, and my first instinct was to straighten him out there and then, but then he introduced himself as the doctor responsible for my sister’s case, and that made me change my mind about making a fuss about what name I’d rather be called. After all, in the larger scheme of things, what was a name when my sister and her baby’s lives could be hanging on a thread?

“So, Ebi, that’s your name right?’

“Ebinimi, but Ebi is fine,” I added quickly so he would get right to the point and save me from further anguish.

“Sorry to have kept you waiting out there for this long. I’d wanted to be sure of the exact situation of things so I wouldn’t be giving you any hasty updates,” he said, pointing to one of the two visitor’s chairs in front of his neatly arranged laminate office desk. I took his gesture to mean he wanted me to sit but I let him know that I’d rather stand for whatever it was he wanted to tell me.

“How is she doing, my sister?” I asked rather impatiently, praying as I did that he had nothing but good news for me.”

“Congratulations, your sister has been delivered of her baby.” The look on my face told him that it wasn’t quite the news I was expecting to hear from him, so he added immediately – “It was an emergency situation so we had to carry out a CS.”

“But she isn’t due until—”

“The baby is premature and has been put in an incubator until she can breathe on her own. The implication of this is that both mother and baby would have to be guests of the hospital for a little while so we can take proper care of them. There were some complications during the operation so your sister needs close monitoring also, but I assure you it’s nothing to worry about. They are in safe hands here in the Bayelsa State Specialist Hospital.”

“Thank you, doctor. Can I see them now?”

“Sure you can. Just ask any of the nurses in the waiting room to take you to where they are. And please feel free to come back here if you have any questions for me.” We shook hands and then I hurried off to see my sister and my little niece.



Ebiakpo and the baby were in the hospital for almost two months so she missed her husband’s funeral. In the end I guess you can say she got what she had always wanted.

I had no objection to her and her two children moving back to Kalakala Street with us after they were discharged from the Bayelsa State Specialist Hospital. Number 9 was her house just as much as it was mine. Ebiakpo was happy to be home again, so was Anda. And the new baby thrived in the family house. With the church gone, there was now ample space in the

compound for my sister to start up the small restaurant she said she would open after she put to bed and was strong enough to hustle again. My sister was such a great cook so I just knew that the business would do very well.

In the hospital, Ebiakpo named the baby Christiana, but because she came home on the morning of my convocation ceremony, we all called her Bekere.

We had planned a big party to celebrate my second graduation from the Niger Delta University that became an even bigger party because of Bekere's homecoming. Everyone was around for it – friends, customers and neighbours. Even Saka flew in from Lagos the evening before to be a part of the celebrations and so his Yenagoa fans could take selfies with him, post it on their own personal platforms and make him even more popular. The pretty, thin, tall, light-skinned girl in almost all his pictures on social media who called herself Sphynx, accompanied him on the trip – he said she was now his manager and I might surmise, the reason he and Agnes were no longer together. I heard from Biodun and Broderick that Agnes was very bitter about the breakup and had threatened to post some nasty things about him on Instagram. It was going to be the greatest night party Kalakala Street had ever seen.

CHAPTER 40

The highlight of the night party was a toss off between Oputi accepting my spur-of-the-moment marriage proposal even though the improvised engagement ring I borrowed from Ebiakpo's jewelry collection didn't quite fit and ABT calling to tell me that he wanted me to think about contesting as chairman of Sagbama local government area in the council elections coming up in two months.

"Make you think about wetin I just tell you now oh. You know say now na me be the highest appointee for federal level now and na me be the Bayelsa person when the President dey listen to pass for this country," Honourable Aaron bragged to me over the phone. He had called to congratulate me on my graduation that evening and I was both surprised and happy that he did. I believe Mr Freedom must have told him about my convocation when I called him very early in the morning to remind him about the money he promised to send me for the party.

"I know that you're the President's right hand man sir. I saw it for myself when I was in Abuja last year."

"Everybody for FCT know that one na," he said, laughing out loud. "And any person when I tell am to give chairman of local government don enter and I want you to get the thing."

Honourable Aaron's unexpected offer left me speechless.

"I will think about it my leader," I managed to say after a long pause. I was beside myself with joy but I just didn't know how to express it in that moment when there were so many other things going on at the same time.

"Make you think about am oh."

"In fact my leader, nothing dey to think about sef. To be local government chairman for this state, no be small thing oh." I knew he was expecting an immediate positive response from me so I fell in line.

"Now that you are a masters degree holder, you have to stop all these mechanic work when no go fit give you better money. I know say na the thing when you like oh, but I don see say you get potentials and you go fit

deliver. You get the qualifications and I don also see say you dey very loyal and with the right support and the right people backing you, you will go very far in this state,” he predicted.

“Thank you sir.”

“I know say you will do very well for politics. Once you ready make you let me know, so I go tell the party chairman make dem begin print posters for you. I go also arrange meetings with una Sagbama elders and stakeholdres so everybody go dey on the same page when I enter Yenagoa next week.”

I couldn’t believe my luck and that all these things were happening on the same day. It was all like a dream and I didn’t want to wake up. I had never seen myself as a politician, but if somebody as rich and powerful as Honourable Aaron Barnabas-Treatment was ready to sponsor me and throw in the weight of the presidency behind me, then I had nothing to lose. In fact, I should be thanking my stars and celebrating my good fortune.

I went back to the party to do just that – celebrate and share the good news with Oputi and Ebiakpo who were entertaining some neighbours and very close friends in the parlour.

Afterwards, I dragged my fiancée outside to join some other set of friends singing at the top of their voices and gyrating really hard to the latest Naija beats the DJ was spinning from his laptop.

All the shouting and the loud music and the alcohol flowing freely were perhaps the reason I didn’t notice the commotion that heralded Aguero’s grand entrance into the party. My guests were first drawn to his convoy. There were at least six SUVs, all black with tinted glasses. When Aguero stepped out of his car, not less than twenty guys all dressed in jeans and t-shirt walked behind him. Everyone saw them, but I didn’t until it was too late.

The moment I realised it was my best friend, I stopped dancing so I could welcome him properly.

“Aguero, wetin you dey do here, I think say you dey do party for Aridolf this night? Me and my woman, Oputi, been dey even plan to come hang out with una for there when we finish for here sef.”

I closed in to give him a congratulatory hug and to show him how

appreciative I was of his encouragement and for bringing out money from time to time to help with smoothening things out with difficult lecturers in times I was broke. It was indeed a thrill that as bestfriends we began the programme together and we were finishing it together. I knew I couldn't have completed my MBA from NDU without Aguero's support and I owed him so much.

The embrace lasted for a split second, but I felt the prick somewhere around my lower abdomen. It was sharp and painful and totally unexpected. When Aguero pulled back, I noticed the tip of the knife in his hands was red, but it still didn't click. I took a few unsteady steps backwards and froze.

Maybe because I was a little bit tipsy, it didn't quite sink in that I was being propped up and shoved. I saw myself floating on water and punching frantically on air like a drowning man until I was standing face to face with Aguero again. By this time, I was completely surrounded by his *friends* and there was no getting out of the cordon they built around us.

The look Aguero gave me was menacing and I felt shivers run down my spine. Something was wrong and I was not happy that I wasn't processing it quick enough.

"Blessing was at my party."

The moment he said that I knew it could only mean one thing. Aguero had found out the truth and he was in my party for his pound of flesh.

"It is not what you think." My response was feeble. It was a plea for forgiveness. It was a cry for help.

"Did you think I was never going to find out?"

"Aguero, please, let us go inside and talk things over."

From the corner of my eyes, I could see Oputi struggling to get through the human barricade of muscled men and locked arms. Behind her were Saka, Biodun and Broderick. They were pushing and shoving to get to me, but it didn't look like they were making any progress.

"Run, Ebinimi, run!"

The voice sounded like Oputi's but I knew it wasn't hers. In spite of how real it sounded, I knew the voice was coming from inside my head because the music from the party was way too loud for me to hear her from that

distance.

“Run, Ebinimi, run!” the voice called out again. This time I tried to run, but my legs couldn’t carry me fast enough and the hands holding me were too strong; they were so strong, I couldn’t shake them off.

“Ebinimi, don’t close your eyes. Please don’t close your eyes,” the voice pleaded this time.

Everything started to happen in slow motion and with each passing second the voice grew fainter and sounded farther away until there was only silence.

I tried, God knows I tried to listen to the voice and keep my eyes open, but in the end the pain was just too much. The pain and anger, anger at the thought that all this wahala started when Blessing came to trick me with false pregnancy.

I had to rest. I had to close my eyes.

THE END

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