

DOZ CHRONICLES DRAMA



# The —♦— GRIFFITHS

*A sequel to The Vine Church*



Eturuvie Erebor

## **The Griffiths**

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**A DOZ Chronicles Drama**

ISBN: 978-1-0681699-1-5

## THE GRIFFITHS

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Published in London, England by Eturuvie Erebor trading as DOZ Chronicles, a unit of DOZ Network.

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*In the wake of revival, marriages once broken are mended.*

*Forgiveness has flowed like oil down the altar steps.*

*But all it takes is one truth nestled in a growing womb to shake the sanctuary again.*

Victoria Griffith finally has her husband's loving attention and the comfort of a marriage revitalised. Mabel Babs-Jonah is no longer the abandoned woman longing for someone else's life—she has reclaimed her own, and her husband, too. Even Elizabeth David-West, whose sins nearly wrecked all three families, has found her way back into the arms of the man she betrayed.

But redemption doesn't expunge the past, especially Elizabeth's sins. Suspicion begins to ripple through the pews, threatening to undo not just her fragile marriage but every bond that was so painstakingly repaired: *the child Elizabeth carries may not belong to her husband.*

As husbands grow wary, wives grow wise, and children begin asking questions no one wants to answer. The Vine Church once again becomes the epicentre of scandals that have no place on the altars.

This time, though, the betrayal isn't just confined within the holy walls – it's front-page news. From London to Lagos, from the boardroom to the bedroom, the ripples spread—until everyone reckons with the fact that *Grace demands everything to be laid bare.*

Dear Reader,

The Griffiths is a sequel to The Vine Church. If you haven't read The Vine Church, you may not fully appreciate the story in The Griffiths. While some might argue that this book can be read independently, I honestly believe that it cannot be thoroughly enjoyed in that way.

From the moment God took over the writing of The Vine Church, I realised that the story was too expansive to fit into a single novel. It was a narrative that needed more space to be fully told. If I had tried to contain it all in one book, I would have become overwhelmed. The logical approach was to identify a suitable point to conclude the first half of the story, allowing me to focus on developing the second half. Therefore, even before The Vine Church was released, I began assembling the story for the sequel.

I stand in awe of God. When I came across the manuscript for The Vine Church in April 2024—nine years after I initially wrote it—I had no idea that God would lead me not only to rewrite and publish the story but also to create a sequel from it. It's been a truly fantastic journey, divinely orchestrated. Throughout this process, I have been like a secretary taking notes. I could never have done this on my own. If you ever get a chance to read the original manuscript from 2015, you'll understand what I mean.

The Griffiths is finally here, after many days and nights of taking notes, and I hope you enjoy reading it. I want to seize this opportunity to thank everyone who read and reviewed The Vine Church. I enjoyed reading your feedback and would be delighted to hear your thoughts on the second half of the story, The Griffiths. Please share your comments and feedback with me through my website, [www.eturuvieerebor.com](http://www.eturuvieerebor.com), or via email [eturuvie@eturuvieerebor.com](mailto:eturuvie@eturuvieerebor.com).

I look forward to hearing from you.

Evie.

For Jesus

Special thanks to all who read and reviewed The Vine Church

SAMPLE

## Prologue

*Three months later...*

“It’s a boy!”

As everyone cheered and blue confetti filled the air, Mabel stepped under the massive balloon archway into the large marquee in the beautiful garden of The Vine Church, where the gender reveal and baby shower party for Elizabeth David-West was being hosted.

From the doorway, she scanned the area, and spotted Elizabeth and her husband, Chris, at the front of the tent, standing in front of a floral backdrop with a teddy bear and neon sign that read, “We Can Bearly Wait.” She noted that Elizabeth looked displeased and concluded that perhaps the other woman wanted a girl, considering she already had two boys, James and Andrew.

The grand tent was a stunning spectacle, adorned with vibrant decorations that transformed it into a captivating venue for the event. Tables were decorated with themed tablecloths, napkins, and centrepieces that featured baby bottles filled with flowers and stuffed animals. At the back, a photo booth was adorned with baby bottles, pacifiers, and an “Oh Baby” sign. The dessert table, a focal point where guests gathered, showcased a beautifully decorated cake, cupcakes, and a variety of other treats. The gentle notes of soft piano music filled the air, setting a serene ambience that encouraged mingling and sparked lively conversation among guests.

A multitude of faces filled the space. Mabel recognised most from church, even though they were not friends. She tried to keep to herself and did not mix much with people in church. A reason she had not been invited to the party. She was here to collect her eldest daughter, Tracy, who had received an invitation from James David-West. Tracy and James had become good friends since James and his brother Andrew joined the independent Christian school that Tracy and her sisters attended. Both were in the same class and studied together; hence, Tracy was invited to the party.

Mabel’s face lit up with a warm smile when she saw Tracy approaching, accompanied by James and Andrew, with a goody bag in hand. As they reached her, Andrew lingered in the

background, smiling and waving at her shyly. She waved and smiled back before turning to Tracy and James.

“Hello Mum,” Tracy greeted with a broad smile that indicated she had enjoyed herself immensely.

“Hello, Mrs. Babs-Jonah.” James’s smile was almost as infectious as Tracy’s. “Thank you for allowing Tracy to attend the party.”

“It was my pleasure. She speaks very highly of you and was thrilled to be invited. Thank you for having her.” Mabel looked at Tracy. “Ready to go?”

“Yes, Mum.” Tracy turned to James. “I had a nice time. Thank you for inviting me. See you at school tomorrow.”

“Sure. See you tomorrow, Tracy.”

Tracy wavered. “Mum, can James come over to our house sometime? I told him you make the best African food.”

Mabel laughed. “Of course, Tracy. We’ll arrange something soon. Bye, James.”

“Bye, Mrs Babs-Jonah.”

“Ooh, Tracy likes James!” Stacy said as soon as Mabel and Tracy climbed into the car.

“Yeah,” Daisy said excitedly. “Tracy has a crush on James!”

“What do you know about having a crush, little lady?” Mabel asked Daisy.

“It’s what Stacy said,” Daisy replied.

“Because it’s true,” Stacy said.

Mabel laughed and started the car. “Come on, girls. Don’t tease your sister like that. James is just Tracy’s friend. Right, Tracy?”

“Right!” Tracy scowled at her sisters before turning to her mum. “Thanks for setting them straight, Mum!”

They all laughed as Mabel turned the car toward the church’s main exit.

James smiled as he watched them leave and turned to Andrew, who was wrinkling his nose while observing his older brother.

“You like Tracy, don’t you?”

“Shh, don’t tell anyone,” James said, putting his index finger to his lips. Andrew giggled as they rejoined the party.

Liam Hall walked across the tent toward the object of his desire. A tall, handsome man in his mid-twenties, with chestnut hair and hazel eyes, which he usually hid behind reading glasses that made him resemble Clark Kent, he was considered attractive by many young women in The Vine Church, due to his looks and his elevated position as Pastor John’s trusted aide.

“Hi Rebekah.”

Rebekah set the cupcake back on the dessert table and turned to face Liam, a playful smirk dancing on his lips, his hazel eyes gazing into her blue ones. Her heart pounded in her chest, quickening with each passing moment. She plastered a smile on her face, fighting to regain her composure amidst the swirl of emotions.

“Hi Liam.”

Why was her heart stirring with emotions she couldn’t quite pin down? Liam had been working for her father for the past three years. She had seen him enough times that she shouldn’t be shy around him. And she hadn’t. Until that night, John Jr. was stabbed. Something had happened that night. She didn’t know what it was, but that night she had seen Liam in a different light, as someone more than just her father’s personal assistant and private secretary.

She recalled that night as if it were mere hours ago, not nearly five months past. Distraught and filled with fear that her brother would die, she ended her relationship with Conor Wilson, her boyfriend, who was waiting impatiently to have sex with her. She promised God that she would not return to Conor if He saved John Jr.’s life. She knelt at the altar, close to her parents, and repented for every sin, particularly the times she had taken her clothes off for Conor during video calls.

After a time, she experienced God’s peace and believed that He would not only return her brother, but also bless her with a godly man, like her father, to guide her in His ways. Then she looked up and saw Liam watching her from his seat in the pastors’ row, which was directly behind her father’s. His gaze was intense, as if he could see into her soul and knew every sin she had confessed to the Lord. Though he seemed nonjudgmental, his gaze was

unsettling, as if he perceived her and her unworthiness in a way no one else did. She had not stopped thinking about him since that night. She also no longer viewed him the same way after that.

A few days before she left for university for the first time, her dad took her out for a special dinner date. Just before they left, Liam stopped by the house and told her she looked beautiful. In the past, she would have accepted a compliment from Liam like she would from any of her brothers. However, now she was viewing Liam in a new light, and this recognition made her blush, which only added to her embarrassment. She stuttered her thanks, and fortunately, her father then entered the hall and called Liam away to his home office, much to her relief.

“Enjoying yourself?” Liam asked.

Rebekah nodded, unsure whether she could align her thoughts and words to produce any intelligent sound. She took a sip of her non-alcoholic sparkling grape juice to avoid having to speak.

“I think it’s a beautiful party.” Liam stepped closer to the table and ladled a generous portion of vibrant fruit punch into his glass.

Rebekah shrugged and placed her drink on the table as her hands shook slightly. “I agree, although I’m not thrilled that Aunt Elizabeth’s expecting another boy.”

Liam grinned. “She didn’t seem thrilled either when the gender was revealed.”

Rebekah chuckled as she remembered how disappointed her Aunt Elizabeth looked. She glanced to where Elizabeth and Chris were receiving presents and chatting with a group of people surrounding them. Her eyes caught Elizabeth’s, and their identical blue eyes held for a moment before they smiled fondly at each other and looked away.

“Are you leaving for school tomorrow?” Liam asked, raising his glass to his lips.

“Very early.” She shuddered. “I hate Mondays.”

Liam grinned. “Don’t we all?” He paused as though he was about to say something.

“Rebekah?”

“Yes?”

“Rebekah! There you are! Guess who’s here?”

Rebekah turned her head toward the voice and saw Isla Green approaching.

“See you around, Rebekah.” Liam headed toward a young woman Rebekah often saw at church. She watched him go wistfully, wishing they’d had a chance to talk more.

“What did he want?” Isla asked as she caught up with Rebekah, and the two girls quickly exchanged kisses. “Running errands for your father?”

Isla Green was Rebekah’s childhood friend. For years, the two girls lived in the same neighbourhood and attended the same church and school. Like Rebekah, Isla was a first-year law student at the University of Oxford.

“Don’t be a snob, Isla!”

Isla rolled her eyes. “You should be a snob. You don’t want to end up with an errand boy when you can have Conor Wilson. And here he comes.”

Rebekah turned around just in time to see Conor Wilson approaching them. Twenty-five-year-old Conor Wilson was a six-foot-one Caucasian male. He was a wealthy, professional footballer who played for a well-known English club. Rebekah’s relationship with him lasted over a year before ending the night John Jr. was stabbed. In a text, she informed him that she was recommitting to her faith and ending their relationship. She had not seen him since. He had tried to call and sent texts, but she had ignored them.

“Hi Rebekah.”

Rebekah glanced from Isla to Conor. Isla believed Rebekah was rash and unwise for ending her relationship with Conor. She urged Rebekah to talk to Conor, explaining that he was willing to attend church and even become a Christian if it meant winning Rebekah back.

Rebekah realised that Conor’s attendance at her aunt’s baby shower and gender reveal party was arranged by Isla.

“Hi, Conor,” Rebekah said. “What are you doing here?”

Conor let out a hearty laugh, his eyes dancing with mischief as he scanned the lively scene around him. “This is church, isn’t it? Everyone’s welcome.”

Rebekah shook her head in disbelief. “Church ended hours ago. This is a party for my aunt.”

“Same thing,” he said with a slight shrug, laughing. “It’s a gathering on the church grounds attended by many members of the congregation.”

“I invited him,” Isla said.

“I figured that out already,” Rebekah said to Isla before giving her attention to Conor once again. “What do you want?”

“Ugh!” Isla sounded exasperated. “He wants to talk to you! Quit making a fuss!” She walked away.

John Griffith glanced at his daughter, who was speaking to a young man he didn’t recognise, while he half-listened to Pastor Tom’s words. He disliked how the young man stood too close to Rebekah and how he looked at her. Liam had spoken with Rebekah earlier, and John noticed that he maintained a respectful distance and did not look at her as if she were something to be devoured. But Liam Hall was his mentee, being groomed for the assignment that God had in store for him. He expected nothing less from the young man he had trained for years.

“Just a moment, Tom.” He turned to John Jr., who was standing next to him. “Who’s the guy talking to your sister?”

John Jr. shrugged and frowned, contemplating how much he should share with his dad. He didn’t want to get Rebekah into trouble. Whatever she had done in the past should remain there, especially since she had been working hard on her relationship with the Lord lately.

“Some football player who likes Rebekah,” John Jr. said after a while.

John was about to respond when his phone vibrated softly in the inner pocket of his suit jacket. He smiled apologetically at Tom before pulling out his phone and answering it.

“Yes, this is Pastor John,” he said in response to the caller’s query.

“Pastor! You must come immediately. Something awful has happened!”

“Georgieta?” He frowned, pondering whether it was her. “Have you changed your number again?”

“No, Pastor, I’m using a friend’s phone.” Her voice sounded frantic.

“What’s the matter, Georgieta?”

“It’s Mariatu, Pastor. She exceeded her expected due date by almost two weeks. A cervix sweep was performed two days ago, and last night she called me to say that the baby hadn’t moved for hours, not even after eating, which usually prompts movement. During the church

service this morning, I received a call informing me that an ambulance had taken her to the hospital, so I rushed to her side. The baby died in her womb, and she's being induced to give birth to it. Please come immediately, Pastor. She is very upset, and your presence will make a significant difference."

"What hospital is this?" he asked, and once he got the details, he assured Georgieta he was on his way and ended the call.

As he put the phone away, he looked up at Tom. "Tom, I need you to come with me."

Tom frowned. "Everything okay?"

"Mariatu's been rushed to the hospital. Her baby died in the womb, and she's being induced to deliver it."

Tom raised a brow. "To deliver a dead baby?"

"Yes. I must go to the hospital immediately."

"Of course, I'll come with you," Tom said.

"Can I come, Dad?"

John looked at his son. They had been spending a lot of time together since John Jr.'s near-fatal stabbing, and John Jr. was learning a lot about what he did as the senior pastor of The Vine Church.

"Of course you can."

As John walked toward the exit, he searched for Victoria, who was busy handing out goody bags and giving thank-you smiles to departing guests. Paul and the housekeeper, Lindsay, sat at a table close to her, looking exhausted and as if they would rather be anywhere but there at that moment. He stopped beside her, leaned in, and told her he was going to the hospital to see Mariatu.

Her eyes widened in shock, and her expression radiated a mix of surprise and concern. "Oh my God. John, is she okay?"

"I hope so," was all he said to her. He didn't want to tell her here that Mariatu was in the hospital being induced to give birth to a stillborn baby, especially in case someone overheard him. It wasn't the kind of news one would want to spread during a baby shower. He glanced

over his shoulder at Rebekah, who was with the footballer, before turning to Victoria once again.

“I dislike that young man with Rebekah, and I don’t want him near her.”

“Sure, John.” As he walked away, she turned to Paul. “Paul, will you be a dear?”

Paul let out a frustrated sigh. “What do you want, Mummy?”

“Go tell your sister to come and help me over here.”

“Okay,” he mumbled as he stood up and started walking toward Rebekah.

SAMPLE

## Chapter One

“Hi, honey,” Barry called as he stepped out of the walk-in wardrobe and into the bedroom. “I’m home.”

Mabel spun around in utter disbelief. Barry couldn’t be home, could he? Indeed, he could, and he was. Barry stood before her, leaning against the door frame, hands in his denim pockets. He grinned, pleased that he had surprised her.

“Barry!” she exclaimed, pleasantly surprised to see her husband, who had left them five days ago just as the New Year’s celebrations ended to attend to a business emergency in Singapore. She tossed her purse on the bed and ran into his arms, laughing delightedly as he spun her round the room before setting her down on her feet and kissing her lingeringly on the mouth.

“Babe! You startled me!” As the words left her mouth, a million questions raced through her mind.

When had he returned? How was he already in the house? His casual attire and the open suitcases in his wardrobe suggested he had time to change and start unpacking. Did he arrive while she was out with Stacy and Daisy to pick up Tracy from the baby shower? Was he in the house when they arrived home and stayed downstairs for dinner? She had just come upstairs, leaving the girls to clean up. Why had Sabrina, their new housekeeper, not said anything? She may have been busy preparing the meal and not noticed him enter and come upstairs. But none of that was important. What truly mattered was that Barry was home.

“It’s so good to see you.” She cupped his face in her hands and ran her fingers over his day-old beard. “The girls and I have missed you so much. Why didn’t you tell me you were coming home today? I expected you tomorrow.”

Barry chuckled, pleased at her enthusiasm for seeing him. He was just as happy to be back home with her, back home with the girls. He stood back, holding her at arm’s length as he admired her attire: a wide-bottom *Ankara* pair of trousers from *Ara*, styled with a turtleneck cashmere sweater and black suede pointed-toe stiletto ankle boots. Her long, braided hair was part piled on her head while the rest flowed down her back in a curly wave. She looked beautiful, as always—his African queen.

“I wanted to surprise you. It’s good to hear that I’ve been missed. Hopefully, you missed me a little more than the girls did.” He pulled her closer, his arms circling her waist.

“A lot more than they did.” Mabel giggled and kissed him. “How did you manage to come back today?”

He shrugged. “I finished my meetings early and decided to hop on an earlier flight. I couldn’t stay one more day without seeing you.” He gently nuzzled her neck. “I love your perfume. Looks like you’ve been out partying without me.”

“Yes, I have!” She pulled away from him, struck a sassy pose, and then giggled. “I’ve been out, but not partying. However, there was a party for Pastor John’s sister, Elizabeth. A baby shower and gender reveal party was held at the church.”

Barry frowned. “Pastor John’s sister, Elizabeth,” he repeated and shrugged, trying to sound and act casual. So Elizabeth was pregnant. So what? He wished her and her husband well. “I had no idea she was pregnant.”

“She is.” Mabel picked up her purse from the bed and entered her walk-in wardrobe to remove her shoes. “She must be about five months gone.”

In the middle of the bedroom, Barry stood frozen. No part of him was moving except his heart, which had quickened its pace. *Five months?* Five months before January was what? It was August. It could also be the end of July. He suddenly experienced warmth throughout his body.

“I didn’t realise you two were friends.” He tugged at his zip neck jumper. “It’s kind of warm in here.”

Mabel looked up from unzipping her boots with a frown. “The heating’s not on yet.”

“That’s strange.” He walked towards the radiator and touched it. “Very strange.”

Mabel kicked off her shoes and stepped out of the wardrobe towards him, placing a hand on his forehead. “You’re not coming down with anything, are you?”

“Of course not. I’m strong like a horse.” He grinned. “I had no idea you were friends with Pastor John’s sister. I thought you didn’t have friends at The Vine Church.”

Mabel pulled a face. She occasionally saw Pastor John’s sister from a distance. It was impossible to be unaware of her. She had a front-row seat whenever she attended church and

acted as if she were better than everyone else. Mabel could not imagine being friends with her any more than she could with the high-and-mighty Victoria Griffith, who was now the church's women's leader and made it difficult for women to reach her husband.

"We're not friends. She's just a person I occasionally see at church. And I wasn't invited. I was there to drop Tracy off and collect her."

"Tracy was invited?" Barry couldn't decide whether the better situation was his wife's exclusion from Elizabeth's party due to their lack of friendship or Tracy's inclusion.

"Yes." Mabel put her hands in her pockets and shrugged slender shoulders. "Her son, James David-West, is a new boy at Tracy's school. He joined in September after transferring from a prestigious but non-Christian school. They're in the same class, and Tracy has been helping him catch up on his schoolwork. That's how she received the invitation and how I observed part of the event."

Barry's heart was racing. He felt uneasy about Elizabeth being so close to his family. Lately, the concept of worshipping at The Vine Church made him feel uneasy. He discovered a little late that Elizabeth attended the same church and that Pastor John was her older brother.

Her husband, whom she appeared to have taken back, also attended the same church. Barry tried to avoid them as much as possible, and he never expected their families to mingle since Mabel kept to herself. He had never imagined that their children would meet at school and become friends. The last thing he needed was for the children to learn about his affair with Elizabeth.

He wished Mabel had allowed him to move the family to his home in Bromley after they remarried late last year. Bromley would have been a better and safer choice, as it would have placed them far from Elizabeth and her family. The girls would have attended a different school, and as a family, they would have attended a different church.

The likelihood of having any interactions with Elizabeth and her family would have been low. However, Mabel was adamant about not wanting to move, and he couldn't blame her, especially since she and the girls had just relocated from Manchester the year before.

So, they remained in Hampstead, close to Elizabeth, and attended The Vine Church, pastored by her brother, where she and her husband also worshipped. Now, her son was attending

Tracy's school and was in the same class as his daughter. They were too close for comfort, and the chances of the secret leaking were pretty high this way.

"I see." He forced a smile and hoped Mabel didn't notice his discomfort. "Well, I hope the event went well."

"I think it did." Mabel shrugged. "She looked crestfallen when she realised she was having a boy. I think she desperately wanted a girl. Her husband didn't seem to care one way or another, but she was visibly disappointed."

"I see. So where are the girls?" He desperately needed to change the subject before Mabel noticed his heart was racing faster than usual.

Before Mabel could answer, she heard her youngest, Daisy, scream from the bottom of the stairs. "Tracy and Stacy, Daddy's home!" Without a doubt, she had heard her father's voice from the open bedroom doorway.

Before she or Barry could brace themselves, their trio pounded up the carpeted stairs and into the bedroom, throwing themselves at Barry in a group hug. Mabel barely had time to extricate herself.

"I missed you, Daddy!" Stacy said.

"Me too!" said Tracy.

"I missed you the most!" Daisy said emphatically, and Barry laughed, tenderly touching each girl's face.

"I missed you all very much. I had to come home today, because I couldn't wait another day to see my little girls."

"How was Singapore, Daddy?" Tracy asked, stepping back.

"It was a good trip, but I couldn't wait for it to end so I could be back home."

"Did you bring us some souvenirs, Daddy?" Stacy asked excitedly.

"Yes! You promised!" Daisy reminded him.

"Girls!" Mabel called their attention. "Daddy's just got home. He hasn't even had time to have a meal. Why don't you all go and get ready for bed? You can talk to Daddy in the morning."

“But there’s school tomorrow, and Daddy will be in bed when we leave!” Daisy complained.

“Yes! Stacy moaned. “And he’ll be at the office when we get home!”

“And we’ll likely be in bed when he gets home,” Tracy frowned and chewed her bottom lip.

“Girls!” Mabel snapped at the trio. “Go and prepare for bed!”

“Okay,” they chorused.

The girls looked crestfallen, but resignedly, they moved away from their dad and began to walk towards the bedroom door.

Mabel followed behind and shut the door. When she turned round, Barry was standing close. “I’ve been anticipating this moment every day for the last week.” His lips met hers, and she kissed him with urgency.

Their lovemaking was quick, and a few minutes later, they lay on the bed giggling. The laughter was interrupted by a knock on the door.

“What is it?” Mabel yelled. The girls were set to get on her last nerve.

“We want to say good night to Daddy,” Daisy said.

Barry chuckled as he and Mabel jumped off the bed and quickly straightened their clothes. Once they looked decent, Mabel approached the door and opened it.

“You have five minutes, and then you need to go to bed,” Mabel warned as she opened the door to the trio wearing pyjamas.

“Mum, Sabrina would like to speak with you before she leaves,” Tracy said.

Mabel stepped out of the room to go downstairs, and Stacy shut the door after her.

“Turn the lock so she can’t come back,” Daisy said.

Barry laughed. “Are you locking Mum out?” he asked.

“Yes!” Tracy confirmed. “We want to spend some time with you, Daddy.”

“Uninterrupted time,” Stacy said.

“Okay, then.” Barry sat on the bed, and all the girls sat around him, bombarding him with questions about his trip and telling him what they had been up to while he was away. As they

chatted, Barry went into the walk-in wardrobe, opened his cabin suitcase and got out the Singapore-themed jewellery he had brought back for them.

“Oh, Daddy, this is so beautiful,” Tracy enthused as she tried on her bracelet.

“I’m glad you like it.”

“We like everything you get us, Daddy,” Daisy said.

“Open this door at once!” Mabel called from the other side of the door.

“Oops! Mum’s back. Time to go to bed,” Stacy said.

“Do I get goodnight hugs and kisses first?” Barry asked.

“Of course, Daddy,” Daisy said.

The girls took turns hugging and kissing their dad goodnight. They opened the door to a scowling Mabel and sprinted away, giggling before she could speak.

“I can’t believe they shut me out,” Mabel complained as she stepped into the room and shut the door behind her.

“I’m sorry. They just wanted to spend some time with me.” Barry embraced her and kissed her face until she smiled once more. “You’ve got me for the whole night.”

“Yes, I do.” She laughed and pulled away as he tried to kiss her. “I need to go down to the gym and get my exercise in for the day.

“I think I’ll join you,” he said. “I haven’t had a chance to hit the gym since I left for Singapore. Back-to-back meetings left me no time.”

She put a hand to his midriff. “No wonder you’re already getting soft in the middle.”

“Come on,” he said, removing his jumper and entering the walk-in wardrobe to check his appearance in the full-length mirror. “I realise it’s bad. Surely, it’s not that bad.”

“If that helps you sleep better at night,” Mabel giggled. “Have you had dinner?”

“Are you being serious right now?” he asked. “You make fun of my belly and in the same breath ask me if I want to eat?”

She rolled her eyes. “Okay. Let’s hit the gym.”

They changed into their gym clothes and went downstairs to the gym located in the basement. After an hour of motivating and pushing each other to the limit, they were sweating and laughing, even though exhausted.

“Workouts with you are certainly the best,” Mabel said, wrapping her arms around him and kissing him. “Doing life with you is great.”

“What else do we do well together?” he asked.

“Not saying.” She playfully shoved him before running out of the gym, with Barry chasing after her up the steps.

They showered, made love again, and went down to the kitchen for a light snack before preparing for bed. Mabel stayed up reading a fashion magazine while Barry read a sci-fi novel. She soon became exhausted and put the magazine aside, kissed him, and settled into bed. In no time, she was fast asleep.

Barry stayed awake. He set the book aside, got up, put on his robe, and stepped out through the glass double doors onto the terrace outside the master bedroom. He sank into one of the wicker chairs, ignoring the January cold as he allowed his mind, for the first time that evening, to drift unhindered to what Mabel had said concerning Elizabeth.

Elizabeth was pregnant. About five months pregnant, Mabel had said. She was also expecting a boy. A son. His heart raced. Could it be what he was thinking? He had been with Elizabeth in the summer of the previous year until he broke off their affair to return to Mabel. That decision was one that he did not regret.

His life alongside Mabel was a delightful tapestry of joy and contentment, woven with moments of laughter and shared dreams. With each passing day, he loved her and the girls more than he thought possible. He glanced over to the bed where she lay fast asleep, entangled in the sheets. He would do anything for her. But how did he deal with this revelation about Elizabeth’s pregnancy?

If his thinking were correct, surely Elizabeth would have contacted him? Unless she had no intention of doing so. Unless she wanted everyone to believe the baby growing in her womb was her husband’s. Did she reunite with her husband solely to use him as a cover for the child’s paternity? He thought their reconciliation had been quick. The possibility of Elizabeth sleeping with both of them always existed. Should he dare to investigate more? Perhaps it

was better to leave well enough alone? For Mabel and the girls, it was probably best to do that.

Lost in the darkness, he sat for an unknown amount of time before a sound from the bedroom broke the silence.

“Babe?”

He turned his head to see Mabel awake, propped on one elbow, staring at him. They never discussed it, but each time he left their bed, she awoke. Both understood the reason. A part of her still did not believe that he wouldn’t get up and leave in the middle of the night as he had once done two years ago.

He silently muttered a curse when he thought of how callous he had been and what Mabel had endured because of that. He rose and walked back into the bedroom, shutting the glass doors behind him. As he stripped off his robe and climbed into bed with her, he pulled her into his arms and kissed her forehead.

“I’m right here,” he whispered. “Always.”

## Chapter Two

John woke with a start. As he turned his head, he caught sight of Victoria, who was wide awake and looking at him with a worried expression. He smiled at her to reassure her.

“It was just a bad dream,” he said. “Go back to sleep.”

“It was more than a bad dream, John. You were restless and muttering unintelligibly,” Victoria told him, propping up on an elbow. “What’s the matter? Tell me.”

He let out a sigh, then turned onto his side to face her completely. “I had a dream about Mia.”

“Mia?” Victoria frowned. The name meant nothing to her.

John realised that while she knew Pastor Mark Evans, his good friend who had committed suicide more than a year ago, she did not know who Mia was or how Mia was connected to Mark’s death and the scandal that rocked his church.

“Mia was a member of Mark Evan’s church.”

There was sadness in Victoria’s eyes as Mark’s name was mentioned. “I remember Mark.”

John nodded. “Mia joined his church from the LGBT community. She testified that she had encountered Jesus, given up that lifestyle, and was born again. I told Mark then it was important that she go through deliverance, but Mark thought differently. The day before his death, he called me to say a scandal was brewing. Mia had been involved sexually with his assistant pastor, and was openly in a lesbian relationship with the choir leader’s wife, who also happened to be Mark’s wife, Christine’s, sister-in-law. He suspected Mia might have slept with Christine, possibly in a threesome with Mark’s assistant pastor. He also said Christine was pregnant by his assistant pastor, and they were leaving to start their church. The following day, he died from a drug overdose.”

“John.” Victoria’s hand came over her mouth. “This is terrible. You never told me any of this at the time. My only understanding was that poor Mark had passed away suddenly.”

John exhaled as he moved to sit up in bed. He had never really involved his wife fully in his life before the night that John Jr. was attacked. “I am aware.”

Victoria sat next to him and gently touched his face. “You carried too much weight alone for many years, John. I’m certain God helped you. But I am your wife, and I’m here to carry the

weight with you, and you shouldn't have to carry it alone. You can talk to me, John. I would never discuss anything we shared with anyone. I know how you feel about gossip."

"It's not that I don't trust you." John ran his fingers through his hair. "At first, I worried that you might let things slip in your discussions with others, and later, I guess I just got used to not telling you." He took her hand and kissed it. "But that's changing."

"So I see." She caressed his face lovingly. "Are you worried about seeing this Mia woman in your dream?"

He nodded. "I can't help but think God is warning me about a possible scandal. Perhaps a scandal similar to that in Mark's church."

"What?" Victoria's eyes widened in astonishment. "Where would a scandal of that magnitude come from? Or any scandal at all?"

John did not answer right away. He pushed the duvet back, climbed out of bed, and paced. His mind flashed back to the previous year and the times he feared a scandal. Mabel had become too close to him and kissed him in his home office while Victoria and the kids were away on holiday in America. But Mabel couldn't be a source of scandal. She had reunited with her husband, and they were both happy. He saw them often in church, even though Mabel didn't come around him as she had done when her husband had abandoned her and the girls. That was understandable, and he welcomed the distance.

His mind shifted to Mariatu and Pastor Ben. He had also feared that Mariatu's pregnancy by Pastor Ben would cause a scandal in the church, but it hadn't. Both Pastor Ben and Mariatu had been suspended from their duties in church. Once Pastor Ben returned, he was sent to the new church that had started in Manchester. Mariatu had chosen not to return to her role as assistant worship leader as she was visibly pregnant and had become an online worshipper.

He had seen her yesterday. Her dead baby had been delivered and buried, and while she was distraught, things seemed to be looking up for her, as there had been an eligible bachelor at the hospital who was besotted with her. John knew that if Mariatu gave the man Georgieta said was Mariatu's old schoolmate half a chance, he would hear wedding bells soon. He didn't see Mariatu causing a scandal.

*Where would the scandal come from?*

"John," Victoria called out to him gently from the bed. "Would you like us to pray?"

John snapped out of his reverie and turned to look at his wife. He smiled. "Yes. We need to pray."

Victoria got out of bed. In the middle of their sizable, dimly lit bedroom, they went on their knees, joining their hands together. They began with worship and ended with prayer. An hour later, as they got off their knees and climbed back into the bed, John turned to look at her.

"I have a confession to make. I should have told you this before now, but with John Jr.'s near-death experience, and our marriage trying to make a comeback, it just didn't seem like the time. But I must tell you. I don't want any secrets between us."

Victoria's heart skipped a beat. "What is it, John?"

John took her small hands in his large ones. "I love you very much. You know that, right?"

"John, just tell me what it is!" Victoria sounded impatient. "Is it that Mabel woman from church? Did you sleep with her? Are you worried it might cause a scandal?"

John's face was pale, and his eyes wide, as he sat frozen in shock, unable to believe what he had just heard. "No! I wouldn't do that to you or Jesus. No. I didn't sleep with her. But it was something I shouldn't have done, anyway. I let her get close enough to me to kiss me."

Victoria's eyes narrowed to razor-thin slits, sharp enough to pierce through the tension in the air. "She kissed you? Or you kissed her? Or you kissed each other?"

*Was it a good idea to have brought this up so early on a Monday morning?* John wondered.

"Her lips brushed mine. It was swift and barely a brush. It happened before I even realised it would happen."

"A brush of the lips?" Victoria shifted her position to sit at the foot of the bed, allowing her back to rest straight against the footboard while she looked at John. "She brushed her lips against yours or stuck her tongue in your mouth? Don't lie to me, John, and look at me when you speak."

John grabbed at a fistful of hair in quiet exasperation as he raised his head and met her gaze. "Come on, Victoria, have I ever lied to you?"

"By omission, yes! You should have told me about this when it happened, and each day you didn't tell me, you lied to me."

“I am sorry.” He leaned forward and gently rubbed one of her small feet. “But apart from this, have I ever lied to you?”

“Not that I remember right now.”

“My reputation where you’re concerned is much worse than I thought.” John rubbed his face wearily. “Forgive me. But I’m not lying when I say it was a slight brush of the lips that happened swiftly.”

“Why did it happen?” Victoria asked, pulling her feet out of his reach. “You said you let her get close. Too close if you ask me. Why? Others have tried to get close before, but not enough to brush their lips against yours. Why her? Do you have feelings for her?”

“No. I don’t. I don’t have feelings for any other woman. I love you. You’re the only woman I want. Mabel had become quite close to me, and I foolishly let my guard down. It’s nothing more than that, Victoria. I promise you. She wanted more, or at least thought she did. She was vulnerable at the time. But I told her I love my wife and Jesus, and His love constrains me.”

Victoria watched him for a while as she tried to decide whether she believed him or not. She decided she did. John was a good man, but unfortunately, not very schooled in the ways of women. She had watched as he carried on with that dreadful Mabel, utterly oblivious to the fact that the woman wanted more than a spiritual mentor and guide.

“I never liked that woman hanging around you,” she said after a while. “I knew she was trouble. She never could hide the fact that she wanted you. She was always too bold in the way she showed her desire for you. I wanted to warn you several times, but you wouldn’t have listened to me. You would have said I didn’t want you helping her. You need to set solid boundaries as you interact with women in the church, John.”

“Well, I don’t interact with them much these days, do I? You’re the women’s leader now, and you’re doing a fine job looking after the women.”

“Because I don’t want them throwing themselves at my husband in the guise of seeking spiritual support.”

“Apart from the ones in the hospital who are too sick to kiss your husband.”

“Yes. Apart from those. A woman in the hospital is too sick to pursue my husband.”

John chuckled and reached out to pull her onto his lap. "I'm sorry it happened. And I'm sorry I didn't listen in the past. That's not a mistake that will happen again."

"I should certainly hope so."

"It won't." He tightened his hold on her. "I want to be kissed by only one woman."

"I will get you a T-shirt with those exact words."

"I've got a better plan. How about a T-shirt that says, Victoria's husband, to be kissed only by Victoria? I'll wear it forever." He pulled her head closer to his and kissed her.

Victoria quickly forgot Mabel as they made love and then prepared for the day. She basked in her husband's love as she left home to drive the kids to school. John Jr. and Paul had a short drive, but Rebekah's journey back to Oxford was much longer. Victoria looked forward to the trip, as it usually gave them time to chat. However, this morning, something seemed off as Rebekah sat quietly in the front passenger seat, chewing her bottom lip and staring out the window.

"You're unusually quiet this morning, missy." Victoria took her eyes off the motorway for a fraction of a second to look at her daughter.

Rebekah was usually very chatty when she drove her to school. They discussed everything from school to friends, boys to fashion, and even God. Rebekah always had many questions about God and what He thought about some of her friends and their actions while in school. But this morning was different. At first, she thought Rebekah was overwhelmed with sadness, having bade her dad and brothers farewell this morning. Rebekah always found it hard to say goodbye when it was time to leave for school.

She still wasn't used to being away from her family, even though she came home every chance she got. And with John now giving more time and attention to the family, Rebekah was very quickly becoming a daddy's girl, which made the goodbyes a lot harder. But she was usually able to overcome the sadness within a few minutes of leaving the house and engage in girly chats with Victoria.

"I'm just worried about school and the workload ahead of me this new semester. Plus, my results for last semester are out in a few days." Rebekah turned her gaze away so her mother wouldn't notice her eyes.

She had not been entirely honest. She worried about school, but more about her past mistakes ruining her future. Rebekah cast her mind back to the text exchanges with Conor yesterday after the baby shower. The messages indicated he had taken photos of her naked while she foolishly removed her clothes for him. She was no longer that person, and the idea that someone had pictures of her nude on his phone worried her.

“I’m sure you’ll do well, Rebekah. You’ve always been a bright student, and you worked very hard.”

“Thank you for saying so, Mum,” Rebekah mumbled.

“I’ve got something to cheer you up,” Victoria said. “I spoke to your Aunt Anna last night. Sarah is getting married this summer and has decided to make you her maid of honour, as you requested when you were little.”

“Wow!” Rebekah shifted her attention from the cars passing by and looked at her mother. “Sarah’s getting married in the summer?”

Victoria beamed and nodded, glancing briefly at her daughter.

“Wow!” Rebekah exclaimed again. “That is so cool. She really wants me to be her maid of honour?”

“Yes, she does. Aunt Anna said so.” Victoria’s smile widened. “You did ask her.”

“Yeah, when I was five years old!” Rebekah said. “How would I think she would honour a five-year-old’s request?”

“Well, you two have always been close, and you’re the closest thing to a younger sister that she has. Aunt Anna says she will call you in a few days.”

“That’s great!” Rebekah laughed. “I can’t wait. I’ll need to go out to her like a month before the wedding. There will be plenty to do, from selecting dresses to arranging flowers while planning the perfect bridal shower. Oh my!!”

Victoria smiled brightly, her green eyes sparkling as she noticed the change in Rebekah’s mood. “Well, speak to her before you start planning anything. You don’t know what she wants to do and how she expects you to perform your role before, during, and after the ceremony.”

“Don’t mind me, I’m so excited, I was running ahead of myself.” Rebekah grinned. “Thank you for sharing this news with me, Mum. It’s made my day.”

“You’re welcome. And while we’re on the topic of weddings, I didn’t get a chance to have a chat with you last night, but your dad didn’t like the young man you were speaking to at the baby shower.” She let the words sink in before continuing. “Is he anyone important?”

Rebekah turned to her mother, frowning slightly. “He’s simply an acquaintance from the neighbourhood. He’s no one important. Isla invited him to the baby shower.”

“Good.” Victoria briefly took her eyes off the road to glance at Rebekah. “You’re in university now, and a lot of women tend to meet their husbands while in university. We’re not trying to control you, but as your parents, God expects us to guide you in making the right choice.”

“I understand this, Mum, and don’t worry, I’m not about to marry the man I was talking to yesterday,” she teased, and Victoria laughed.

Rebekah looked out the window, and as she thought of Sarah getting married and the possibility of meeting a man whom she would one day marry, she saw not the face of Conor Wilson but that of Liam Hall. She frowned. What if she was wrong about Liam? Suppose she was reading the signs wrong? He hadn’t done anything out of the ordinary to suggest he might want to date her. She was probably imagining things. Additionally, she had a bigger problem: removing her nude pictures from Conor’s phone without having to sleep with him.

### Chapter Three

As Chris stood in front of the expansive mirror in the large dressing room, he was lost in thought. The soft light illuminated his face as he meticulously knotted his tie, each twist and pull reflecting the weight of anticipation in his mind. He cast a fleeting glance towards Elizabeth, who lay peacefully in the bed, a serene figure framed by the soft light of the bedroom beyond.

A pang of unease came over him as he prepared to leave her, knowing she was just four months away from birthing their baby. The thought of being apart during such a pivotal time weighed heavily on his heart, but he was needed in Africa. He had been home in the UK since Christmas and was scheduled to return to Africa the day after New Year's, but had remained a few days longer to participate in the baby shower and gender reveal party yesterday.

His new business, Princewill Consortium, which emerged following the downfall of the David-West company, was currently in a critical phase of its operations, having completed the first phase of its initial residential development project. It was now geared to begin phase two. Business had been good so far, with over five hundred homes built and sold. The company was now receiving payment upfront for the more than five hundred houses earmarked for the second phase.

They needed to acquire more land for the development of the third phase, so he had to be available for negotiations. The resurgence of his business exceeded all of his expectations, proving to be an incredible success story, but did that truly signify he had been completely freed from his demons? Far from it. Haunted by the memories, he often found himself trapped in nightmares, reliving the haunting collapse of David-West.

The frequency of the nightmares had steadily increased, likely because he found himself back in the same line of work, visiting sites, seeing artisans who reminded him so much of those who had lost their lives in the crash of the David-West Tower. His friend Alabo. He squeezed his eyes shut for a heartbeat, drawing in a deep, steadying breath until a wave of calm washed over him. Though grateful to God for the investors who believed in him and invested in his new business, he found it difficult to completely forget those who had died because of him. Because of his greed.

He frequently found himself questioning whether breathing new life into the dead David-West company had been a bold move or a costly error, one that would steal his peace and sanity. Sure, he had changed the name of the company, but the operations remained the same, still carried out in Africa, and he was still at the helm.

At times, he thought he would have been better off purchasing old, dilapidated houses in London, renovating them, and reselling them for a modest profit. He had successfully done this for a few years using a sole proprietorship business, Chris West. At the time, the fear of returning to real estate development held him back, making him play it safe.

Chris West had not paid him the substantial salary and benefits he earned as CEO of David-West. However, working with his hands on remodelling rundown houses had been cathartic, offering a much-needed respite from the haunting nightmares that plagued him immediately after the destruction of the David-West Tower. Nightmares that had crept back and enveloped him once more with the birth of his new company. Interestingly, he never experienced nightmares at home with his family. They only seemed to occur when he was back in Africa.

He cast a sideways glance into the mirror, and once again, his eyes fell on Elizabeth's figure stretched out on the bed. He had a powerful impulse to tell her his secret, to reveal the matters that weighed on him. She could never quite understand his choice to remain inconspicuous for so long, avoiding the opportunity to rebuild his business and regain his past achievements. If she had known the truth, perhaps she would not have pushed him so hard.

*And then what, Chris?* he asked, frowning at his reflection in the mirror. *She would have let you keep your little business? Accepted a reduced financial status? Stop pitying yourself, Chris, and be brave!*

Telling Elizabeth about his changes to the building plan for David-West Tower was not as straightforward as he sometimes tried to convince himself it was. If he opened up to her about David-West, he would inevitably have to reveal the painful truth about Alabo's wife and daughters as well. His affair with a mother and her daughters. Could he do that? Could he reveal that dark side of himself? Was he ready to reveal that much? Would she ever look at him the same again?

With unsteady hands, he smoothed down the collar of his crisp white shirt before turning away from the mirror. As he stepped into the softly lit bedroom, he couldn't help but adjust his gleaming gold cufflinks, each click of metal a reminder of the elegance he embodied. As

he slowly made his way toward the inviting expanse of the grand bed, its creased silk black sheets beckoning him like a siren's call, he noticed Elizabeth stir softly.

"Good morning, dearest husband."

Lying on her back, hands cradling her baby bump, Elizabeth drank him in as he stood before her in his Italian-tailored pants, crisp white shirt, silk tie, and handmade shoes. He looked every bit like the successful business executive he had been until a few years ago when he lost everything. The successful man she'd fallen for was back in his power suits, earning a high income once again.

It was all as she'd demanded, but as he stood before her, ready to leave again on one of his trips, she wondered if the money and success were enough. His constant travelling was beginning to bother her in a way it had never done before. He was in London for a month at most at any given time before going away.

The old Elizabeth had wanted that, but now she wondered if perhaps she should have encouraged him to scale his small business. If he had, he would have been home with her more often, and she was starting to think that was more important to her than the expensive gifts he'd bought her at Christmas. A luxury sports car and diamonds were great, but what was better, she thought, was waking up each day to her man at her side, especially while she was pregnant.

Chris smiled, making her wonder if he had just read her last thought. He sat on the edge of the bed, leaning in to capture her lips in a fleeting, yet electric kiss.

"Good morning, dearest wife."

She reached out to straighten his tie. "Are you all set for your trip?"

Holding her gaze, he nodded and placed both hands over her baby bump. "I'm going to miss you." He bent and kissed her belly. "And you, my son."

"Oh, do you have to ruin the moment by reminding me we're having another boy?" Elizabeth grumbled and moved away from him. "I want a daughter. There are already too many men in this house. I'm outnumbered."

"Don't worry, the next one will be a girl," Chris teased and chuckled when Elizabeth's eyes flew wide open.

This baby was unplanned; the result of make-up sex in which they had both thrown caution to the wind and not used protection. While they were pleased because the baby had been conceived through an expression of their love for each other, and that night had marked the turnaround in their marriage, they had no desire to have any more babies.

“That’s a joke, right?” Elizabeth eyed him warily as he reached for her.

Chris laughed. “Of course, it is.” He pulled her closer and kissed her again. “No more babies after this one.”

“Good.” With a wide yawn and a satisfying stretch, she shook off the remnants of sleep, her body arching gracefully. “As much as I am thrilled about this baby, I don’t want to do this again.”

With a wide grin lighting up his face, Chris stood up and made his way back to the dressing room, his steps filled with a newfound excitement. “Since we’re expecting another son, we should begin to consider a name for him.”

“I’m not excited about picking out another perfect male name.” Elizabeth fluffed the pillows around her, creating a cosy fortress of comfort. “I already had some pretty girl names.”

“Well, you can’t use them, so we need to work together to come up with a name for the little man before he arrives and wonders what we were doing nine whole months.” Chris reached for a hairbrush as he spoke.

“Okay.” Elizabeth sounded unperturbed. “We can do it when you return.”

Chris turned from the mirror to observe her. “How did I predict your response?” he asked.

Elizabeth giggled. “And don’t forget we also need to sort through all those presents from the baby shower when you’re back.”

“I shall await the experience with bated breath.” Chris sounded far from excited, and Elizabeth grinned.

They had received more presents than they could possibly use. Most of it had come from members of The Vine Church. She realised that being the senior pastor’s sister and having him throw her a party on church grounds meant that even church members who weren’t invited to the party sent gifts, anyway.

“I have never seen so many gifts in one baby shower.”

“Too much, if you ask me.” Chris ran the soft brush through his low-cut skin fade hairstyle. “Most of it will have to go to charity. But we’ll sort through it when I’m back and decide what to keep and release.”

Elizabeth propped up on an elbow and stifled a yawn. “An entire month without you. How will I survive?”

Chris glanced at her through the mirror, his expression suddenly serious. “I’ll only be a phone call away, and you can request my return at any time. And I’ll speak to James about being more responsible, so you should be fine.”

“And I have Desree.” Elizabeth reminded him of the new live-in housekeeper.

Desree, a woman of mixed ethnicity in her fifties, was truly a Godsend at this time, as she handled everything from maintaining the house to managing tradesmen, grocery shopping, overseeing the cleaning company that came twice a week, and occasionally assisting with the school run. Elizabeth had no idea how she would have survived without her help.

“And you have Desree,” Chris concurred as he put away his hairbrush and reached for a gold tie clip.

Elizabeth longed to say it was still going to be so hard not to see him for an entire month, but she knew Chris found it hard to leave his family each time, and she didn’t want to make it harder for him. Especially as he was doing exactly as she had asked. She let out a long, tired breath.

“I should probably get up and start preparing to drive the boys to school.”

Chris looked at his Patek Philippe watch and glanced in the mirror as he slipped on the tie clip. “It’s still early,” he told her. “Also, why don’t you let Desree take them? Aren’t you exhausted after yesterday?”

“I am exhausted. But I’m spending the morning with Anita at her new office, where she’s hosting an open house to launch her new law firm officially.”

A wistful sigh escaped Elizabeth’s lips as she reflected on the previous year’s transformations. She and her friend Anita had quit the law firm where they had worked for many years and become partners. Their reasons were different; Anita had been implicated when her partner and the father of her two children murdered a man and fled the country. Her partner had been arrested abroad and extradited to the UK, and she had been discharged and

acquitted. After the court drama and another round of drama with the press, she decided to start anew, and part of that meant leaving the law firm to go solo.

Elizabeth quit because she became pregnant and decided she wanted to spend time with her family and be a better wife and mother. She had taken an extended leave of absence, but with each passing day, she believed that she wouldn't be returning to the law firm. She had no idea what to do outside of conveyancing, but she didn't let that bother her.

There was time to consider her options. She planned to return to work full-time when her baby turned five and started school. Perhaps she should speak to Chris about working with him to scale his little business. They could collaborate: she would manage the house purchases and sales after renovations, while he would focus on the remodelling. In this way, she would always have him by her side.

"It looks like you have your day packed."

Chris's voice, dripping with irritation, cut through her thoughts like a knife. He didn't like it when she filled her day with too many activities, especially as her due date approached.

Elizabeth grinned. She was pushing his buttons, but she couldn't resist. "Indeed, I do."

"Okay." He turned away from the mirror to look at her. "Just don't overdo it and promise me you'll look after yourself and our little soldier."

She blew him a kiss flirtatiously. "I promise."

Chris averted his gaze as his phone, resting on top of the dresser, vibrated. "That has to be my cab," he told her. "I'll look in on the boys quickly."

As he walked across the hall to Andrew's room, he paused and looked at the door next to Andrew's. It was the guest bedroom suite and had been his bedroom when Elizabeth had asked him to leave the marital bed. He had lain awake wondering if his marriage would ever be okay again. Then Elizabeth went one step further and asked him to move out. So much had changed since the night she had come to his old flat to ask about his relationship with Ava. They'd made love like two people who'd just fallen in love with each other over again. It was the same night John Jr. was stabbed, and they assembled in church to pray.

He never returned to his flat, except to pack his things and move back home. And then they found out Elizabeth was pregnant, and their joy couldn't have been fuller. He still had things he had to share with her about his past, but he was being careful not to spoil their

relationship. They were so happy right now. Further along the hall was the baby's nursery, where they had placed some of the gifts from last night. The others were in the basement. The nursery door was open, and the room beyond signalled that a baby was expected. It also symbolised the rebirth of his marriage with Elizabeth.

"Please help me to make this last, Lord," he muttered a prayer as he entered Andrew's bedroom.

"Daddy?" Andrew yawned and stretched before wrapping the themed duvet around himself more snugly.

"Hey, son." Chris sat by the edge of the bed and dropped a kiss on his younger son's forehead. "Did you sleep well?"

"Can't say," Andrew mumbled. "I'm still sleeping."

Chris laughed and looked at his watch. "Well, you've still got an hour, and then you need to wake up and get ready for school."

Andrew nodded and yawned again, shutting his eyes. "Are you leaving now?"

"Yes, I am."

"Love you, Dad."

"I love you, too." Chris kissed his head again. "I'll talk to you on the phone every day I'm away."

"Promise?" Andrew asked and opened his eyes to look at his dad.

Chris smiled. "Promise." He touched Andrew's cheek fondly as he stood to his feet and walked out of the room, shutting the door gently behind him.

James was already up and at his reading desk. He liked to study early before going to school, as he was preparing to write his A-level exams the following year. Chris didn't enter but stood at the door.

"You're leaving now?" James asked.

"Good morning to you, too, James David-West." Chris leaned against the door frame, crossing arms and legs.

James laughed at the subtle correction. "Good morning, Dad. Are you leaving now?"

“Yes, buddy.”

He noticed the look of sadness in James’ eyes. His departures were never easy, even though he’d been doing this for a few months.

“You okay?” Chris asked.

James nodded and looked away.

“You’re going to man up around in my absence, aren’t you, buddy?” Chris asked.

James nodded.

“I can count on you to look after Mum, Andrew, and the baby?”

“Yes, Dad.”

“Good.” Chris smiled. “Come over and give me a hug.”

James pushed himself up and walked into his father’s arms. The hug was over in less than a minute, and Chris ruffled the hair of his son, who was already as tall as he was.

“Be good.”

“Sure, Dad.”

Chris walked away, hurrying across the hall to the master bedroom where Elizabeth was still lying in bed.

Elizabeth watched Chris slip on his suit jacket. As he did, he approached her and kissed her again.

“Take care. I’ll call you when I land.”

## Chapter Four

*Three weeks later....*

Elizabeth perched on her seat, her spine perfectly aligned, a picture of poised anticipation. The elegant coffeehouse buzzed around her, the rich aroma of freshly brewed coffee mingling with the soft hum of conversation, yet she couldn't shake the tension coiling in her stomach. Her gaze flitted nervously from the beautifully crafted lattes to the delicate pastries on display.

She and Barry had often visited this coffeehouse before and during their affair, mainly because of the proximity to her law firm. For that same reason, it was frequented by many of her colleagues, who used it as a meeting spot to discuss business with clients and potential clients.

As she sat there, an uneasy feeling gnawed at her. The discomfort amplified as she anticipated her meeting with Barry, making the minutes stretch out in tension. With a soft sigh, she cradled the warm cup in her hands, the fragrant steam curling upward. She brought it to her lips, savouring the soothing taste of the herbal tea as she took a delicate sip, feeling the warmth spread through her. Her thoughts drifted back to the whirlwind of events that had brought her to this moment.

The day Chris left for Lagos, she had gone to spend time with Anita after dropping the boys off at school. They spent the morning setting up Anita's office and speaking with potential clients who walked in to enquire about her services as a criminal defence lawyer. Around midday, they settled down for some tea and sandwiches, and as they ate, Elizabeth's phone beeped. It was a text message. She thought it might be Chris, texting to say he had landed, although even before she opened the message, she realised it was still too early for Chris to have landed in Lagos.

She frowned as she opened the message and read. It was from Barry. She had never blocked or deleted his number because of the business side of their relationship.

*Hello Elizabeth. This is Barry. We need to talk. The earlier the better. Please provide me with a day, time, and place.*

Her frown deepened.

“Is everything okay?” Anita asked.

Elizabeth raised her head and smiled at her. “It’s Barry wanting to meet up to talk.”

She had no secrets from Anita, as they had been best friends since their university days. Anita knew about Barry, when he became a client, when he moved to becoming much more, and Anita was very much aware that the relationship was over.

Anita frowned. “What about?”

Anita knew Elizabeth was back together with Chris and that she was currently too in love with her husband to consider cheating on him.

Elizabeth shrugged. “Possibly something to do with his business. He can go to the office and get the help he needs.”

As she spoke to Anita, she typed a response to Barry.

*I apologise, but I am currently on an extended leave of absence from the office. If this relates to any conveyancing I did for you, please contact the office, and any of my colleagues will be willing to help.*

As she put the phone down and took a bite of her sandwich, the phone buzzed again.

“Very persistent,” Anita said.

Elizabeth rolled her eyes as she picked up her phone and read his message.

*The matter is of a personal nature. I would like to meet with you in person to discuss this matter ASAP.*

Elizabeth typed back a quick response.

*We have no personal relationship, and as such, no personal matters to discuss. You are in my past, and I’d like to leave you there.*

As she sipped her tea, her phone beeped. Anita rolled her eyes, and Elizabeth grinned. She picked up the phone and read the message.

*I would have it no other way. My wife and I share a deep love, and I have no plans to cheat on her with you or anyone else.*

*Then what could he possibly want?* she wondered.

When she asked, he texted back to say it was not a matter for the telephone and he had to see her in person.

At first, she had ignored him but a few days later, there had been more text messages and the more he texted, the more she had a nagging feeling that whatever it was would not go away by ignoring it, especially when he added in one of those messages that it was best for both their future happiness that the business of the past be dealt with. She agreed to meet him at the coffeehouse, where they had previously discussed business and could address any personal matters that still lingered unresolved.

She cast a quick glance around the cafe, her heart racing. With a warm smile lighting up her face, she waved enthusiastically to the familiar faces that surrounded her, feeling a mix of excitement and anxiety. Just then, her eyes caught a glimpse of Barry striding in. He exuded an air of confidence in his impeccably tailored three-piece business suit, each detail perfectly in place. As he approached her, his warm smile lit up his face, making him all the more captivating. Once, Elizabeth had fallen for his charm, but not again. Never again. Beneath the handsome exterior lay a cold-hearted monster who cared for no one and nothing but himself.

As Barry reached Elizabeth's table, he gracefully pulled out a chair, slid into it, and made himself comfortable, ready for the conversation ahead. He turned his gaze towards Elizabeth, his eyes reflecting a mix of curiosity and admiration. Although she remained seated, it was easy to see the baby bump through her red cable knit jumper dress, which she styled with black suede knee-length boots.

It was the first time he had seen her this close up since the day he broke off their relationship. It seemed her marriage had only improved from that point, going by the diamond eternity ring she wore with her wedding band on her left hand.

She was also very pregnant, and while it wasn't a bad thing to be expecting a baby with her husband, the timing of her pregnancy coincided with the last time they'd been together. He had attempted to let the sleeping dog lie, but it had been impossible to do so. If his son was nested in Elizabeth's womb, there was no way he was going to sit back and watch her pass him off as another man's.

"You look beautiful, Elizabeth. Pregnancy suits you," he said.

Elizabeth put on a smile, but it faltered, never quite reaching her eyes. The subtle tension in her expression spoke volumes about the unease churning within her.

*What is this all about?* she wondered.

Why had Barry called for this meeting? She was back with Chris now, and they were happy. She wanted nothing from her past, especially her past affair with Barry, to ruin that. He had refused to talk over the phone, insisting that it was a matter that needed to be discussed in person. Well, she was impatient to learn what he would communicate. She hoped he would get to the point. Her nerves couldn't stand the suspense much longer.

Barry turned and signalled the waiter, who arrived immediately. He ordered a coffee, but Elizabeth declined another herbal tea.

"Thank you, Barry, for the compliment," she said once the waiter was out of earshot. "My husband says the same thing every chance he gets." She sipped her tea.

Barry nodded, his demeanour shifting as a weighty seriousness settled over his features, capturing the gravity of the moment.

"I understand you're curious about the reason for this meeting, and I won't prolong the suspense. I'll go straight to the point. I believe the baby you're carrying is mine, and you're back with your husband to hide that fact."

Elizabeth's eyes widened in shock. She was grateful she was sitting down; otherwise, she might have fallen. Was the man insane? How did he arrive at such a preposterous conclusion? She sensed the baby stir in her womb and gripped the edge of the table, trying to steady herself.

"Are you insane?"

Barry leaned back in his seat and studied her, trying to decipher whether she was putting on an act. Just then, the waiter glided over, a warm smile on his face. With a careful hand, he set down the steaming cup of coffee on the table and made his exit.

"I'm not insane," Barry said as he picked up his cup and sipped his drink. He set the cup down slowly, a sly grin spreading across his face as he looked at her. "But you are insane if you think I'll stand idly by and let you pass my son off as someone else's."

Elizabeth gasped. “This entire conversation is becoming more preposterous by the second. What are you saying, Barry?”

Barry leaned in closer, scanning the room with furtive glances to make sure no one was eavesdropping. The atmosphere was electric as he lowered his voice, so it was barely above a whisper.

“The specifics of your reunion with your husband and the point at which you resumed your relationship remain unclear to me. But about six months ago, during our trip to Dubai, we had an accident. The condom broke. I said nothing at the time, as I believed your chances of conceiving were low.” He leaned back in his seat and lifted his coffee cup to his lips.

Elizabeth turned instantly pale, and as Barry sipped his coffee, she remained in a trance. What did Barry mean when he said the condom broke? If that was true, had she conceived without knowing it? Was it possible that she had slept with Chris while already pregnant by Barry, and that the child in her womb was indeed Barry’s? When she discovered she was pregnant, she gave the doctor the date she had resumed sexual activities with Chris, which had been memorable because of John Jr.’s stabbing. She concluded the pregnancy was Chris’s, as they’d used no protection.

So far, the doctor had said nothing to suggest that she may have become pregnant three weeks earlier. But what if she had? She found the thought of being pregnant by Barry revolting. If it was Barry’s and not Chris’s, where did that leave her? What would become of her life? What would become of her marriage to Chris, which had been growing strong the last five months? What would become of her sons and her relationship with them?

She massaged her temple thoughtfully, trying to ease the tension that had settled there like a heavy fog. “Oh God, please help me.”

Barry surveyed the room once again, then he leaned across the table, his voice dropping to a conspiratorial whisper. “I won’t let my son be passed off as another man’s. DNA testing must be done immediately after the baby is born, even if I have to obtain a court order. Tell your husband the truth, and quickly, or I will.”

He leaned back again and sipped his coffee as he watched Elizabeth’s reaction. He did not mean to be callous, and he had tried to let the sleeping dog lie more for his sake than Elizabeth’s, but he couldn’t. Yes, he loved Mabel, and yes, he loved his daughters very much, but as an only son, it was expected that he would have an heir to perpetuate the Babs-Jonah

family name. And while he had never actively sought a son, although his family expected that of him, he was not willing to allow a son who should carry on the Babs-Jonah name to be given to another man because the mother wished to hide her sinful acts.

Elizabeth gazed downward, her thoughts a chaotic whirlwind. Hot, uncontrollable tears welled up in her eyes, threatening to spill over. She knew Barry was callous and would not hesitate to tell Chris about their affair. She could not allow Chris to hear about it from Barry. She had to tell him herself. She blinked back the tears as she lifted her head and locked eyes with Barry. The man was evil personified. How had she ever thought that she loved him? How had she ever let him touch her? She must have been mad.

“I’ll tell him, Barry. Just give me some time.”

Barry reached across the table to squeeze her hand, but she pulled it away instantly.

“Thank you, Elizabeth. I knew you’d understand.”

He called the waiter, paid the bill, and without another word, got up and left, leaving Elizabeth staring after him.

Elizabeth lingered in her seat, the echo of Barry’s departure still hanging in the air. A sense of unease settled over her, twisting her thoughts into a tangled web of doubt and reflection. As she gently caressed her bump, memories of Barry’s words swirled in her mind. She shook her head. No. This baby couldn’t be Barry’s. She couldn’t possibly be carrying Barry’s child in her womb. She considered what Chris’s reaction would be. Chris loved her without a doubt, but he had his ego. He would never stay with her, knowing she cheated on him, and he certainly wouldn’t stay and watch her body grow daily with another man’s child.

“Oh, Elizabeth, whatever possessed you to have an affair!” she chided silently.

Chris was the love of her life. He always was. From the first moment she set her eyes on him, she knew she wanted to be with him forever. And yes, for years she had taken him and the love he showered on her so generously for granted. But she was at a stage in her life where she wanted Chris, needed him, and he was about to be taken from her, lost to her forever. There was no coming back from this, she knew it. Was it not for this very reason that she had implored God for months to hide her affair with Barry from Chris?

She remembered when she had met him, how impressed she’d been that at his young age, he was already a millionaire real estate developer. She was a sugar baby involved with a wealthy

Russian, Nikolai, in his late sixties. He owned a stunning yacht and was hosting an extravagant party on board.

As she glided through the lively party, a stunning accessory on Nikolai's arm, she caught sight of Chris making his way toward them. The sundeck buzzed with laughter and clinking glasses, but her heart raced at the prospect of their encounter. While she watched him, drinking him in, he ignored her, his eyes fixed on his host, who she later learnt was interested in investing in David-West. Elizabeth could barely believe he ignored her. Other men couldn't help but gawk at her even when they knew she was with Nikolai.

She was even more surprised when he responded with cool politeness to the introduction, neither holding her gaze nor her hand for longer than necessary. She was so charmed that she watched him all night, stealing a moment to be with him when no one noticed. She was even more surprised when he ignored her flirting, but he pulled out a business card and handed it to her just before he walked away.

"If you want to be with me, get rid of Nikolai. I won't share."

He left her standing there, even more fascinated. She broke up with Nikolai that weekend, and after returning to London, she searched for Chris. He was away in Africa on business, but they met for dinner upon his return. They were so enthralled with each other that the meal became a weekend, and then they were married a year later.

She had thought she would love him forever, but she slowly began to resent him with his business collapse a few years ago and their reduced lifestyle. Then Barry appeared on the scene, and she gave him her attention as he was all the things Chris had once been and refused to be. Their affair began, Barry left his wife, and she stopped all intimacy with Chris, asking him to move out of their bedroom and eventually out of their home. She had continued like someone in a daze, not thinking deeply about her actions or their consequences, until Barry broke off the relationship.

When she turned to Chris, it appeared Ava, the babysitter, was already making a play for him. But Chris still loved her, and once he made love to her that day, she realised that she had never really stopped loving him. When he moved back home, she realised she was pregnant, and they were overjoyed. But it now seemed that joy was about to turn into sorrow. Yes, it would be a sorrow if the baby were Barry's. Chris would leave her.

Barry wanted her to tell Chris, and she agreed to do so, and she had to. But she couldn't. She couldn't look the man she loved in the eye and tell him she had cheated on him. It was too much. Once again, she wondered what had possessed her. Chris was due back from Lagos in a few days. She would go to John and tell him everything and ask him to tell Chris.

SAMPLE

## Chapter Five

“Mabel is going to be absolutely furious, and who can blame her?”

With a heavy sigh, Barry leaned back and rubbed his temple, feeling the weight of the moment as he awaited his sister’s response. The air was thick with tension, and he couldn’t shake the feeling that whatever she said next would change everything.

His sister, Kofo Akin-Taylor, nee Babs-Jonah, was sixteen years older than he and had raised him. Their mother had died when he was only five years old, and his sister had married a much older man she did not love to give him a home. For many years, he had been her only “child” as she didn’t have children until ten years after her marriage. She had looked after him, and he wouldn’t be the man he was today without her sacrifice. As a mother figure in his life, he found himself constantly turning to her for emotional support.

And he needed that support now more than he had ever done. His life was about to fall apart. Elizabeth was very pregnant, as he had seen with his own eyes today. He was about to have a son with a woman who was not his wife. How did he tell his wife? How did he tell the woman he loved that another woman was carrying his child? Since returning to Mabel, he had tried to prove to her that he would never walk away from her and the girls again. He thought that the past was behind them, but then this happened.

He had told Elizabeth to inform her husband that the child was likely not his, and that meant he had to tell Mabel that the same child was likely his. Now that the moment had come, he realised it was more difficult than he’d imagined. Hence, the need for moral support. He had spent most of the day distracted, unable to focus on work and wondering how he would break the news to Mabel and how she would react. His greatest fear was that she would leave him. Although he intended to claim his son, he did not want to do so at the expense of Mabel and the girls.

He absent-mindedly traced intricate patterns on the steering wheel of his Bentley, the luxurious leather cool beneath his fingertips as his thoughts drifted elsewhere. He had been home for the last twenty minutes, but was in no hurry to get out of the car and go inside to his family. The girls would have had dinner and gone to bed now. Mabel would probably be upstairs in her tiny office, working or studying, or doing both. Or perhaps she would be in the

gym working out. How could he muster the courage to walk in and confront her with the shocking truth—that Elizabeth’s baby was probably his?

“Barry, my little brother,” Kofo began quietly, interrupting his thoughts. “I have heard all you said. I also understand your concerns. You are naturally worried about Mabel’s reaction to this news. But you will not deny your son or allow another to claim him because you fear Mabel’s response to the news. Tell her. She may be annoyed now, but in time, she will reflect and calm down. We are Africans. Mabel knows the Yoruba culture. The child of the lover is recognised.

“Besides, sons are important to us. She has given you no son, and she can’t ask you to deny the son born by your lover. No man is going to raise your son. You will claim what is yours boldly and openly, regardless of who is annoyed. Your son is your heir and will one day run this business empire you are labouring day and night to build. While we hope and pray that Mabel will calm down, reflect, and accept the situation, I want to emphasise that if she wishes to leave the marriage, she is free to do so. You will not give up your son to make any woman happy. Have I made myself clear?”

Barry exhaled deeply, his shoulders slumping as he adjusted his position in the driver’s seat, a wave of frustration washing over him. This was his greatest fear: having to choose between Mabel and the son Elizabeth carried in her womb. He didn’t want that.

“Sister Kofo, I understand your point, and I concur. However, I don’t want to reach a point where I have to choose between Mabel and my son. I’m deeply devoted to my wife, and I love my daughters too; I don’t want anything to impact my relationships with them. My prayer is that Mabel accepts the child, or better yet, that it isn’t mine.”

At the far end of the line, Kofo’s laughter echoed, a dry, almost haunting sound that cut through the tension like a knife.

“Whatever Mabel has done to chain you to her side, I will undo it. What is the matter with you, boy? Mabel doesn’t have a son for you, and you should have gone out and had a son all these years, but you didn’t. When you left her, I thought you would find a woman to bear you sons, but before long, you returned to Mabel and married her in the courts, tying yourself further so that extricating yourself this time will be more difficult than it was last time. A woman who has given you no male heir. Now, another woman is pregnant and from all indications, the child is yours, but here you are saying you hope Mabel comes round or better

still, that the child isn't yours. I have had enough of this foolishness. I must come to the UK and spend some time until the baby is born. Let me see how Mabel plans to prevent you from claiming your son."

"Sister Kofo, your trip to London seems excessive and completely unnecessary."

"I will determine what is excessive and unnecessary. I will come to London and stay until the baby is born. Tell Mabel to prepare for my arrival."

"Okay, sister Kofo," Barry said grudgingly and ended the call.

Mabel was panting and sweating as she turned off the treadmill and got off, wincing at the soreness in her muscles as she moved. She picked up her water bottle and drank greedily. As she put the bottle down, her phone beeped. She reached for her towel to wipe her sweaty hands, then grabbed the phone.

"Good evening, Mrs Hawthorne," she greeted cheerfully.

Jade Hawthorne was a Lagos socialite and *Ara*'s biggest client. Mabel had met her in Lagos months ago when she and Barry had flown home for their traditional marriage ceremony, and what happened to be a coincidental meeting had changed *Ara*. Not only did Jade's business place large orders with *Ara* for resale in their African clothing stores in London, Zurich, Paris and New York, but she also convinced Mabel to launch another unit within the business to cater to clients seeking haute couture African clothing for weddings and other special events. She had gone ahead and given Mabel several contacts. Since then, *Ara* had been making clothes for brides and bridal parties, resulting in increased revenue that left Barry surprised and impressed.

"Mabel, how are you, and how is *Ara*?"

"I'm fine, and so is *Ara*. Thank you for asking."

"Fantastic," Jade said. "I'm happy to hear it. In three months, a major African celebrity wedding is scheduled to take place in Zurich. I have informed the couple that *Ara* will design dresses not only for the bride and groom and their wedding party, but also for the wedding guests."

Mabel stood there, utterly astonished, as if the world had just flipped upside down. "That sounds like a large order, Mrs Hawthorne."

“Yes, it is, and I am confident that you can deliver.”

“Well, three months is not enough time—”

“It’s more than enough time, dear Mabel. Hire additional staff and work overtime as needed. You’re building a business empire.”

“Yes. However, I also have to consider my family. I mean my husband—”

“Forget your husband, my dear and build your empire. Every woman needs money of her own. Trust me.”

“Yes, Mrs Hawthorne.”

“Good. I’ll email you all the details tomorrow morning, and we’ll take it from there. Good night.”

“Good night, Mrs Hawthorne.”

As Mabel ended the call, her foot slammed against the floor in a burst of frustration. Yes, she wanted to build an empire and have money of her own. But she also wanted to spend time with her husband. Barry travelled a lot, which greatly reduced their time, and now, what little time they would have had together, *Ara* was going to take away. With a weary sigh, she delicately patted her face and neck with the towel; the gentle motion was a comfort, as if she were wiping away the weight of her worries along with the beads of perspiration.

“Mabel, you need to find a way to make it all work somehow,” she muttered under her breath as she left the gym and climbed up the stairs.

As she walked into the ground-level hall, she smiled at a large portrait of herself and Barry, taken on the day of their traditional marriage ceremony in Lagos. They were both dressed in traditional Yoruba attire. He stood behind her, his arms wrapped possessively around her as they both gazed into the camera lens, smiling. Their joy was contagious, and every time she walked past the portrait, even months later, it still managed to bring a smile to her face.

The front door swung open, revealing Barry as he stepped inside the house. His expression was taut, a mix of apprehension and determination etched across his features as he set his briefcase down and proceeded to unfasten his tie. Mabel halted abruptly, her expression shifting as a deep frown creased her brow.

“Barry, what’s wrong?”

“Where are the girls?” he asked.

“They’ve gone to bed.” She walked up to him. “They were going to wait to say goodnight, but it was getting past their bedtime.”

Barry took a deep breath as she reached up and smoothed the crease of his brow, her hands winding around his neck to massage the back of his neck and shoulders slowly. “Tell me what ails you, my love.”

“Where’s the housekeeper?”

“Sabrina’s gone home. Did you need anything? I made you dinner. Do you want to come up with me and freshen up and then come down to eat?”

He shook his head. “We need to talk. I don’t want any dinner. I’m not hungry.”

Mabel’s frown deepened, a shadow crossing her face as she suddenly paused the massage, taking a step back. “Barry. You’re acting strange. What’s going on? Is it business? Are you having business troubles?”

“I think you’d better sit down for this, Mabel.” He brushed by her, into the living room and made a beeline for the gleaming drinks cabinet. With a practised hand, he poured a generous measure of brandy, the amber liquid swirling invitingly in the glass.

Mabel trailed a few steps behind, her heart racing like a drum in her chest as she watched him raise the glass to his lips, wondering what the matter could be. She sat poised on the edge of the sofa, waiting for him to break the silence.

He downed nearly an entire glass of brandy in one swift motion, the warmth of the liquor igniting his senses, before turning to look at her, his gaze intense.

“Elizabeth’s baby might be mine.”

Mabel’s eyes widened in disbelief, her heart pounding faster as she slowly rose to her feet. She couldn’t tear her gaze away from Barry, the weight of the moment hanging heavily between them.

“What?” Her voice was barely above a whisper. “What are you talking about? How is that possible?”

*Elizabeth’s baby, his? Was Barry confused? Deluded?*

“It happened before we got back together.” His eyes pleaded for her understanding. “She and I were in an affair for a while. It was one of the reasons I left you and the girls. The last time we were intimate, the condom tore. The pregnancy has to be mine. I spoke to her today to explain that I cannot permit another man to raise my son.”

He swirled the brandy in his glass before tipping it back for a generous sip. With a keen eye, he turned to gauge her reaction.

“Can you explain how you met Pastor John’s sister?”

“I met her while we were still in Manchester. It didn’t start as an affair. She’s a conveyancing solicitor, and at first, it was strictly business; she was involved in helping me buy properties in the UK.”

“Then it transitioned into an affair.”

“Yes. I took her with me when I went on business, and after I left you, and acquired the property in Bromley, we spent time there too. She spent the night sometimes. I broke up with her before I returned to you, and I haven’t touched her since.”

“But you took her on business, and she spent time in your Bromley home.”

Mabel wanted to grab a throw pillow from the sofa and throw it at Barry’s head, but she held back because it wasn’t hard enough. The man was insane. He had lovers at his home in Bromley and had the nerve to try to persuade her and the girls to move there? With a steady inhale, she recalibrated her thoughts, focusing on what truly mattered. Elizabeth was pregnant. Barry thought he, not Elizabeth’s husband, was the father and wanted the child—his son. The son she had been unable to give him.

A flicker of hurt crossed her face, like a shadow, darkening her expression.

“You’re telling me that you were in an affair with Pastor John’s sister and are very likely responsible for her pregnancy, and intend to be a father to her child.”

“I can’t and won’t tolerate another man raising my son.”

“This is because it’s a boy, isn’t it?” Mabel laughed drily. “You told me it didn’t matter that I hadn’t borne you a son. Were you lying to me?”

Barry shook his head, a sense of urgency in his eyes as he moved closer, determined to reassure her. “No, Mabel. I love you, and I didn’t lie when I said I was content with having

only daughters. I have never actively sought to have a son. But now that I'm about to have one, I won't abandon him or let him bear another man's name. If the child is mine, he will answer Babs-Jonah, my name will be on his birth certificate, and I will be very present in his life."

Mabel stood with her arms crossed tightly, her emotions spilling over as tears streamed down her cheeks.

"You cheated on me, abandoned me and our daughters, and now you want me to join you in raising another woman's son? A child who will remind me of your infidelity every time I see him?"

"Mabel, I promise you, my affair is behind us. I love you and only you. And I never set out to have a baby with Elizabeth. But a baby has resulted from my mistake. I have to do the right thing and claim him. Please try to understand my point. I need your support on this."

Barry reached out to her, but she pulled away.

"Mabel, I need you. Please, let's work through this together."

Mabel shook her head as she turned to leave the room. "I need some time alone."

"Sister Kofo is coming to stay for a while," he blurted out.

Mabel stopped in her tracks and turned to face Barry. Barry's heart raced in his chest as he wondered how she would respond.

"Where is your sister planning to stay?" Mabel asked quietly.

"Mabel, please don't be like this." Barry's voice was tinged with exhaustion. "We have plenty of room."

When Barry moved in, they converted the loft into a two-bedroom, two-bathroom space, increasing the total number of bedrooms in the house from five to seven. However, that was not the point. Mabel was not the same woman Barry had abandoned and divorced. The new Mabel no longer felt the need to accommodate her in-laws, who did not like her, as they were about to discover.

"Yes, we have plenty of room, but not for her," Mabel said. "I refuse to have your sister and her toxicity in my home."

“My darling, please forgive her for whatever she did in the past. I promise to make it up to you.”

“No. She is not going to stay here, and that’s final. She can stay in your old home in Bromley, or she can stay in a hotel. She can stay anywhere but in my home.”

“Honey, you can’t mean what you’re saying. She is like my mother. She sacrificed a great deal for me to be where I am now. How can she not stay in my home? It’s unheard of.”

It was true. His sister had sacrificed a great deal for him, and Mabel had tried to condone her in the past because of that; however, she was a different woman now—a liberated one. She would not settle for any form of mistreatment.

“She can stay anywhere, just not here. That woman doesn’t like me or my daughters, perhaps because they are not sons and can’t inherit your empire. What do I care? I’m building an empire of my own for my daughters to inherit, and this is my house; she is not welcome here, not even for a meal.”

“Okay.”

“I’m glad you understand.” She turned and walked away.

It was time she faced her life and built that empire. Barry had dumped her before because she wasn’t the classy, educated wife he desired. Then he returned as she began to develop herself. But his return was not without problems, one being that he had conveniently impregnated another woman before returning to her and was now expecting a son with her.

That son would be his heir. Mabel didn’t kid herself. She was an African woman and knew how such things worked. It was time for her to work with Mrs Hawthorne to build *Ara* into an empire that her daughters could inherit. And in the process, demonstrate to her daughters that women were no less valuable than men. What did it matter if, in the process of doing that, she had no time to spend with her husband?

Barry sat down on the sofa and buried his head in his hands. He would speak to her later when she had calmed down. At least she had not spoken of leaving him. He would need to do something huge—a grand gesture—to show her how much she meant to him and to keep her by his side. What could he do?

## Chapter Six

“Pastor Maranatha and Beatrice, it’s wonderful to see both of you.” John pushed back his white leather swivel chair and rose as the youth pastor of The Vine Church, Pastor Maranatha Obasi, entered with his wife, Beatrice. Their faces lit up with radiant smiles, reflecting pure joy and excitement.

Their expressions were drastically different from their last visit. Then they weren’t talking to each other, wore no smiles, and Maranatha had moved out of the house after a fight with Beatrice. The fight had been centred around their inability to conceive after years of marriage, and he had prayed for them and ordered Maranatha to return home.

“Please come in and sit down. I did wonder why you made an appointment to see me. Glad to see that you’re both smiling. It means you come bearing good news.”

“Indeed, we do, Pastor John.” It was Beatrice who spoke up as they reached the desk and shook hands with John.

“We won’t sit. We understand you’re busy, and there’s a good number of people waiting to see you, so we’ll keep it brief,” Maranatha said, sounding businesslike.

“Okay.” John nodded. “Let’s hear it.”

“We’re pregnant!” Beatrice announced and burst out laughing.

“Three months,” Maranatha confirmed.

“We’re having twins!” Beatrice laughed again.

John nodded, quite pleased with the news. God had answered their prayers, and reflecting on the misery that had accompanied them to his office months earlier, he understood their joy and shared in it.

“Double for your trouble. Glory be to God. He is faithful. Thank you, Lord!”

“Thank you, Jesus!” the couple chorused.

“A huge congratulations to you both.” He stepped closer, shook hands with Maranatha, and embraced Beatrice. “This is exciting news. Thank you for sharing it with me. My day’s made.”

Beatrice laughed. “We should be thanking you, Pastor John.”

Maranatha nodded. “Yes, Pastor John. Thank you so much.”

“For nothing,” John said as he moved toward his desk and picked up the bottle of anointing oil. “All the glory, thanks and praise go to Jesus.”

Just then, the door opened, and Liam looked inside, adjusting his glasses on the bridge of his nose. “Your sister’s here, Pastor John. She said something about an emergency. Can you see her right away?”

John sighed and ran a hand through his hair. It was always an emergency with Elizabeth. Why couldn’t she wait her turn like everyone else?

“That’s our cue to be on our way,” Maranatha said.

“Ask Elizabeth to wait a few minutes, Liam,” John said, and once Liam retreated and shut the door behind him, he turned to Maranatha and Beatrice. “The Lord bless you and keep you both through the duration of the pregnancy and the birth of your babies.”

“Amen,” the couple chorused as John anointed each on the forehead.

“Thank you once more for the prayers, Pastor John. God does hear you when you pray,” Pastor Maranatha said as he linked an arm around Beatrice’s waist. “Come on, Bea, let’s get you home.”

“You make sure you take good care of her,” John teased, and the couple laughed as they walked towards the door.

“Bye, Pastor John,” Beatrice called over her shoulder as they walked out.

As they stepped outside, Elizabeth emerged gracefully in the doorway, and Liam quietly shut the door behind her. She looked elegant in a pink and black polka dot maternity dress, complemented by black suede pumps and a black Gucci hobo-style shoulder bag. She had elegantly swept her long blonde hair into a sleek chignon, highlighting the graceful lines of her neck. Her makeup was expertly applied, accentuating her features and adding a touch of sophistication to her overall look. She exuded confidence; however, as she drew nearer, John noticed her eyes looked not only sad but also as if she had been crying more than sleeping.

He sighed, walked over, and collapsed into his chair, gently placing the bottle of oil back on the desk.

“Elizabeth, what brings you here today?”

As she entered the room, her gaze surveyed the space before settling on the inviting white armchair across from the desk. With graceful poise, she took a seat.

“I need to talk to you, John. For once, I would like you to be my big brother instead of a pastor.” Elizabeth set her bag down on the armchair beside her and crossed her legs.

John arched an eyebrow, curiosity flickering in his gaze as he contemplated asking her what she meant. But just as quickly, he thought better of it, choosing silence instead.

“While Chris had his setback, I had an affair.” She hesitated, her eyes searching John’s face for any sign of a response, but he remained silent, the weight of his silence hanging in the air between them. Taking a deep breath to calm her pounding heart, she pressed on with renewed determination.

“The affair was the reason I thought I was no longer in love with him and wanted him out of our home.” With a hint of anxiety, she nervously ran her tongue over her lips, trying to bring some moisture to them as her heart raced.

“On the day John Jr. was stabbed, the man I was involved with ended our relationship because he wanted to return to his wife. I decided to give my marriage another chance. Chris and I slept together, which had not happened in many months. We were ecstatic when I conceived. Well, I met up with Barry yesterday. He believes the baby is his, and he wants it. Which means I have to tell Chris about the affair.” She leaned in closer, her voice barely rising above a whisper. “John, I can’t tell Chris.”

“You said Barry.”

“Yes, I was involved with Barry Babs-Jonah.”

“Barry Babs-Jonah,” John repeated the name as if he were trying it out. “Mabel Babs-Jonah’s husband?”

“Yes.” Elizabeth felt a lump rise in her throat. Discussing this with John was proving to be far more challenging than she had ever imagined. “His wife goes to church here. I didn’t realise who she was until I saw them both together during the prayer vigil for John Jr., and I’ve seen them a couple of times together in church after that.”

John rose from his seat, his hands plunging deep into his pockets as he started to stride back and forth across the room. Each step echoed his brewing thoughts, the silence heavy with unspoken words. Elizabeth's eyes were glued to him, curiosity bubbling inside her as she pondered what his next move or words might reveal.

"John?"

John stopped pacing and turned to regard her. "He abandoned his family." He pointed at Elizabeth. "You're the reason he left his wife, Mabel."

Elizabeth nodded, "Yes."

"Elizabeth, Elizabeth, Elizabeth. If it's not one thing, it's another." John tossed his hands up in exasperation. "From the moment you arrived in this world, you have gone in the opposite direction and done everything our parents found abominable."

As the weight of her emotions overwhelmed her, Elizabeth's composure shattered, and she found herself engulfed in a wave of tears. "I'm so sorry. I can't express enough how truly sorry I am. My husband is the love of my life, and I'm so scared I'm going to lose him, and it will be my fault."

"You're right! It will be your fault. I talked to you for years, but you wouldn't listen. Our parents pleaded with you to live a righteous life, but you had other plans. Now look at the result. Look at the mess! You love one man, are possibly pregnant by another and sure as night follows day are certain to lose both."

As Elizabeth's tears fell gently, he stepped closer, his heart aching for her. With a swift motion, he grabbed the box of Kleenex from the table and handed it to her.

"Can you see now why God warns us to avoid sexual immorality?" he asked softly, hovering over her, but did not wait for an answer. "Not only have you destroyed your marriage, but you have also destroyed poor Mabel's. Of course you have. You sit here crying because you're on the verge of losing the man you love. Well, what do you imagine is going to happen when her husband goes home to tell her that the baby in your womb is his and he wants it? You think she's just going to smile and say, 'That's fine, darling, bring home the fruit of your adultery, I'll love it like it's my own flesh and blood?' How would you react if Chris came home to you with similar news? So, you see, you've broken down two homes."

"I had not thought that far about how this would impact Mabel and her marriage."

“That’s just typical, Elizabeth, just typical!” John stormed around the room, his frustration palpable, before spinning on his heel to confront her once more. “When have you considered how your actions might impact someone else? It’s always about you, Elizabeth! You do what you want and don’t stop to think how it would affect your parents, God rest their souls, or your brother, the pastor, your husband, or your sons. If it makes you feel good, you don’t care whose ox is gored!”

Elizabeth blew her nose noisily and wiped her eyes. “John, please, I need your love and understanding, right now.”

John slammed his hand on his desk and glowered at her. “You get no sympathy from me, Elizabeth! You’ve been warned one too many times in the past, but you failed to listen.”

Elizabeth tossed the used Kleenex into the waste basket and reached for a fresh one. “I am so sorry.” Fresh tears streamed down her face as she succumbed to a flood of emotion.

With a sigh of frustration, John raked his fingers through his hair, the movement capturing the turmoil swirling in his mind. If only crying could solve the problem. This was a huge mess, and despite Elizabeth’s tears, John doubted whether she truly understood the gravity of the matter.

Mabel was going to have a serious problem with her husband because of this. She would no doubt turn to him, and how would she react when she discovered the culprit was his sister? She and Barry had only recently remarried, had their honeymoon, and were enjoying their happily ever after, and now this! He raised a hand to run it through his hair.

*What would happen if the press caught wind of this?*

John paused, his hand suspended in the air, apprehension playing across his features. The thought sent a shiver down his spine—the media would relish the opportunity to tear The Vine Church apart over this. Perhaps this was the scandal God had been trying to warn him about?

“Oh no,” he groaned out loud. He could already envision the scandalous headlines swirling around: ‘Pastor’s Sister Destroys Member’s Marriage!’ What a chaotic situation this was turning into. What was he going to do with Elizabeth? How was Chris going to take this news? What about Elizabeth’s boys?

“You said you had given no thought to how this would affect Mabel’s marriage,” he began in a calm voice. “But have you given some thought to how this will affect your marriage and your children?”

“I don’t think Chris will want to stay with me any longer.” She pressed a trembling hand over her mouth, desperate to stifle the rising sob that threatened to escape.

“And what about your sons? What happens if Chris wants a divorce?”

“I think the boys will be happier with their father.”

“It might be beneficial for you to leave London when the baby arrives.”

Elizabeth’s eyes widened in shock. “Where will I go?”

“You can go to South Africa for a year or two until things die down,” John said.

Before their parents passed away, John and Chris demolished their house in South Africa and rebuilt it into a ten-bedroom home. After their passing, it became a retreat centre for missionaries visiting the country, providing affordable lodging. An older woman named Lindiwe had served their parents for the last decade before their deaths. She continued to work as a housekeeper, ensuring the smooth running of the centre. Elizabeth could go and stay there with the baby. Out of sight was typically out of mind, and soon people would stop talking.

He studied Elizabeth closely, searching her face for a flicker of reaction. But to his dismay, her expression remained vacant—a blank canvas devoid of emotion.

“This is huge, Elizabeth,” he said quietly. “You all belong to The Vine Church, and I foresee a scandal developing, particularly after the baby’s arrival.”

“I hadn’t thought about that.”

“Of course.” John pressed his lips together.

“I’ll go away after the baby’s born. I’m so sorry that my actions are about to cause you so much trouble.”

“It wouldn’t be the first time. I am immune to it now; my worries centre around the church.”

“I understand.” Elizabeth wiped her eyes. “Chris returns this week, and I was meant to pick him up, but I can’t face him.”

“That’s understandable.”

“I was hoping you would pick him up and tell him. I want him to be aware before I confront him.” Elizabeth looked up at him hopefully.

John stood there, his gaze fixed on her. It was typical of Elizabeth to make a mess and expect someone else to clean it up.

“John, please,” she began quietly, her hand trembling as she wiped her tears. “I’m aware that I have always been a reckless person, but following the stabbing of John Jr., I knelt and asked God to forgive me and help me, and I was completely sincere. This is not something new I’ve done, John; this is a consequence of a sin God has already forgiven me for, and for which I am truly sorry. For the first time, I genuinely yearn to be a wife and mother, yet my past is attempting to rob me of this.”

John observed her in silence for a while. “Is there a chance, a slim chance, that this baby might not be Barry’s?”

She looked up at him, the tears flowing freely down her cheeks. “I can’t tell you how many times I’ve gone over this in my head, John. But the truth is, since I turned forty, my body’s not been the same. My periods have become irregular, and I stopped tracking my ovulation.”

“Could you be more careless? You’re sexually active with a man you’re not married to and don’t want a baby with him, and you’re not tracking your ovulations?”

Elizabeth remained silent, and the world around her faded as the weight of her sorrow pressed down, leaving her in a moment of quiet despair. As John observed her, his heart ached for her. Eventually, with a sigh, he reached out and pulled her into his arms, a gesture that caused her to sob anew.

“It’s okay. God forgives you, and I forgive you. I’ll tell Chris, and whatever he decides, I’m by your side. I won’t leave you to deal with this alone.”

Elizabeth nodded, her head buried into his shoulder as she wept quietly. She enjoyed the security of his embrace, but the weight of the situation hung heavy between them.

## Chapter Seven

As Chris left the arrivals lounge, refreshed from his long flight, he phoned Elizabeth to tell her of his arrival. However, her phone rang, and there was no response. The call proceeded to voicemail. He furrowed his brow, a flicker of surprise crossing his face. It was unexpected, unless she hadn't answered because she was driving to the airport to pick him up as promised.

He should be excited about seeing her again after being away for an entire month, but he wasn't ready to face her. He had a lot on his mind. This trip to Africa had opened up his past in a way that none of the other trips had. It began with his journey from Lagos to Port-Harcourt to see Alabo. Well, to see Alabo's resting place. The nightmares had plagued him relentlessly, each one more vivid than the last, pushing him to the brink of desperation. In search of solace, he decided to visit Alabo and seek his forgiveness, hoping that this visit might hold the key to his peace.

He had neither attended Alabo's funeral nor paid a visit to his final resting place, leaving an unfilled void in his heart. After the death of David-West, he remained in the UK and had no reason to visit Port Harcourt. Now that Princewill Consortium was operational in Lagos, he decided to visit Port-Harcourt. He did not announce his visit, as he had no desire to see anyone, including family, friends, and domestic staff, at his residence in Port Harcourt.

He was not expecting to meet Biobele, Alabo's eldest daughter. She was equally surprised to see him.

"Chris!" She exclaimed.

"You look well, Bio."

He hadn't seen her in years, but the effect she had on him apparently had not diminished. That was surprising. After reconciling his differences with Elizabeth, he expected to feel nothing for any woman. But Bio was not any woman. And yes, he had bedded her and her sister and mother, but Bio was different. She was the only woman whose virginity he had taken. Despite their brief arrangement, he considered her virginity a serious matter. Bio would always hold a special place in his heart.

“Chris,” she said once more, her gaze sweeping over him. “I can’t believe it’s you. It’s so good to see you. I never thought I’d see you again.”

“How’s married life treating you, Bio?” he asked.

She looked pensively at her fingers without glancing at him. “I didn’t expect to see you here.”

Chris realised that she had not responded to his question about marriage. “I was just leaving. I came to pay my last respects to Alabo, as I never had a chance to do that.”

Bio nodded. “I understand you faced significant hardship following the David-West Tower’s collapse.”

Chris shrugged. “I’m alive, which is more than can be said for a lot of the people on site that day.”

“Like my dad.” Bio looked towards the grave of her father, and Chris noticed her eyes were moistened.

He considered himself a monster. Not for the first time, he realised how his actions had impacted others. Many had lost loved ones they would never see, talk to, or hold again. He deserved to have lost everything, and he would lose more to alleviate the remorse that plagued his heart whenever he recalled his actions.

“I’m sorry for your loss, Bio. I wish I could make it right.”

Bio wiped away a tear. “It was an accident. I understand you feel responsible because it was your project, but these things happen; besides, we received generous compensation. It won’t bring my dad back, but it certainly helped improve our lives. For that, we will be eternally grateful.”

Chris stared, speechless. He didn’t know what to say. His phone beeped just then. It was a text from the driver saying it was time to leave for the airport.

“I need to go now, Bio. It was nice meeting you again.” He put the phone back in his pocket, and as he tried to walk past her, she prevented him.

“You’re just going to leave like that, Chris? After all this time? After everything we shared?” She moved closer. “What happened to us, Chris?”

“You got married, Bio,” he reminded her. “Besides, it was a temporary arrangement. I was married, I am still married, and I had nothing to offer then or now.”

Bio nodded, blinking back tears. "My mother was right when she called me a fool for initially turning down the marriage offer. She said my hope that you would marry me as your African wife was a pipe dream. She suggested I abort the baby and marry my suitor."

Chris froze. "What baby?"

"Our baby." She looked up at him as the tears flowed freely down her cheeks. "My mother asked me to get rid of it. She asked me to forget you and forbade me from contacting you again. She warned that contact with you would fuel impossible desires, destroying my marriage."

"You didn't tell me you were pregnant," Chris said softly, trying to picture Bio with his baby.

"My mother said you would ask me to abort it. And I think a part of me didn't want to hear you say those words. It would have killed any love I had for you. So, I didn't tell you."

"You rejected yourself before I rejected you."

Bio nodded. "I think your rejection would have killed me."

"I don't know what kind of man you think I am, Bio, but I would never have rejected you or asked you to abort my child." Chris sighed and put on his sunglasses. "But that's all water under the bridge now. Our child is dead, and you're another man's wife. Take care of yourself."

"Was."

"What was that?"

"I was another man's wife. My husband died a year ago."

Chris was jolted out of his musings by the sound of someone calling his name. He looked up and saw John. A frown creased his brow, and his heart raced, thumping in his chest like a drum echoing in the silence.

Why had John come to the airport? Elizabeth didn't mention her inability to come to the airport when they spoke the night before, despite his expectation that she would pick him up. Unless there was a problem.

"John?"

"Hello, Chris," John greeted, firmly shaking his hand and patting his back.

“Is Elizabeth okay?” Chris asked, a flicker of worry crossing his face. “I could have taken a cab. You needn’t have bothered picking me up.”

John shrugged as he led Chris towards his vehicle in the car park. “It’s no trouble at all. I wanted to talk to you.”

“Talk to me?” Chris asked. “What’s going on, John? Is everything okay? Is Elizabeth okay?”

“Elizabeth is fine. So are the boys. An issue arose during your absence; let’s talk.” John unlocked the doors, and both men climbed in.

“What issue is this?”

“Patience, Chris,” John’s smile, meant to reassure, only heightened Chris’s unease. “How are you, Chris? How was your trip? Did you have a good flight?”

Chris found himself wishing for a break from the small talk, yet he understood that John wasn’t one to be hurried along.

“I’m fine, John, and I had a good trip, thank you for asking.”

*Dear God, we sound like two polite strangers,* Chris thought to himself.

“I’m glad to hear it.” John looked at him and smiled. “I’m aware you’re keen to hear what I have to say, and I won’t delay further.”

“Good. I’m waiting.”

A heavy silence filled the car’s interior as John searched for the perfect words, with the weight of the moment pressing down on him.

“Elizabeth had an affair while you were going through your setback following the collapse of your business,” John began. “The relationship was over when you two got back together, but the bloke thinks her pregnancy might be his. Something about a condom split a couple of weeks before you and Elizabeth got together, so it’s likely she was already pregnant at the time you resumed intimacy.”

Chris felt an inexplicable chill sweep over him; it wasn't the cold February air outside. He froze in place, and John had to watch closely to observe the rise and fall of Chris's chest to see if he was still breathing.

Satisfied he was breathing, John proceeded. “I understand that you may not want the marriage after hearing this. No one will expect you to. Adultery is grounds for divorce even in the church. I would completely understand if you walked away from the marriage; that’s why I came out to get you. If you decide that you no longer wish for the marriage to continue, I will drive you to any place of your choice and arrange for your belongings to be delivered there. But I do not want you to return to the house or to see Elizabeth. She can’t face you, not after what she’s done. As much as I’m angry with her, she is my little sister, and I love her very much. Also, she’s pregnant, and I need to make sure that she is not experiencing any distress.”

“And that’s why you came to pick me up?”

John let out a deep sigh, running his fingers through his hair. “Please understand, Chris. I’m trying to protect Elizabeth.”

“She is my wife! You’re out of line, John. It’s my duty to protect her, not yours!”

“Well, that is true. But I assumed—”

“You were mistaken; Elizabeth is my wife. And I’m unaware of who this unhinged individual is making assertions. But you have no right to tell me I can’t go home to my family. You’re taking me home now, or I’m calling a cab.”

“Okay. I’ll take you home. If you cause her any distress, you and I will have a problem.”

“That’s not your line but mine, John. Once again, you’re out of line. Stay out of my marital affairs. Elizabeth is my wife, not yours. You protect your wife and leave me to protect mine.”

“Well, just as long as we understand each other.” John started the car’s engine and pulled out of the airport’s car park, the tension evident in the air.

Elizabeth stood in the baby’s nursery, surrounded by most of the gifts from the baby shower, which she and Chris were supposed to sort through when he returned, before the meeting with Barry that changed everything. As she surveyed her surroundings, her gaze danced over the soft cream walls adorned with delicate patterns. The nursery furniture, perfectly coordinated, created a serene atmosphere, while the inviting rocking chair they had selected together seemed to beckon her to sit and dream.

Together, she and Chris had infused every corner of this room with their love and creativity, turning it into a vibrant reflection of their shared passions and dreams. They were filled with excitement about the arrival of this baby. This child signified, to them, God's blessing on their renewed marriage. They decorated this room and often visited to discuss the baby they were expecting. Love and hope once filled the room. Now, as she stood there, despair was all she experienced.

The sound of a car door closing outside pulled her from her reverie, and she moved to the window just in time to catch a glimpse of John and Chris. Her heart raced, fuelled by a surge of anticipation. Chris was home. He had come home to her instead of going to his old flat. But what did it mean?

A part of her wished Chris had not returned, as she was uncertain how to face him with the truth out. She could not bear to see the hurt in his eyes—the hurt she caused by her betrayal. The way she had treated him was utterly unjust; he truly deserved so much better. All he had done was love her.

As she watched, she realised that John had no intention of coming in. He shook hands with Chris on the front steps before getting into his vehicle and driving away, leaving her to confront her problems alone. She remained where she was; she couldn't get her legs to move, try as she might. She stood at the window, staring for an unknown time, but saw nothing, her tears blurring her view.

"Elizabeth."

Hearing Chris's voice in the open doorway, Elizabeth turned around, avoiding his gaze, as she could not bring herself to look at him. She believed herself incredibly unworthy of such a good man.

"Chris," she breathed softly, her voice barely above a whisper. "You're home."

"Welcome back, Mr David-West." Desree appeared at that moment behind Chris, causing him to turn away from Elizabeth.

Chris smiled at the older woman who reached for his suitcases. "Thank you, Desree," he said.

As she walked away, wheeling the cases behind her, he called out, "Please prepare the guest suite for me."

Elizabeth let out an involuntary gasp and looked away as Chris entered the room, strolling towards her. She found herself holding her breath, her heart racing, as he sauntered by, hands deep in his pants pockets, his gaze fixed on the window. He stole a glance out the window, as if searching for answers in the world beyond. When he turned back to her, their eyes met in a powerful lock, charged with unspoken emotions.

“I suspected you were cheating, Elizabeth. I could have found out if I had wanted to, but the truth was more than I could bear. So, I buried my head in the sand and pretended to misread the signs.”

Elizabeth maintained eye contact with him, but as tears welled up and blurred her vision, his presence faded into a blur of emotions. “I am so sorry. Please forgive me.”

“Why did you do it?”

“I thought I was attracted to him. He reminded me of you as you had been before your business crashed. But in the end, he was nothing like you.”

Chris turned his head and gazed out the window. “You met with him a few days ago. Did he touch you?”

“No. We met in public.” Elizabeth wiped her tears away with her hands. “At a coffeehouse near the law firm.”

“Did you want him to? Did you see him and desire him? Did you long for him to return to you?”

“No. I don’t want him. I don’t want anyone but you, Chris.”

He stepped away from the window and moved a little closer to her. “When you look at me, Elizabeth, what do you see? A good man? Is that why you want me? I’m not a good man, Elizabeth.”

Elizabeth nodded, her voice trembled. “Perhaps, but you’re the man for me and the only man I want.”

Chris watched her intently, and unable to maintain his gaze, she lowered her head, looking down at her hands. After a while, he came closer, entering her personal space. He tilted her chin so she could lock eyes with him again.

“What if the child is his? Would you hand over the baby, walk away, and choose to stay with me?”

Elizabeth wrestled with her thoughts, but finally she nodded. “Yes.”

Chris gave a subtle nod, his silence speaking volumes as he released her chin, turned on his heel, and walked away.

As Elizabeth stood there, a wave of emotion washed over her. Tears streamed down her cheeks as she watched him walk away, each step deepening the ache in her heart. Did she honestly expect Chris to allow her to stay married to him while raising another man’s child, especially when that child would constantly remind him of her infidelity?

She cherished the baby growing in her womb, but she knew she could only want to be its mother if it were Chris’s child. If it turned out to be Barry’s, he could take it immediately after she gave birth. She would channel all her energy into mending their marriage if there were even the slightest chance that Chris still held feelings for her.

Chris refused to join Elizabeth and the boys for dinner that evening, making the experience a difficult one for her. He remained in his bedroom, and the boys rushed in to see him the moment they returned from school. They left looking gloomy. Elizabeth was unsure what he told them, yet trusted Chris to keep their marital problems private.

The atmosphere at the dinner table was thick with silence as both boys picked at their food, their responses to their mother’s questions about school limited to short, one-word answers. Each query hung in the air, met with hesitant nods and vague shrugs, creating a stark contrast to the usual lively chatter.

Midway through the meal, Andrew angrily threw down his cutlery, creating a loud clattering noise in the quiet dining room.

“What have you done to my daddy?”

“Why, I never!” A rush of surprise overcame Elizabeth, leaving her momentarily speechless.

“Andrew Datonye David-West, where have your manners gone begging?”

James pushed back his chair, causing it to fall backwards, and walked out of the dining room without a word. As Elizabeth sat frozen in place, her eyes wide with astonishment, Andrew followed suit.

With a heavy sigh, Elizabeth tossed her napkin onto the table, frustration etched across her face. “Dear God, please help me.”

Chris lay in the guest suite, his old bedroom, staring at the ceiling. He was exhausted but unable to sleep, and couldn’t dismiss the thought of Elizabeth’s infidelity. He hadn’t anticipated spending his first night home this way—away from his wife, after a month’s separation. For weeks, he had eagerly anticipated lying next to her, making love, and falling asleep in her arms. Yet, he was back in his old bedroom, the one Elizabeth had relegated him to during her affair.

As Elizabeth entered the room, a stillness lingered in the air, yet he remained unaware of her presence, absorbed in his own thoughts.

“Chris, do you want any dinner? I’ll deliver it on a tray if you prefer to stay upstairs.”

Chris shook his head. “I’m not hungry.”

“Chris, do you want me to leave? I could visit South Africa temporarily. John suggested going after the birth; however, I could go now if needed.”

Chris’s gaze locked onto hers, his expression a tumultuous blend of uncertainty and emotion.

“No, Elizabeth. I don’t want you to leave.”

Tears sparkled in Elizabeth’s eyes, but she nodded, fully grasping the complexity of their situation.

## Chapter Eight

“Mabel! It’s great to see you. Come on in,” John said as Mabel stood in the doorway of his office, a hint of uncertainty in her posture as she paused, her gaze flickering with a mix of anticipation and apprehension.

At his invitation, Mabel took a confident step further into the room, the door clicking softly shut behind her and a warm smile spread across her face.

“Hello, Pastor John,” she greeted. “Thank you for agreeing to see me on such short notice.”

“Nonsense!” John brushed aside her apology with an easy grin, rising to greet her with an inviting warmth that filled the room. “You don’t have to be so formal, Mabel, and don’t be a stranger. I’m your pastor, and your friend, and you can always contact me.”

Mabel sighed. It was true. Many months ago. But not now. A lot had changed in recent times, with Pastor John’s wife working so closely with him, literally in the office next door, with a connecting door that allowed her to pop into her husband’s office at any time. Further, Barry fulfilled her desires, and she needed Pastor John less. But that had changed.

Barry remained unchanged, yet her anger strained their marriage, prompting her to seek Pastor John again. She had reservations, however, particularly since the topic for discussion related to his sister, and she was uncertain of his reaction. But what could she do? She had to unburden her heart, or she would go crazy. Although she had people to confide in, she doubted their ability to offer spiritual guidance.

“Won’t you sit down?” John asked, interrupting her musing.

“Yes, thank you.” Mabel gracefully sank into the plush armchair.

“You look lovely. No doubt this outfit is another one of your designs.” He gestured to her outfit, which consisted of wide-leg brown *Adire* trousers paired with a cream turtleneck sweater and a cream blazer featuring elbow patches made from the trouser fabric. She radiated an aura of sophistication.

“Yes, Pastor John, it is one of my designs.”

“Your designs are brilliant as usual.” With a satisfied nod, he settled into his chair, a sense of approval radiating from him. “What’s the situation at *Ara*?”

Mabel wasn't prepared for small talk, but she indulged him. It would help her calm her nerves and facilitate the discussion on the sensitive topic she had brought to him.

"Thank you for the compliment, Pastor John. Things are good at *Ara*. The haute couture unit has begun in earnest, with orders constantly pouring in. You are aware that Barry gave me a property in the city following our wedding. I have converted it into a showroom for *Ara*, where I display my designs. There's also a studio for the haute couture dresses within the same building. But we continue to mass produce the majority of my designs from our factory in Lagos."

"Has owning this property in the city given the business a competitive edge?"

"Oh, it has. Sales have doubled. And it's a very prestigious location and entirely suitable for the wealthy clientele *Ara* is serving now. It's good times for *Ara*." She let out a soft sigh, her heart heavy with longing as she yearned to express the same sentiment for herself.

"Good times for *Ara* but not for you?" John enquired, noticing the wistful sigh that lingered in the air, hinting at unspoken feelings.

Mabel nodded, silently, sensing his awareness of her sadness. He had always been able to sense her despondency. She wondered about his knowledge of events. If Barry had confronted Elizabeth, would Elizabeth have told her brother? Probably not. That wasn't something one told one's brother easily, especially when that brother was a pastor. But he was bound to find out anyway, as Elizabeth would have to tell her husband, seeing as Barry was adamant about being named on his son's birth certificate.

"Mabel, what brings you here? What's going on?"

How did she say this? How did she inform him that his sister, for the second time, was on the brink of destroying her marriage and likely for good this time? How did she explain the sleepless nights she had had because of the baby his sister carried in her womb? How did she explain the African culture that prized sons above all else?

Pastor John was very conversant with the culture, having been born and raised in Africa, but knowing about something was very different from actually living it. How did she explain that Barry's sister planned to live in her home until the birth of the child, and that her life was about to be a living nightmare, because of his sister?

John watched, with a slight frown, as Mabel struggled. She had something to say, but she seemed to find it challenging to express her concerns. Could this have something to do with Elizabeth possibly being pregnant with Barry's child? Had Barry told his wife already?

"Is everything okay on the home front, Mabel?" he asked.

"My marriage is in trouble, Pastor John. Barry—"

With a sudden creak, the side door swung open, and in walked Victoria, her vibrant orange and cream ensemble instantly illuminating the room and drawing John and Mabel's gaze towards her radiant presence. Close behind her, Elizabeth followed, a curious glint in her eyes.

"John, Elizabeth would like a quick word before she leaves," Victoria began, and paused. The two women halted in their tracks at the doorway as they laid eyes on Mabel. Elizabeth shrank back. Victoria didn't notice and moved further into the room. "I'm sorry, John. I had no idea you had an office guest."

Mabel's eyes narrowed to slits as she set eyes on Elizabeth for the first time since Barry told her the other woman was likely carrying his baby. It was interesting to see how a little knowledge could change one's perspective on a person or thing. She had never been a fan of Elizabeth's, lumping the pastor's sister in the same non-favourites list that she lumped his wife. But she only registered a certain level of indifference towards Elizabeth. Now that she knew this woman had wrecked her home, put her in the hospital and on top of it, now that Barry was back with her, he still partly was joined to Elizabeth because of the baby nestling in her womb, she was livid.

As she observed Elizabeth, it became clear why Barry had left her for the other woman. She was beautiful and slim; even with the baby bump, she looked elegant and well-groomed in her white pants, styled with a red cardigan, and pearls. She was precisely the kind of woman Barry would find attractive.

Barry found Mabel attractive now, but for many years it had not been that way. He nagged about her weight and eventually abandoned her and the girls, preferring the slim and tall Elizabeth, who looked like a movie star, and that stung. And that was not all. There was now a bigger issue beyond whether Barry found Elizabeth attractive or not—the child.

Mabel eyed Elizabeth as a predator eyed its prey before pouncing. This was the woman carrying in her womb the son Barry longed for. The son that the Babs-Jonah family had prayed for on the day she and Barry were initially married. The boy she had fervently beseeched God for, and had been denied. The son who would one day continue the Babs-Jonah family name.

Elizabeth instinctively touched her baby bump, and Mabel suddenly sprang to her feet, her expression a storm of fury. With determination etched on her face, she marched straight toward Elizabeth, every step crackling with tension.

“Isn’t it great that I find you here? You whore! Home wrecker!”

With a surge of unexpected fury, Mabel swept past Victoria and unleashed two sharp slaps against Elizabeth’s face, catching both John and Victoria off guard before they could even process what was happening. Elizabeth’s tears streamed down her cheeks; each drop a testament to her overwhelming emotions. Confused yet concerned, Victoria slipped her arm around her sister-in-law, offering a warm embrace that spoke louder than words as John approached.

“What’s the meaning of this, Mabel?” Victoria’s voice trembled with disbelief as her wide green eyes darted between Mabel and John, searching for answers. “What just happened?”

“For years, this whore has been having an affair with my husband. She’s the reason he abandoned me and my children, and she didn’t stop there; she’s pregnant by him!” With a quick, determined stride, Mabel brushed past Victoria and delivered another sharp slap to Elizabeth’s face, the sudden impact making her flinch as a mix of shock and hurt flashed across her expression. “You good-for-nothing home wrecker!”

“How dare you?!” Victoria’s frustration boiled over as she whirled toward Mabel, her eyes blazing with anger. In a swift motion, she raised her hand and struck Mabel’s cheek, the sound echoing in the tense air. Without hesitation, she followed with another hard slap, leaving Mabel stunned and the room heavy with shock. “You’re a fine one to talk! You dare call her a whore and a home wrecker when that’s exactly what you are!”

Mabel gasped, her hand coming up to her face, her eyes filling with tears as she looked from John to Victoria.

“Yes! My husband told me everything, you shameless whore! Common courtesan!” Victoria unleashed a furious blast of words, her anger evident as she spat them out with intensity. “But he didn’t have to. I knew you wanted him; you couldn’t hide it. Cooking for him, tying his shoelaces, in my presence! And then coming to my home in my absence and seducing him. Under my roof!” With a swift motion, she brought her hand across Mabel’s cheek once more, the impact sending her stumbling back a few steps, surprise etched across her face.

“That’s enough, Victoria. I think you’ve made your point clear.” John’s voice left no room for debate, a tone fierce enough to silence any objections. “Take Elizabeth out!”

Victoria looked disapprovingly at John before wrapping an arm around a weeping Elizabeth. “Come on, let’s get you out of here,” she said, pulling Elizabeth away and leading her out of the office.

“You told her about us?” Mabel questioned as soon as the side door shut behind Elizabeth and Victoria, the tears falling freely.

“There is no us, Mabel, we’re not an item. And there are no secrets between Victoria and me.” He guided her back to the chair she had left and handed her a box of Kleenex tissues while she bowed her head and wept softly.

*The meeting had not gone as she expected. It had been a disaster.* Mabel reflected as she walked to her car in the parking lot outside the church’s administrative building.

*What had happened in there?* she pondered. *How had she gone from a victim to a villain?*

She never got a chance to tell Pastor John the reason for her visit. Not that it mattered any more. Not when his wife had reminded her of the times in the past that she had openly and brashly flirted with the man of God. How could she speak to him as her pastor after being reminded of her previous schemes to make him her secret lover? She was not that woman anymore. She had long buried any unholy longing she once harboured for Pastor John, but who would ever believe her?

There were tears in Mabel’s eyes as she pulled into the car park outside the girls’ school. She switched off the engine, and as she got out, reaching for a tissue in her handbag to wipe her eyes, she noticed a silver Mercedes pulling in beside her. A man stepped out, and she sensed his gaze on her as she stood beside her vehicle, dabbing at the corners of her eyes. She had seen him countless times on the morning and afternoon school run. She knew he usually

picked up and dropped off his daughter, who was about Stacy's age. He observed her like he always did, his gaze lingering with a mix of fascination and longing. This time, however, was unlike any other—today, he took a step forward, breaking the distance that had always held him back.

“Hi, I'm George. George Michael. Are you okay?”

Mabel glanced up at him, her eyes shimmering with unshed tears, the warmth of his concern wrapping around her like a comforting blanket. It brought to mind Pastor John's earlier care for her and the girls.

“Hello, George,” Mabel said, mustering a warm smile. “I truly appreciate your concern. I'm Mabel.”

“Lovely name.” He scanned the car park, his gaze flickering over the details before landing on her. “I don't mean to pry, but are you in danger?”

Then it occurred to Mabel that he likely believed she was a victim of domestic abuse. She shook her head vigorously.

“I'm not in any physical danger.” She pressed the soft tissue to her lips, trying to hold back the sob that threatened to escape.

In that moment, a wave of despondency washed over her, heavy and consuming, enveloping her in a shroud of despair that seemed unshakeable. Pastor John had once been someone she could turn to and confide in, but he was no longer that person. Barry was not, as he wouldn't see her point of view on this matter. Undoubtedly, he would hear about what had transpired in Pastor John's office today and tell her a few home truths. With her eyes brimming with tears, she caught George's gaze, and he frowned deeply, captivated by the storm of emotions swirling within her.

“Problems with the husband?”

Mabel nodded, and she attempted a smile, trying to control herself. “I didn't mean to break down as I did. I suddenly experienced being overwhelmed.”

“Sounds like you need a friend to talk to.” He extended his hand, offering her his card with a confident smile. “Reach out if you're ever troubled or in danger. I used to be a Christian therapist before I settled for being a writer, and I've worked with many women going through domestic abuse. Sometimes the abuse is not physical.”

“Thank you.” Mabel accepted the card and slipped it into her shoulder bag. Then, with an inviting smile, she reached into her bag, retrieved hers, and handed it over to him.

He examined the card with a spark of curiosity. “Is it okay to call or text you later just to be sure you’re okay?”

“Yes, it is. And I thank you again for your concern.”

“You’re welcome.” He met and held her gaze. “You will tell me if you’re being abused, won’t you?”

Mabel nodded. “Yes. I will.”

She didn’t understand why she was talking to this stranger, except that his concern reminded her of the first time she met Pastor John Griffith. When George walked up to her, she was immediately reminded of how Pastor John had crossed the hospital ward to speak to her. When George talked to her, she recalled the many times Pastor John had cared for her and the girls. She was not in danger, but it didn’t hurt to have a friend to talk to.

George observed her closely and nodded in response to her promise, but remained silent. As the students streamed out of the school’s main entrance, laughter and chatter filling the air, he turned back to his vehicle.

## Chapter Nine

As Elizabeth stepped through the front door, the cheerful sounds of laughter bubbled up from the upstairs rooms, filling the air with warmth and excitement. Drawn by the alluring sound, she ascended the wide Georgian staircase, its recently installed lush, immaculate carpet absorbing the sound of her designer pumps as she navigated the long, wood-panelled, brightly lit hallway. Ultimately, she found herself in the spacious and luxurious, yet comfortably furnished, library, which Chris used as his home office.

Ava sat in one of the austere, high-backed leather chairs in front of the large oak desk, her jean-clad leg swinging from the side of the chair in a boyish pose. Close to her, a little too close, in Elizabeth's opinion, Chris sat perched on the desk, reading a document.

Elizabeth's face darkened with displeasure. *Why was Ava here?*

Once she and Chris rekindled their romance, she found herself feeling uneasy about Ava's growing bond with him. To protect her relationship, she began subtly steering Ava away from their connection, which had prompted her to hire Desree, the new housekeeper. She believed that if Ava didn't need to look after the boys, then she and Chris would see each other less frequently, if at all. It seemed her estimation had been wrong. Although, to be fair, she was seeing Ava at her home for the first time since Ava stopped minding the boys.

It was not the scene she wanted to come home to. As she left the church office to return home, all she could think about was being alone with Chris after the assault and humiliation she had suffered at the hands of Barry's wife. She wanted him to hold her. She *needed* him to hold her. Even though he was barely talking to her. He had spoken a handful of words since his arrival home, yet here he was laughing heartily with Ava.

Elizabeth was unsure what Ava had said or done to make him laugh, but it was pleasant to hear Chris laugh. He had not laughed since he returned home, and she found herself aching for the sound of his joy echoing through the house once more. It was heartening to hear him laugh, though it ached her heart that she had not been the one to make him laugh.

It was the reason she had been to see John, although the visit had turned out to be a catastrophe. When she set out from home to see him, it was to get some answers regarding

Chris's strange behaviour. Now, in hindsight, she wished she had not gone. Mabel was a member of The Vine Church, and Elizabeth should have known that it was only a matter of time before she ran into her in church or the church office. She should have avoided both until further notice.

She had arrived and seen Victoria, who quickly captured her to discuss plans for the women's cookout on Easter Monday. It was still weeks before Easter, but it was Victoria's first cookout in her role as the women's leader, and she wasn't playing about it. She wanted everything to be perfect so John wouldn't complain. After discussing Victoria's idea for the cookout with her and sharing some insights, Victoria decided to bypass Liam and take her to see John directly.

It had been a mistake, as Mabel was there, and a can of worms had been unleashed, not only about her and Barry, but also about John and Mabel. Elizabeth wasn't concerned about that. Her concern was her marriage. She longed to comprehend why Chris was distant. She had thought when he came home that he might still want her. John was supposed to have allowed him to leave and not return to the house. She did get a chance to speak to John after Mabel left.

As anticipated, John wasn't cheerful, yet his reaction was straightforward when she described Chris's withdrawn behaviour: quiet, solitary, and skipping meals at home since his return, going out early, coming back late, and isolating himself in his room.

"I think Chris loves you," John said. "But you'll have to give him time to come to terms with what's happened. It's not just that you had an affair. The baby he thought was his may very well belong to another man. That's a lot to drop on a guy, Elizabeth. He's not going to be normal for a very long time. Every time he looks at that baby bump, he's going to be reminded of your infidelity. It isn't easy. But I think deep down inside, he wants to fight for you and your marriage. Why? I have no idea. But like I've told you many times, Elizabeth, the man is too good for you. Give him time and space to process things."

She was still deep in thought when Chris noticed her. She watched with her heart breaking as every trace of laughter disappeared, and he straightened up and walked around the desk to his chair, causing Ava to turn her head and see Elizabeth.

"Hi Elizabeth!" Ava hailed with a bright smile, which quickly changed to a frown, no doubt as she noticed Elizabeth's teary eyes and red face. Elizabeth blushed. "Are you okay?"

She didn't know what was worse, that Ava had noticed her unkempt appearance even though she had tried to put herself together before coming home, or that Chris just stared at her without saying a word, even when he could see that she was in distress.

"I'm fine, thank you, Ava. It's lovely to see you again." She forced a smile. "Please excuse me."

Elizabeth hurried to her bedroom and shut the door just as the tears began streaming down her cheeks. She let her handbag fall onto the rug and climbed into bed, kicking off her pumps and curling up in a foetal position as sobs shook her body.

It took a while for Chris to appear in the doorway. Even then, he watched her weep silently, offering no comforting words or touch. This was a Chris that was foreign to her. She was unfamiliar with this side of him. Chris couldn't stand seeing her cry; he always offered her comfort even when they lived separately. When she was heartbroken over Anita's arrest months ago, Chris had come over. He climbed into bed with her and held her as she cried. She wanted that now, but it was becoming clear with each passing minute that she wasn't going to get any comfort from him.

"I visited John today," she said after a time, sitting up and hugging her pillow close. "Barry's wife, Mabel, was there visiting John. It was awful, Chris. I really don't know what I expected, but she attacked me. One minute she was seated, talking to John, and the next, she was all over me, hitting me and calling me a whore and a home wrecker. It was a terrifying and humiliating experience. Fortunately, Victoria led me away."

Chris lingered in silence, and the weight of unspoken words filled the air. Elizabeth glanced up, wondering if he had heard a word she said.

"I see," he muttered.

She frowned. *Was that all he could say?*

"Chris," she began, his name a whisper on her lips, a silent plea although she didn't know what she was begging for. Why had he come home to her? He clearly didn't love her anymore.

He turned away from her, and if he heard her say his name, his actions did not indicate it. "I need to go and get the boys from school. Desree's not able to pick them up this afternoon." He shut the door behind him, and Elizabeth broke down into sobs.

“Is Elizabeth okay?” Ava asked as he rejoined her in the library, her eyes filled with worry.

“She will be fine. She just needs some rest.” Chris avoided looking at Ava as he spoke. Ava saw too much for her own good. He leaned over the desk, grabbed his car keys, and then turned to her. “I’m going to get the boys from school and take them out for a meal. You want to come?”

“Try and stop me,” she said, her eyes twinkling mischievously, and Chris laughed.

For days, Ava had been trying to discuss his business, Chris West, with him. He had only given her audience today, and their conversation had not gone far before it was interrupted by Elizabeth’s return. Knowing Ava, she would follow him to the moon if she thought it would give her a chance to discuss business with him.

She was due to graduate from university in a few months and wanted to partner with him, so she ran Chris West in London, allowing him to make money from the business while focusing on Princewill Consortium’s operations in Africa. So far, she had yet to convince him, but she was a determined young lady, and he knew if she had a little time, she would.

They would go and pick the boys up so she could have time to talk to him. Talking with her would take his mind off Elizabeth and the situation at hand, which still bothered him greatly. He knew Elizabeth wanted him to hold her and comfort her, but he couldn’t bring himself to touch her. Yes, she was his wife, and yes, he had turned down John’s ridiculous offer, but that didn’t mean he was ready to communicate with her as a husband communicated with his wife.

Each time he gazed upon her, he envisioned her in Barry’s arms and Barry’s bed, and he wanted to hurt someone. He should probably have moved into his old flat, which was still available, but it was not John’s place to tell him what to do and how to handle a crisis in his marriage. He appreciated Ava’s company, as it would help distract him for a few hours.

“Okay, then, let’s go!” He extended his hand, and she grasped it; together, they walked downstairs.

Later that night, Chris found himself wide awake in bed, gazing up at the ceiling. Thoughts swirled in his mind, each one demanding attention and stirring a whirlwind of emotions. He

let out a long sigh, tossed the covers aside, and swung his legs over the edge of the bed. Slipping his feet into his comfy slippers, he walked to the floor-to-ceiling window and parted the thick curtains. As he gazed into the distance, his eyes found no sight to capture. It wasn't that the world was devoid of substance; rather, his mind was cloaked in a haze of swirling thoughts, leaving him blind to everything around him.

It seemed to him that he was plummeting into an abyss, spiralling out of control as every facet of his life slipped through his fingers. What had once seemed limited to one department of his life now threatened to escape its confines and take over his entire existence. Once more, his thoughts drifted back to Bio. Their simple conversation at Alabo's graveside had become complex, making him question whether their meeting was truly a coincidence. He also questioned whether he had done the right thing in giving her his number.

Only this evening, after Ava had gone home following a lengthy business discussion, he retired to his room where he received a troubling message from Bio, its contents gnawing at the corners of his mind. It was a text message paired with an adorable photo of a precious little baby.

*She is yours.*

The message was concise and direct, and as he read it and gazed at the accompanying image, his heart raced with surprise. He hurriedly typed his response, his fingers trembling with anxiety.

*Who is the baby?*

He hit the send button, and Bio's reply came almost immediately.

*She is yours.*

He was unsure how to react, so he sent a text asking the burning question in his heart.

*How old is she?*

Bio's response arrived just moments after he clicked the send button.

*She is almost seven.*

Chris recognised that he and Bio's offspring would be around that age. He checked the photo, and seeing no resemblance, he rapidly composed a short message.

*Show me a more recent picture.*

A photo of a charming little girl with missing front teeth was sent to his phone. He looked at it, instantly recognising Bio's features, but not his own. While he examined it, a message followed.

*She is yours. DNA testing will prove it.*

Chris's heart pounded as he typed a reply, anticipation surging through him with each keystroke.

*I don't know what game you're playing, Bio. You told me you aborted my child.*

He clicked the send button and was staring at the child's photo when Bio's response came through.

*No. I never told you that I aborted your child. I told you my mother asked me to abort your child. She thought I did. My husband believed she was his child, and that she was born prematurely. But she is yours.*

Chris stared at her message for a long time, and again at the child's photo, unsure how to respond as he pondered how this child would alter his current life. After a few minutes, he sent her a text, expressing the question that was weighing most heavily on his heart.

*What do you want?*

Bio's response was exactly what Chris had predicted, unfolding like a perfectly scripted scene.

*I want to be your wife.*

He wasted no time in responding to her.

*I am married.*

Bio's response came quickly, and again, it was what he had predicted.

*This is true; however, you could have a second family in Africa, a secret from your wife. Men do this all the time. It could work, especially since you already divide your time evenly between Africa and the UK.*

Chris sighed and glanced at the child's picture one more time before texting a response.

*I will visit Port Harcourt in a couple of weeks to get a DNA test done. Only if the results confirm that she is my child will I be open to discussing the future, both for you and for her.*

After sending that final text, he didn't wait for her response but put his phone away, yet his mind remained a whirlwind of unrelenting thoughts. The thoughts were powerful and lingered as he got ready for bed. And even when he climbed under the covers, they refused to let go, keeping him awake long after everyone had gone to bed.

Dissatisfied with simply looking out the window, he threw it open, letting in the cold winter air, and closed his eyes to enjoy the feeling on his face.

Bio had a burning desire for him to take their relationship to the next level and become her husband. The idea of a second family was simply unimaginable to him. He knew that to move forward, he would have to face the heart-wrenching decision to leave Elizabeth behind. It made sense for him to do that. Elizabeth had not only had an affair, but she was likely pregnant with a child that would forever bind her to that man.

That was a challenge he was utterly unprepared to face. If it were only the affair, perhaps he could find it in his heart to forgive her and leave the past behind. He had sinned too. He had cheated on her and, in the most abominable way, with a woman and her two daughters—the wife and daughters of his friend Alabo, a man who trusted him. The more he thought about it, the more certain he became that Elizabeth's infidelity was payback for his wicked deed against Alabo.

He had made mistakes. Elizabeth had made mistakes. They were both in difficult circumstances, and although he had a powerful desire to remain with her, particularly for James and Andrew—two boys he cherished above all else—it appeared sensible to dissolve the union.

*End it and then what?* his inner voice questioned. *Marry Bio?*

He couldn't do that, not after he'd been intimate with her sister and mother. Escaping that entire family appeared to be his best option. But if the child was his, and it likely was, how could he extricate himself from them? He let out a deep sigh, shaking his head as he acknowledged the chaos around him. What a disaster his life was turning out to be.

## Chapter Ten

“Yes, Rebekah’s very excited about her maid of honour role. Since Sarah called last week and asked her, she’s been on the phone with me almost daily, seeking tips on how to best perform the role before, during, and after the wedding. I can’t remember when last I saw her that excited about anything.”

With a playful swivel of her chair, Victoria chatted animatedly on the phone with her older sister Anna, who was thousands of miles away in America. The distance melted away as their laughter filled the room, bridging the gap between them.

“I’m glad she’s looking forward to it. We’re all filled with excitement over here, and seeing all of you again will be wonderful.” A suspenseful silence hung in the air. “I hope John will make it this time?”

When John was mentioned, Victoria’s smile faded, and her mind drifted back to the previous year when he hadn’t travelled with them due to that dreadful woman, Mabel. She was so hurt that she decided to end their marriage. To make matters worse, she recently discovered that the same woman had the audacity to visit him at home and make a move on him. The thought of Mabel kissing John in their home was unbearable for Victoria, and her anger grew once more. That terrible woman hit Elizabeth and insulted her as if she were any better. Her audacity was remarkable.

Victoria realised John was upset due to her outburst, especially after mentioning what he had confided in her. But was that the sort of thing he expected her to keep quiet about? Well, she could not. And she wasn’t sorry; she would slap Mabel’s face every chance she got. The woman would do well to stay as far away from her as possible.

She and John had not had a chance to talk about it at the office as John entered into back-to-back meetings, which made it even impossible to inform him when she was leaving for the day. His demeanour suggested displeasure when she took Elizabeth to see him after Mabel’s exit, indicating a potential fight at home. She was steeling herself for it. John was about to discover that the once docile Victoria had died on the day she learnt her son had been stabbed. In her stead stood a woman prepared to confront his anger with her own.

“Victoria?”

Anna's gentle voice forced her out of her contemplation.

"Ah, yes, John." Victoria let out a sigh and rubbed her temple. "I did mention that Sarah was getting married, but I haven't asked if he'll be joining us." She looked up and saw John standing in the doorway. She frowned. When had he returned? She had not heard him come in.

His facial expression suggested that now wasn't the best time to ask if he'd be joining them on the trip to Texas for Sarah's wedding. It also wasn't the time for any long chats with her sister. John looked like he had a million things to say to her and couldn't wait for her to get off the phone. She also had a million things to say to him, so it was time she got off the phone.

"I've got to go, Anna. John's just walked in."

"You will be a dear and ask if he's coming, won't you?"

"I most certainly will; either way, I'll inform you."

"Brilliant," Anna said. "Speak soon."

"Bye, Anna, give my love to Mum." Victoria ended the call and tossed her phone onto the papers on her desk in the cosy office she had created on the ground floor, beneath the stairs.

"John," she began, trying to sound casual. "You're home earlier than expected. Would you like some dinner?"

"You sound very much like the doting, dutiful wife, but you are nothing like that!" He turned and walked away.

*What did he mean by that?*

Victoria's brow furrowed as she slowly pushed herself up, a hint of determination dancing in her eyes. She followed him into his home office across the hall and stood in the doorway, watching as he placed his briefcase on the desk and then removed his jacket.

"I beg your pardon?" she asked. "Is this about —"

"You understand completely what this concerns, Victoria!" John did not look at her as he yanked off his tie and unfastened the top buttons of his shirt. "Don't play dumb with me!"

“You come home and disrespect me, and accuse me of not being a doting and dutiful wife because of that common courtesan? That lady of the night?”

“She is none of those things, and you know it! You sound unkind and unlike a Christian woman or women’s leader when you act as you did today or refer to another woman by such derogatory names.”

“I will call her even more vile names! And you don’t speak to me like your other women’s leader was perfect!”

John hesitated, his fingers hovering over the cuffs of his shirt as he contemplated rolling them up. “I am highly disappointed, Victoria. This behaviour isn’t acceptable following your misconduct. I shared with you in confidence that Mabel made a pass at me. That information was intended for your ears only. It was not for you to throw in her face the first chance you got. You had no right to say what you said or act as you did.”

Victoria shook her head, her emerald-green eyes sparking with fury. “I had every right, John! She was acting holier-than-thou; someone had to call her to order!”

“And to call her to order, you had to repeat something I told you in confidence? I maintain that you were out of line.”

“I’m not the one who was out of line; she is! She is a hypocrite!”

“She is a hurting woman! Her husband left her with three children, courtesy of my darling sister, and when she finds out, you expect her to give hugs and kisses?”

“I don’t expect her to give hugs and kisses, but I certainly don’t expect her to attack a pregnant woman and call her a whore when she has acted similarly and would have done exactly what Elizabeth did, if not more, had you encouraged her!”

“Yes, she might. But can we consider the reason she was acting that way?”

“I do not care about the reason. If she is a good woman, she would never have come after you, knowing that you are not just her pastor, but a married man, my husband!”

“I don’t think she was thinking clearly about her actions. She was abandoned and—”

“Oh, John, there are many women abandoned in this day and age, but they don’t go after another woman’s husband and try to steal him!”

“Whatever your views are about Mabel, it still doesn’t excuse the fact that you revealed something I told you in confidence. For years, I shared nothing with you, and it was for the very reason that I could not trust you to keep your mouth shut when your emotions took over like today!”

“I refuse to let you guilt-trip me, John! I’m not the one at fault here, and this isn’t some secret that’s yours to keep. You should never have hidden it from me in the first instance. I should have been told at the first convenience, and that brings me to the question that’s been in my heart: Why did you wait so long to tell me, John? Do you have feelings for Mabel?”

John laughed drily. “Don’t be ridiculous, Victoria! We’ve been through this already. I told you what happened, and I didn’t do so sooner because I feared you would act as you did today!”

“How is it that with everything that happened today, all you can do is blame me, John?”

Victoria demanded. “Mabel walks into your office, and as soon as I show up with Elizabeth, she is all over your pregnant sister, hitting her across the face. You don’t stop her, you don’t rebuke her, there seems to be nothing wrong with what she’s done, the only problem is Victoria.”

“Don’t twist things around, Victoria. The fact that I’m displeased with you doesn’t suggest that I condone Mabel’s actions. However, I understand why she acted as she did. Her marriage is in trouble, a second time and all because of Elizabeth. When Elizabeth walks in, belly first, and Mabel sees the baby bump, a reminder of her husband’s infidelity, how do you expect her to react?”

“Well, I expect her to remember that she made a pass at my husband to my face and behind my back, and curb her anger. The nerve of the woman to attack Elizabeth in my presence, knowing how she’s made a play for my man to my face.”

John let out a weary sigh, running a hand through his hair as he shook his head in disbelief.

“There’s no getting through to you tonight. I’m done here. But understand this, your betrayal today means I have to check what I tell you in the future, so don’t complain when you’re shut out like you once were!”

“That’s just fine, John! I’m capable of finding a life for myself that doesn’t include you! I’m not the woman I once was, John, begging for your attention. I’m done with that. You shut me

out of your life, and I will shut you out of mine until we become roommates living under the same roof. What you put into this marriage is what you'll get out of it!"

John stood there, a mix of disbelief and surprise etched on his face. He hadn't seen this coming, and her unexpected words hung in the air, leaving him momentarily speechless. Victoria. stared him down, making it clear she meant every word.

A faint rustle in the hall behind them made them both freeze, their heads snapping around in unison. John Jr. was carrying a platter of chicken wings in one hand and a can of Coke in the other. Victoria's brow furrowed as she stole a glance at the glowing digital clock on the wall behind John. Dinner was less than three hours ago.

"Er. Sorry, ignore me. I just came downstairs for a snack, but I'll disappear now." He turned on his heels and fled.

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Mabel gazed at her computer screen, her vision blurred by tears as the events of the day replayed in her mind. She still couldn't believe how quickly she had gone from victim to villain. Even now, hours later, the events that took place in Pastor John's office still hurt. More than the hateful names she had been called, she grieved what she perceived as the end of her relationship with Pastor John.

Her phone beeped, and she wiped away her tears, then reached for it with slightly shaky hands. It was George Michael, the man she'd met during the afternoon school run.

*How are you, Mabel? I'm asking not only out of politeness but also to genuinely understand and offer help.*

Mabel smiled as she read his message, which reminded her once again of Pastor John and how caring he'd been when she first met him. She began to text a response.

*Thank you for checking on me. I appreciate your concern. This season is challenging for me, so I can't say that I'm okay. However, I can say that I will persevere.*

She hit the send button, and before she put her phone away, his response arrived.

*I appreciate your positive outlook and strength. However, my experience caring for my mother and sisters has taught me that a woman shouldn't have to bear the burden of being*

*strong; that responsibility should fall to the man in her life. Would you be willing to share what's troubling you?*

Mabel smiled. His concern was so heartwarming. She believed that a man who cared for the women in his family was a good man. She was tempted to ask about his wife, but didn't. Instead, she shared her problems.

*My husband had an affair several years ago. He left me and our daughters for many months but returned last year, begging for my forgiveness. I forgave him, and we remarried. We were happy for a few months until he found out that his former lover is pregnant, and the baby might be his, conceived towards the end of their affair. It's a son, and as we have no male children, my husband wants the child desperately. This troubles me.*

She set her phone aside, curiosity piquing her senses as she heard a rustle outside her door. Turning her gaze, she spotted Tracy emerging from behind the door, a warm smile spreading across her face.

"Hello Mum," the teen greeted quietly, coming into the room and curling up on the pink suede armchair by the door.

"Tracy," Mabel frowned. "Why are you out of bed? You should return to bed right away. You have school tomorrow."

"I know. I was having difficulty sleeping because I was worried about you. I thought I'd come and make sure you're okay. You appeared to have been weeping when you collected us from school, and though you stated you had something in your eye, I've observed you since we arrived home, and you seem unhappy."

Mabel's eyes welled up again as she recalled Tracy's support after Barry left them, all due to Elizabeth. It would be easy to rely on Tracy again, to share what was happening and have her step up to fulfil the role of a mother, but it wouldn't be right. Tracy was a child and did not need that burden. She had thrust it upon the teen's shoulders once; she would not do it again. Besides, Tracy was preparing to take her A-level exams the following year, and Mabel didn't want anything to distract her as she studied.

"You are wise beyond your years, aren't you, young lady?" she teased, and Tracy grinned.

"Thank you for looking out for me, but I'm fine. Yes, I was a little sad earlier on, but that's life, things will happen that make me sad, but they don't have to worry you. God looks after

me, Dad looks after me, and I look after myself, so though things make me sad, they won't destroy me. I'm fine."

"Are you sure, Mummy?" Tracy stood up and came closer, touching Mabel's shoulder. "I still remember when Dad left, and you fainted and were hospitalised afterwards. I don't want that to happen again, Mummy."

Mabel couldn't hold back the tears any longer; they fell freely as she stood and hugged Tracy fiercely. "That won't happen ever again, I promise you."

She wouldn't let it. She loved Barry but had ceased to make him and their marriage her whole world. It was the only way she could protect herself if he chose to hurt her again. As long as her daughters were fine, nothing else mattered. Once she lived for Barry and their marriage, now she lived for her girls.

Finally convinced that Mabel was fine and not having another nervous breakdown, Tracy went to bed. Mabel, meanwhile, picked up her phone, which had beeped while she and Tracy were talking. George had responded to her message. She opened it and read.

*I'm sorry to hear about your troubles. As I mentioned earlier today, everyone needs a friend during tough times. Talking about what you're going through can be very helpful. Although we've only just met, I would like to be your friend and support you through this difficult period.*

Mabel smiled. He was right about her needing a friend, and she was touched that he wanted to be her friend and support her through this difficult time. The man was too good to be true. Once again, she was reminded of how she'd met Pastor John and how he'd been a friend who helped her bounce back after being abandoned. She concluded that George might be a replacement for Pastor John.

She sat thinking of a suitable response when Barry appeared in the doorway. His eyes were weary, shadowed by exhaustion, and a fierce scowl twisted his face, revealing a storm of anger brewing just beneath the surface. He was likely aware of the incident that occurred in Pastor John's office. Mabel steeled her resolve, anticipating the storm that lay ahead.

"I can't believe you went out in public and displayed such disrespectful behaviour. You may appear sophisticated on the outside, but underneath, you are still crude. How could you start a fight in Pastor John's office?"

“What was I supposed to do when I saw your pregnant whore?”

“Could you please display a bit of decorum? Your words and your actions are vile and, might I add, unnecessary!” He took a step into the room and dropped his briefcase on the armchair Tracy had just vacated and began to undo his tie. “What did you hope to achieve by hitting Elizabeth? Hmm? Do you realise you could have been arrested for assault? Have you completely lost your mind?”

“I haven’t lost my mind!” Mabel stood up and folded her arms across her chest. “And I wouldn’t have been the only one arrested for assault because Victoria Griffith hit me. But of course, you wouldn’t care about that, I’m not pregnant with your heir.”

Barry sighed, shaking his head as he shrugged off his jacket. “There’s no need for sarcasm. I lacked any such information.”

“Because I’m not important. You’ve been in a frenzy since you realised Elizabeth was expecting a son. It’s all that matters to you. But don’t expect me to give her a hug and kiss for sleeping with my husband and wrecking my home!”

Barry tossed his jacket on the armchair. “No one has wrecked your home. I told you, Elizabeth and I are over.” He took a step closer and gently touched her chin to peer at her face, but she stepped away. “Why did Victoria Griffith hit you?”

The question caught Mabel off guard, and she wondered if she should say anything. Barry had known she was attracted to Pastor John, but she’d never told him about the kiss. Would it be wise to tell him something that happened while they were divorced, and which would probably affect how he viewed the preacher going forward?

“What sort of question is that?” she asked. “What does it matter why she hit me? You came in here furious because I hit your lover, but when I said that Victoria Griffith hit me, you asked why. If it is a valid reason, will it justify her actions, Barry? Your wife was slapped three times across the face. Where is your sense of indignation?”

Barry moved in closer, positioning himself so that only the desk stood between them. “You should never have started a fight,” he said, placing his hands on her upper arms and rubbing them gently. “Elizabeth is not a threat; she and I were over before I returned to you.”

Mabel swatted his hands away. “How can you be over? Every day that whore’s belly is swelling with your child!”

“What do you want, Mabel? What do you want from me?” Barry scratched his head in frustration, overwhelmed by the situation.

“It’s too late to ask that, Barry. What do you want me to say, that I wish the child in her womb would not see the light of day?”

“Mabel, I understand you’re angry with me and detest Elizabeth, but the child has done you no wrong.”

“Yes, it has! The moment it was conceived, it wrecked my home, so don’t stand there and tell me it’s done me no harm.” With a graceful motion, she stepped away from behind the desk and brushed past him, heading towards the door. “I’m off to bed. If you want dinner, get it yourself, or eat at Elizabeth’s!”

Barry watched helplessly as she walked away. Much later, when he entered the bedroom, he found her propped up against the pillows, illuminated by the soft glow of her bedside lamp, her phone in her hand. She failed to acknowledge him but was texting, her fingers dancing across the screen, and a playful giggle escaped her lips, filling him with intrigue.

“Who’s that?” He knew Mabel well enough to recognise when she was flirting.

She cast him a burning glare. “What do you mean?”

“Who are you texting on your phone?”

She shrugged. “A customer who’s excited to place a substantial order with *Ara*!”

He didn’t believe her, but he decided not to pursue the matter further as he stripped off his clothes and headed for the shower.

## Chapter Eleven

“What does it mean to take the lead in your household?”

John scanned the packed hall and met the gaze of over a thousand eager faces; each one filled with anticipation. The men exchanged glances but stayed quiet, the tension in the air thick enough to cut. Each man likely contemplated the direction he was heading with this rhetorical question.

The same question kept whirling in his mind as he meticulously refined his sermon notes for the men’s breakfast meeting. It was a time for men to connect, share stories, and enjoy a hearty meal together, all while building friendships and strengthening their faith. It attracted many men from within and without The Vine Church. For John, it was always a time to teach the men about servant leadership.

Behind him, Victoria sat as the only woman present in the meeting. She looked elegant and composed in white trousers, a light blue knit shirt, and a navy blazer. On the surface, she appeared poised and unruffled, but beneath that calm facade, a whirlwind of questions stirred within her. What could possibly be the reason for John’s invitation to the predominantly male meeting? It was her first time, even though John had held the men’s breakfast meetings for over a decade.

John was eager to showcase the principles of servant leadership to the attendees, ready to inspire and lead by example. Having Victoria present was the only way he could accomplish it effectively. Since John Jr.’s stabbing, God had been working on his heart, making him a servant leader who leads with love, humility, and selflessness, rather than the arrogant dictator he had been, leading with pride and selfishness and expecting everyone to fall in line. He was not perfect, but he was working on it, and he could see that his family’s attitude toward God and the church had undergone a change. They didn’t have to be forced; now they were inclined to draw closer to God.

He couldn’t shake the memories of the other night, replaying the heated argument with Victoria in his mind. Each word they exchanged echoed in his thoughts. Long after she had gone to bed, he remained downstairs in his home office working on his notes for today’s meeting. As he did, he concluded that Victoria was incorrect, had behaved badly and owed him an apology. If she wasn’t going to apologise, he was content to cease all communication

and relations with her until she did. As he worked on his notes and his message to men about what a husband should be as a servant leader, he paused and sighed.

“John, you’re nothing but a fraud,” he muttered under his breath.

He stood up, a determined glint in his eye, and made his way upstairs, eager to find Victoria. This wasn’t about who was right. If he wanted his family to apologise when in error, he had to teach them and show them what that looked like.

As he stepped into the bedroom, he found Victoria propped up against the pillows, wholly absorbed in her book. The soft glow of the bedside lamp illuminated her focused expression, and she didn’t even glance up at him as he entered, lost in her own world of words. He couldn’t help but notice she was wrapped in one of those dreadful flannel pyjamas that he detested.

The sight stirred a mix of amusement and exasperation within him. She wore them whenever they quarrelled. It was her way of signalling that she wasn’t in the mood for intimacy. The old him would have taken issue with her attitude, but the new him was teaching her how to be better by being better himself. He sat perched on the edge of the bed, his gaze fixed intently on her.

“I acknowledge the things that I did wrong, and I’m sorry.”

To his shock, Victoria unexpectedly burst into tears, her sobs reverberating with the weight of her unspoken feelings.

“I am sorry for disappointing you, John. You shared with me something in confidence, and I shouldn’t have repeated it to anyone. You won’t trust me again, and it’s all my fault. I’m sorry.”

Just like that, the issue was resolved when he led by example and showed his wife what it meant to apologise for one’s wrongs. With that realisation, he approached his message preparation with a newfound sense of confidence. Free from self-doubt, he was eager to share his thoughts. Inviting Victoria to attend was also easy, knowing he was working behind closed doors to live out the message he preached.

“Today’s breakfast meeting will explore an exciting theme: the husband as a leader! Gentlemen, please stay with me as we explore the crucial role of leadership in our relationships. As usual, a question-and-answer session will follow this message.”

John took a moment, allowing the weight of the message to settle in the air around him before he pressed on. “God has chosen the husband to lead, and that leadership is not about control, asserting authority, or fulfilling selfish desires. It is servant leadership and is demonstrated by serving one’s wife and children.”

He delved into the profound concept of Jesus as a servant leader, illustrating how His humility and selflessness set a powerful example for all leaders. The men watched with rapt attention, their pens racing across paper as they eagerly jotted down every word he spoke. He observed intently, taking deliberate pauses now and then to allow them the chance to jot down notes and keep pace with the unfolding insights. He had a vision that, much more than just jotting down notes, they would take the inspiration home and truly immerse themselves in practising what they learnt.

“Jesus, in contrasting between servant-oriented leadership and power, made statements such as, ‘I am among you as one who serves’, and ‘the greatest should be like a servant’. He didn’t stop there; He washed the feet of those He led.”

John stepped away from the pulpit and approached Victoria, and at that moment, an usher who had been briefed placed a bowl of warm water at her feet. John went down on one knee before the congregation and reached for Victoria’s feet. As he looked up, their eyes met and held briefly. Her eyes were filled with tears as the significance of what he was about to do struck her.

He averted his gaze, gently slipped off her elegant navy suede pumps, and tenderly washed her feet, bringing a sense of warmth and intimacy to the moment. After finishing, he took out his handkerchief and dried her feet, disregarding the towel available, and then carefully slipped her shoes back on.

As he stood up, the room erupted into a thunderous standing ovation from the men, while Victoria’s cheeks flushed a deep crimson, betraying her overwhelming emotions, and John held up his hand for silence.

“I am still a work in progress, but I have demonstrated to you what it means to lead, go home and do likewise.”

As John wrapped up the men’s breakfast meeting, he spotted Barry making his way through the crowd. He was exactly the person John had been hoping to see. It was time for them to sit down and have a much-needed chat.

“Barry! How good to see you. I see you made it to the men’s breakfast meeting this time.”

John extended his hand, and with a determined grip, Barry clasped John’s hand firmly.

“Ah, yes, I did, Pastor John. Fortunately, I wasn’t away on business this weekend, and so nothing could keep me away.”

“I’m glad to hear it. I hope you were blessed?”

“As always, Pastor John.” Barry gave John a thumbs-up. “It’s always a delight to hear you talk to men. I especially enjoyed watching the demonstration today, where you washed your wife’s feet.”

“Well, let’s hope Victoria loved it too. She doesn’t like surprises, and that was one big surprise I gave her.” He chuckled heartily, and Barry’s laughter joined in, bubbling over like two friends sharing an inside joke. “How is Mabel? And how are the girls?”

“She’s fine. The girls are doing great. I just thought I’d come and say hello before rushing off.”

“That was thoughtful of you, and if you can spare a few minutes, I’d like to have a word.”

“Of course, Pastor John.”

“Good. Walk me to my office, we’ll talk there.”

In John’s office, he dropped into his swivel chair, finally relieved to sit down after hours on his feet. Barry sat down in an armchair across from John’s desk, looking nervous as he undoubtedly realised why John wanted to speak with him.

With determination in his eyes, John dove straight into the issue at hand. He leaned forward, his hands clasped tightly on his desk, signalling that he meant business.

“Barry, you’re probably already aware why I asked to have a word.”

“Yes, Pastor John.” Barry squirmed in his seat, a palpable tension radiating from him as he struggled to find comfort.

“You’ve gone through a lot of trouble opening up a can of worms and unsettling not only Elizabeth’s family and yours, but mine as well.” John paused to let his words sink in. “I need to understand what you’re after. What do you hope to gain?”

“Hope to gain?” Barry looked surprised. “Pastor John, this is my son we’re talking about. My flesh and blood!”

John held up a hand to stop him. “It remains unconfirmed, Barry, until the baby’s birth and a DNA test verifies paternity. There’s a chance Elizabeth may not have conceived with you and conceived when she renewed her marital intimacy with her husband.”

“Well, that chance is doubtful. Additionally, I’m unsure when she and her husband resumed their sexual relationship. And unless she was with both of us at the same time, it seems to me that she jumped very quickly into his bed after jumping out of mine.”

“Barry, I haven’t called you here to get information on when Elizabeth left your bed and returned to Chris’s. I have called you to help you hopefully see that you are doing some damage, which may be unnecessary.”

Barry spread his arms, his amazement evident. “Pastor John, all I’ve done is prepare everyone’s mind about claiming my son. If that boy turns out to be mine, I want it clear to everyone that I am going to be his father, and it will be my name on his birth certificate and not some other man’s.”

John sat for a little while staring at Barry. Then he let out a deep sigh, his shoulders slumping as he sank back into his chair, exhaustion etched on his face. “I won’t take up any more of your time. But I need you to please stay away from Elizabeth for the duration of her pregnancy. When the baby is born, I will arrange how you do your DNA testing, and if the child is yours, you’re free to go to Elizabeth for a paternal rights conversation.”

Barry shrugged. “Sounds fair enough. My older sister arrived from Lagos very early this morning. She is excitedly looking forward to seeing the baby when it arrives and hopes to meet Elizabeth, but I understand that you don’t want her stressed.”

“I appreciate you respecting my wishes,” John said. “Your sister is welcome to attend church and meet me and Victoria after the service, and she can accompany you for any DNA testing, but I don’t want either of you anywhere near Elizabeth until the DNA test confirms you’re the father of her baby.”

“Your point is noted, Pastor John.”

Barry got to his feet and made his way to the door. As he opened it, he glanced over his shoulder, “Bye for now, Pastor John.”

Before John could respond, and before Barry turned his head to see where he was going, a man suddenly appeared in the doorway, blocking his exit. As Barry caught sight of him, the man lunged forward, shoving him with unexpected force, so he staggered back into John's office.

With a jolt, John sprang from his chair, his eyes wide in disbelief. "Chris!"

Chris walked calmly into the office, casually dressed in blue jeans, a designer hooded jumper and a pair of trainers. He ignored John, and his eyes were fixed on Barry, who was backing away from him slowly.

"You're the man who's been sleeping with my wife?" Chris asked. His voice was a deep rumble laced with an unsettling menace that sent shivers down Barry's spine.

"Listen, man, it's not what you think," Barry began to say, but Chris punched him hard, knocking him to the floor.

With a malicious glint in his eye, Chris snatched John's sleek fountain pen from the desk. Dropping to his knees, he positioned himself just above Barry, ready to unleash whatever clever scheme he had up his sleeve. The atmosphere crackled with anticipation.

"Don't move, or I'll stick it in!" he snarled at Barry.

"Shall I call security, Pastor John?"

John lifted his gaze, only to find Liam frozen in the doorway. The young man was pale, his complexion shifting to a ghostly white, while his hazel eyes widened in disbelief, reflecting the shock that coursed through him. A couple of men were peering over his shoulder to catch a glimpse of the ruckus in John's office. He lifted his hand to signal that everything was under control, then turned to Chris.

"Chris, will you please stop this?" John hoped the other man would listen to him. He had never seen him in this state before. He looked like a completely different person and nothing like the Chris that John knew.

"Stay out of this, John," Chris said without looking at John. "The man thinks he can sleep with my wife, announce that my baby is his, and I'll take it on the chin." He drew the pen closer, its steel nib hovering perilously near Barry's neck.

Barry was gasping for breath, his heart racing like a wild stallion. He raised both hands in a pleading gesture, his eyes wide with urgency. "Please calm down, and let's talk like reasonable men."

Chris laughed drily. "Do I look reasonable, hmm?" he asked. "Look at me and listen carefully because I will only say this once. I'm not afraid of death, my good friend, and I'm not afraid of prison. I'm not a good man, but I'm trying to be a Christian, so don't provoke me to act unchristianly and stay away from my family."

Barry looked at Chris, stunned and unable to utter a single word. John drew closer to both men. As he did, Chris rose, placed the pen back on John's desk and walked casually towards the door, hands shoved into the pockets of his hooded jumper. As he reached the door, he turned to Barry.

"Put a leash on your wife because if she lays a finger on my wife again, I will shut down your business concerns in Africa." He brushed past Liam, who quickly followed him, shutting the door as John and Barry stared on in bewilderment.

"Who is that guy?" Barry asked, turning to John as he pulled himself off the ground and dusted off his suit, which he had worn for the business lunch and dinner meetings scheduled for that Saturday.

John didn't respond; he was contemplating the very same question.

## Chapter Twelve

“The dress is absolutely lovely!” Jade exclaimed as she turned around in front of the full-length mirror, her excitement evident.

As Mabel watched the older woman who, at sixty, looked half her age, she couldn’t help but think she looked stunning in the navy blue *Asoke* haute couture gown she had ordered from *Ara* to attend an African movie premiere later that evening. Born to a Yoruba father and an English mother, Jade Hawthorne was strikingly beautiful, with rich brown curly hair that fell past her shoulders and blue eyes almost as deep as the dress she wore.

“I’m glad you like it.” Mabel smiled at the woman who had become not just her number one client, but also her business mentor over the last few months. “A satisfied customer is my daily goal.”

“Well, I’m certainly a satisfied customer.” Jade turned around one more time. “The gown fits flawlessly. You’ve done the adjustments very well. I have no complaints.”

“I’m glad to hear that,” Mabel observed as Jade walked around the room trying to spot any area that may require a final adjustment, but finding none. The gown draped perfectly, and Mabel liked how it moved in unison with Jade. She had worked tirelessly for days with her tailors to achieve this, and she was pretty pleased with herself. However, she had only one cause for concern. “Do you find the fabric too scratchy?”

Jade paused mid-stride and turned to Mabel, surprise flickering across her features. “Of course not! It’s perfect! I love it!”

“Glad to hear it.” Mabel beamed. “Why don’t you try the others?”

In typical Jade Hawthorne style, she had not just ordered one dress for tonight’s event but three. She did that every time and eventually wore the best of the dresses to the event.

“Good idea.”

As Mabel helped her get out of the dress, their eyes met in the mirror. “You appear somewhat unhappy. Are you okay, Mabel?”

“Yes, I’m fine, thank you for asking.” Mabel smiled.

Jade turned to observe her. “I didn’t ask that question to be polite. I do want to know how you are. Is that husband of yours giving you grief?”

Mabel moved away, without answering the question. She hung up the navy dress, picked up a black and gold dress in *Asoke* and faux feathers, and held it towards Jade.

“Try this one next. I can’t wait to see how it sits on you.”

“Yep!” Jade turned around and faced the mirror as Mabel undid the buttons on the dress and helped her get into it. “It’s just as I feared. You can’t trust any man. He’s only just remarried you. The honeymoon is barely over, and yet here you are looking miserable.”

Mabel smiled as she buttoned the dress. “It’s not clear to you that my husband is the reason for my unhappiness.”

“Huh,” Jade sneered. “You must think I was born yesterday. It’s always the husband. And that’s why I advise women to have a life of their own.”

“I think the dress is nice, but it could use some alterations to the waist.” Mabel leaned forward to pinch the fabric at the dress's waistline. Jade turned around swiftly to face her, causing Mabel to drop her hand and step back.

“Do you know what I did when my husband cheated on me years ago?”

Mabel hid a smile as she shook her head. “No, Mrs. Hawthorne.”

“I killed him. In here.” Jade placed her hand over her heart. “It would not have made economic sense to walk away from him at the time, so I stayed, used his money to build my empire, got a secret lover and carried on like he didn’t exist. At first, he was too busy with business and mistresses to realise the change in me. Now, he’s eighty years old, seeking companionship from the wife he married forty years ago, except she has no time for him as she’s too busy expanding her business, visiting her children and grandchildren, partying with her friends, and being entertained by lovers half her age and generally enjoying her life. She’s too busy to care. Now, he wants a marriage. But I don’t.”

Jade turned around to face the mirror and admired the dress. Her eyes held Mabel’s in the mirror. “Sometimes, leaving the man is not the best punishment. Staying is. Be like me, Mabel. Live life to the fullest.”

“Of course, Mrs Hawthorne,” Mabel said quietly.

They spoke no more of marriage but focused on the dresses Jade had come to fit. And they talked about *Ara* and other clients Jade had lined up for Mabel. Mabel was pleased when the topic shifted to business, and not once did she worry that the work would take her away from Barry. Why should she? He had begged her to marry him again, he had made promises, and to be fair to him, he had kept all the promises, but this issue with the child he had fathered outside was too much to bear. She couldn't bear it.

His sister, Kofo, arrived early that morning from Lagos, a reminder that Barry was about to have a son with another woman. Kofo had not yet had a chance to speak to Mabel. When she arrived, she was jet-lagged, and after breakfast, she went to lie down. Mabel knew that once she returned home, Kofo would call her for a discussion, remind her that Barry was an only son and needed a male offspring to perpetuate the Babs-Jonah lineage and that Mabel was being selfish if she wasn't already rolling out the red carpet for the arrival of the golden child. Mabel wished she'd had the temerity to refuse Barry when he begged her a second time to let Kofo stay.

She arrived home late, hoping to go upstairs, see the girls before they went to sleep, and then have a light snack before turning in for the night herself. She knew from talking with Tracy on the phone earlier that Kofo had dinner with the girls, and she hoped the older woman would go straight to bed and not be awake when she got in, as she was not in the mood for small talk or, worse still, a quarrel.

"Mabel, you're home."

Mabel stopped in her tracks, said a silent prayer, and entered the living room, where Kofo was sprawled on the sofa, watching an African movie on the television. She was a beautiful woman of sixty-four years, and although she did not eat right or exercise, like Jade Hawthorne, she spent a considerable amount of money on cosmetic surgery, which meant that she still looked very good for her age.

She wasn't very tall, but she compensated for that by buying four-inch stiletto shoes, and she drew attention to herself by wearing unusual coloured lipsticks. This evening, she wore blue lipstick to match her blue nail polish on both her fingers and toenails, along with a blue *Adire* boubou gown.

The girls were missing, and the Caribbean housekeeper, Sabrina, a young woman in her early thirties, hurried in with tea and biscuits on a tray for Kofo. Mabel smiled her thanks at the

younger woman, who Kofo would have kept very busy with endless demands. The girls would undoubtedly have had their dinner and retired to Tracy's room to watch some television before turning in for the night. They were not fans of Kofo and kept out of her way as much as possible.

"Good evening, Sister Kofo." Mabel tried to smile. "I hope you've had a pleasant day."

"Yes, I have, thank you." Kofo sat up as Sabrina set the tea before her and began to pour.

As Sabrina hurried away, Mabel called after her, "It's okay to go home now, Sabrina."

"Thank you, Mrs Babs-Jonah," Sabrina smiled at her and scurried away, probably before Kofo made another request.

Kofo lifted her teacup, took a sip, and set it down before taking a bite of the all-butter shortbread finger biscuit. Mabel cringed as she wondered about the calories in each biscuit, while also considering the calories in the *Amala* and *Efo-Riro* soup that Kofo insisted on having for dinner.

"I'm unsure if Barry told you, but I will be accompanying you to church tomorrow. I want to meet the woman who is pregnant with Barry's son. Barry tells me her brother is the pastor of the church. It would be good to meet him and his wife, too."

"Of course. I'm sure they would all like to meet you, especially her husband!"

Kofo disregarded the sarcasm in Mabel's tone and gestured towards the far end of the elegant U-shape sofa. "Please sit down, I would like a word."

Mabel sat quietly, seething at being invited to sit in her own home! The nerve of the woman!

"I am all ears, Sister Kofo."

"I understand that you are giving your husband a lot of trouble over this child," she began, lowering the volume of the television and turning in her seat so she could face Mabel. "Are you aware that Barry is an only son?"

"Of course, I am."

Kofo nodded as she took another bite of the biscuit and washed it down with her tea. "You are not wise," she said after a while. "Understanding that Barry is an only son and you have no son for him, and yet you refuse to welcome this child with open arms, you are not wise. Let me give you a little friendly advice."

Mabel reined in her temper. “I am listening.”

Kofo sipped some more tea before speaking. “It is in your interest, and the interest of your marriage and your daughters, that you accept what is. Were you expecting Barry to stay with you and be content when you have given him no sons to carry on the Babs-Jonah name? And are you expecting him to deny his son because he was born outside your marriage? You are a Yoruba woman; have you forgotten the culture? You came to the UK and changed your name from Aramide to Mabel, and now you also want to throw your culture away?

“Things are not done that way. Our culture not only recognises the children of lovers, but also embraces and celebrates them, especially when they are male. You are aware of this; I don’t have to educate you. You can accept the omo-ale, lover’s child, soon to be born to your husband, or you can say goodbye to your marriage. I am here to make certain the woman and her family understand that the child she is carrying has a father willing to acknowledge paternity. Our son will not be given to another man.”

“Are you done?”

“Yes. I am done for now.”

Without a word, Mabel rose, picked up her bag and went upstairs in search of her daughters. She pulled herself together and blinked back the tears. It was essential to remain strong for the girls.

Much later, she sat in bed, her phone in her hand as she and George texted each other back and forth. She giggled at his jokes, enjoying his easy personality. Since that first day, she had been spending a great deal of time texting him, and she realised she was not only enjoying it but also looked forward to receiving his messages.

She paused as she thought about what she was doing. George might be a good man, but was it wise to cultivate a friendship with him? She remembered the last time Barry had seen her, and she lied, saying he was a client. Lying to Barry had not felt wrong, and that worried her. Lost in her swirling thoughts, she gnawed on her bottom lip.

What are you doing, girl? Where do you think this is heading? If you can’t disclose whom you’re chatting with to your husband, and you find yourself lying about it, doesn’t that suggest you’re on a slippery slope? Do you want to follow Mrs Hawthorne’s advice? Do you want to cheat on Barry? What happens when your daughters find out? Is that the kind of

example you want to set for them? Break it off now before you get into trouble. Without further hesitation, she sent a text to George.

*I have enjoyed texting you and chatting with you has helped lift my spirits, but I don't think it's wise to carry on. Thank you for allowing me to discuss my problems with you. Goodbye.*

She switched her phone off, adjusted her pillows and lay down, exhaling as she did.

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“What’s the matter, Barry? You look like death!”

Lanre Fischer let out a hearty chuckle as Barry slid into the chair opposite him at their favourite restaurant, a familiar ambience of laughter and the tantalising aroma of delicious African food enveloping them. It appeared to be the ideal setting for another unforgettable evening. Except that Barry was having a difficult day.

After being assaulted by Elizabeth’s unstable husband in Pastor John’s office earlier that morning, he spent some time researching the man. It was essential for him to do so. No one could casually threaten to ruin another’s business operations without attracting their attention. He had dedicated years to building his business and wanted to determine if Chris David-West could fulfil the threat he had made. His Google search provided enough information to make him cautious.

Elizabeth had always spoken of the man dismissively, leading him to believe that he was a weakling unworthy of consideration. However, that was certainly not the case. Chris Chimbiko David-West had many influential friends in Africa and beyond. His business empire and its success attested to that fact. His online pictures, which followed the rise of his business empire until the crash of the David-West Tower, showed him in different moods. Beneath the handsome facade and disarming smile, Barry detected a subtle but menacing presence.

Chris David-West had made no idle threat, and that left Barry wondering how he could take his child without suffering any devastating business and financial consequences. And as if that wasn’t bad enough, some lunatic had called him as he drove to dinner with his friends, wanting to ascertain if he had impregnated a married woman. He told the bloke to get lost and

cut the call as he was in no mood for foolishness. To put it mildly, he was having a very tough day, and neither the presence of his friends nor the aroma of the delicious African food filling the air could lift the heaviness in his chest.

“Don’t talk nonsense, Lanre,” Dele, the third member of their business trio, chided. “Leave the man alone; he’s been under a lot of pressure recently.”

“I don’t see why,” Lanre said. “Finally, he is getting the son he’s always wanted.” He patted Barry on the shoulder and sipped his Gin and Tonic.

“And in the most awkward of circumstances,” Dele murmured, turning his head to catch the attention of the waiter.

Lanre pulled a face. “I see no issue. If the child is his, it’s his. He’s not the first man to have a child with a lover.”

“Ex-lover,” Dele corrected and signalled the waiter.

Lanre shrugged. “What difference does it make?”

“It makes a world of difference to his wife and her husband!” Dele snapped.

“Will you two stop it?” Barry grumbled. “I haven’t called this meeting to talk about my personal affairs, however interesting they may be.”

“You hear that?” Dele asked.

Lanre looked unperturbed. “I had to bring it up, he looks terrible.”

“And your concern isn’t helping!” Dele chided just as the waiter arrived.

For the next few minutes, while they placed their order, both men paused their arguments, and Barry experienced relief.

“Listen, don’t be a bad influence on this man, Dele,” Lanre said as soon as the waiter walked away from their table. “Just because you’ve found the love of your life and you’re content and not looking to play the field doesn’t mean you should encourage Barry to tow the same line.”

Before Dele could retort, Lanre stood to his feet.

“Where are you going?” Barry asked.

“I need to use the restroom quickly. I’ll be back in a jiffy.”

As he walked away, Dele looked at Barry.

“Oh, please don’t say anything,” Barry groaned.

Dele ignored the request. “Listen up, man, I’m aware you’ve received advice from many sources about this, and you might not want to listen to me, but I’ll share my opinion, regardless.”

“Go ahead,” Barry mumbled.

What was the point in saying otherwise? Dele clearly had a lot to get off his chest concerning this matter, and he wouldn’t stop until he did. Barry just hoped he would forever be ignorant of Chris David-West’s threat to tamper with their business operations.

“If I were you, I would let this matter go. You believe this child is yours, and he may be, but remember, she is married, as are you, and the likelihood of a suitable father-son bond before adulthood is minimal. Even if they let you have him, Mabel will give you hell, and she may never accept him. If you push, you may lose Mabel and your girls.

“You’re at a crossroads and a very important one, and you must ask yourself what is important to you and what you’re willing to sacrifice, because sacrifice you must. Mabel is still very raw from you abandoning her because of this same woman. And even though you’ve kissed and made up, it is too early to begin to push this agenda of bringing home a child born to you by the very woman you left her for. And a son, for that matter, a son she would have loved to give you but couldn’t.”

Dele was being honest. Perhaps he should never have brought this matter up. Or waited to be certain the child was his. Either way, it was already too late for that. What was done was done, and he might not only lose his marriage but also his business. If his affair caused Dele and Lanre to suffer, then he would have also lost good friends. It was a mess. Defeat washed over him like a dark wave.

“I could use a drink right about now.” He sighed, the weight of his words hanging heavy in the air.

“You’re going to make a drunk out of this man, Dele,” Lanre said as he returned to the table in time to hear Barry’s last statement. “Stop filling his head with nonsense.”

## Chapter Thirteen

“I think you need to be aware of what’s happening, John.”

John looked up from his laptop as Pastor Tom burst into his office, followed closely by Pastor Maranatha. Both men looked grim in their dark suits. In the open doorway, Liam stood, neither entering nor retreating. He looked just as grim.

John’s eyes flicked to the digital clock mounted on the wall, its bright numbers indicating that it was almost time for them to go and join the Sunday morning service. “What’s going on?”

Tom came to a sudden stop in front of John’s desk, his hands disappearing into the pockets of his sleek suit pants as he took a moment to gather his thoughts. “I just received news from the head of security that there were reporters on the church grounds this morning. I understand that they were talking to members arriving for the service, wanting to find out if the pastor’s sister had an affair with another member of the church and is pregnant by him.”

“And so, it begins!” John buried his face in his hands, overwhelmed by a wave of emotions that threatened to spill over.

“We believe that the press was tipped off following the squabble in your office yesterday after the men’s meeting,” Maranatha said.

John lifted his head and locked eyes with the younger man. “Of course.”

“I apologise, Pastor John, I should have been more discreet,” Liam said, his face reddening in apparent embarrassment.

“It’s not your fault, Laim. The way things were going, this was bound to get out sooner or later.” With a soft sigh escaping his lips, John turned his attention to Tom and Maranatha. “I think I’m glad it’s out now and we can focus on how to mitigate it.”

“It will be on every church gossip site, blog post, and social media before the day is over,” Tom said. “What do you want us to do?”

“Do nothing,” John said.

“I beg your pardon?” Maranatha frowned.

“We do nothing,” John repeated.

“Don’t you think it would be a good idea to address the church before your sermon this morning?” Tom asked.

“And tell them what exactly, Tom?” With a tired sigh, John enquired, his voice heavy with exhaustion. “Tell them that my married sister had an affair with another woman’s husband and may or may not be pregnant by him?”

A heavy hush settled over the room, wrapping everyone in an uneasy stillness. Both pastors averted their eyes, their discomfort palpable as they struggled to meet his gaze. Liam decided he had heard enough and, slightly uncomfortable, quietly withdrew, gently shutting the door behind him.

Tom inched closer. “I’m unsure if remaining silent is the most prudent course of action. The press crew questioned the members about the baby shower and their feelings regarding their pastor and his wife hosting it for his sister on church grounds, despite the sister’s immoral behaviour.”

“I believe that for this very reason, you must address the church, Pastor John,” Maranatha said quietly. His voice was a gentle plea.

John shook his head. “I have feared a scandal coming to The Vine Church for some time now. I was warned in a dream, and Victoria and I prayed about it. That’s all the action that I am willing to take on the matter. I will not mount the pulpit to announce my sister’s wrong choices, either to justify or condemn those choices. I also will not be mounting the pulpit to excuse myself for hosting her baby shower on church grounds. Let people gossip, let them react to the press release and social media posts how they see fit.”

“John, I need you to think about this carefully,” Tom began when John was done speaking. “People are aware that only last year, Pastor Ben got Mariatu, the assistant worship leader, pregnant, and they were both suspended from their duties for months. It would appear to some that you are being hypocritical, punishing Mariatu for adultery with Pastor Ben but celebrating your sister on church grounds for the very same act. This is not necessarily about Elizabeth; it’s about explaining your actions.”

Still, John shook his head. “If people imagine I was familiar with my sister’s predicament and I gave her an extravagant baby shower, then they don’t understand my character and should likely look for another pastor.”

“How would you like us to react?” Tom asked.

“People are sure to approach us with questions,” Maranatha said. “The young people, especially, will come to me as the youth pastor when they see posts on social media.”

“Refer everyone who talks to you back to me.”

“You’re sure?” Tom asked.

“Yes. They’re unlikely to come to me because they don’t want the truth; they want gossip.”

“Is Elizabeth in church today?” Maranatha asked.

“No.” John shook his head. “She’s feeling unwell, and so she and the boys are home watching online.”

“And Chris?” Tom asked.

“He’s travelled back to Lagos.” John sighed. “Right after the ruckus yesterday morning.”

“You should probably call Elizabeth and warn her,” Tom said. “You don’t want her to find out from social media or some tactless person.”

John thought about it for a while and then shook his head. “Probably best not to alarm her, especially if it turns out to be nothing.”

“How about telling Chris in case it turns out to be something?” Maranatha suggested.

John contemplated the situation for a while, and eventually, he nodded in agreement. “You’re right.”

“I think we’d better go out and join the service,” Tom said to Maranatha before turning to John.

“I’ll be out soon,” John said, rising to his feet.

Both pastors exchanged a glance but said nothing as they left his office. As they were going, Victoria stepped out of her office, a vision in a yellow midi cape dress, complemented by a wide-brimmed yellow fascinator that partially concealed her auburn hair and half of her face.

“John, what’s going on?” A furrow creased her brow, and a shadow of concern darkened her eyes. “I was on my way to the church auditorium, and Liam asked me to come and see you first. Is everything okay?”

John's gaze swept over her. "It's here, finally."

The shadow of concern on her brow deepened with each passing moment. "It's here? What's here?"

"The scandal I've been afraid of." He turned away from her and focused on gathering his iPad, Bible and other essential materials for the service. "Press men were on the church's campus today interviewing members, I'm told."

Victoria's hand instinctively flew to her mouth, her eyes wide with surprise. "Is it about Elizabeth?"

"Yes, indeed, it is." John laughed drily. "I can already imagine the headlines: 'The pastor of The Vine Church's married sister is pregnant by another man, and he threw her a lavish baby shower on church grounds.'"

Victoria turned pale upon realising what they had done by hosting that baby shower. "Oh, dear Lord," Victoria grabbed the back of an armchair to steady herself.

"Tom and Maranatha want me to make some statement, but I won't bother. Let people talk. We've prayed. I will allow God to deal with it as He chooses."

Victoria's eyes widened in astonishment as she stared at him. "John, we hosted her baby shower. We'll look like complete hypocrites."

John paused mid-task as he turned to meet her gaze. "What did we really do wrong, Victoria? We hosted the baby shower, but we did so not knowing there was a possibility the baby was someone else's or that she had an affair."

"But we held the party on the church's grounds."

"So what?" John shrugged. "The marquee is hired out regularly as a fundraiser for the church. Anyone could have paid to use it. We paid the full price to use it. I declined the offered discount because I believed it was unfair to accept it. In that regard, I did not abuse my position as senior pastor and president of The Vine Church. So, let people talk."

Victoria groaned and covered her face with her hands. "Oh, this is horrible."

John pulled her into his arms, carefully avoiding her fascinator. "It's going to be okay. We prayed ahead of this day, and I'm confident that God will be faithful to us."

As he wrapped his arms around Victoria, offering her solace in this heavy moment, a thought flickered through his mind: he would reach out to Chris as soon as the service came to a close. Chris needed to return to London immediately, as Elizabeth required him.

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“Alaere, what a surprise. I wasn’t expecting to see you. Certainly not in Lagos.”

Chris strolled leisurely into the expansive poolside area of his Lagos mansion, where the shimmering surface of the large swimming pool beckoned under the warm tropical sun. Beneath the shade of a sprawling umbrella, his guest settled in comfortably, in a lounge chair, savouring the moment as she patiently awaited his arrival.

Alaere Douglas, his former lover and the widow of his late friend, looked younger and more beautiful than he remembered. Life without her husband had been more pleasant for her. Chris didn’t want to consider why that was. Typically, women like Alaere moved on quickly, becoming mistresses to powerful, wealthy men who could provide the lifestyle they desired and which their husbands were unable to provide.

He didn’t listen to gossip, but sometimes it was difficult to ignore it. Recently, since his return to West Africa to begin his business, Alaere’s name had come up in areas where he had not expected to hear it. She was undoubtedly using her beauty and charm to ensure her pockets were well-lined. Who could blame her? She was a woman forced to marry a man considerably older than she was, and who struggled financially and was unable to take care of her. A beautiful and desirable woman, but forced to live a hard life. But looking at her now, that hard life was undoubtedly a thing of the past.

Not that he was surprised. Alaere had always been a very resourceful woman. Chris remembered how he returned from London years ago to find her in his home, cooking his food instead of her younger daughter, Doubra. It signalled the dawn of their secret romance, a carefully crafted plan devised by her, which continued until the day the David-West Tower collapsed.

“Chris,” she purred, uncrossing her long legs, which were revealed through the opening at the front of her maxi *Ankara* skirt. With a fluid motion, she stood from her seat, her silhouette more refined and athletic than he recalled, a striking transformation that captured his attention. “Have you been avoiding me, Chris?”

Chris frowned as he stepped out of her reach, moving as far from her as he could without seeming rude. “Avoiding you?” he asked, taken aback by her question. “Why would I avoid you?”

She shrugged slender shoulders. “You tell me.”

“Alaere, you’re probably the only person who didn’t hear about my personal predicament following the collapse of David-West.”

“Oh, I heard.” She sat again and crossed her legs as a maid appeared carrying a tray with a long glass of orange juice, which she received graciously, smiling her thanks.

“Would you like anything to drink, sir?” the maid asked, turning to Chris.

“Sparkling water,” Chris responded. “Thank you.”

As the maid glided away, Alaere took a delicate sip of her drink, savouring the flavours that danced on her palate. “I do not downplay the effect of the David-West collapse on you or your health, Chris. But I see that you have bounced back, and I wonder why you chose Lagos and abandoned Port Harcourt.”

Chris plunged his hands deep into the pockets of his shorts, a nervous chuckle escaping his lips as he tried to shake off the awkwardness of the moment. “Lagos offered me what I needed to bounce back. So, here I am. I have no reason to be in Port-Harcourt.”

“No reason?” she asked. “Your words hurt me, Chris.”

Chris paused as the maid returned with his glass of sparkling water. “Thank you.” He smiled at her. Feeling shy, she looked away and quickly left his presence.

“You’ve always had a way with women, Chris,” Alaere observed quietly.

Chris ignored her comment and took a long sip of his drink before setting it down on the stool beside him. “What is it that you want from me, Alaere?” he asked. “Why are you here?”

Perhaps a more intriguing question would have been how she had managed to track him down in the first place. Still, he realised that his visit to Port Harcourt would have triggered people’s awareness of his being in Africa. It wouldn’t have taken much digging to uncover the intriguing fact that Chris David-West had taken the helm of Princewill Consortium with operations in Lagos. Locating his house or contact numbers would not be difficult for someone familiar with domestic staff.

“I want to rekindle our arrangement.”

Chris shook his head. “That’s not going to happen, Alaere. We’re done.”

“Why?” Alaere’s eyes widened in astonishment at his unexpected reply. She stood with her glass in hand and approached him, pressing her hand firmly against his chest, dropping her voice to a whisper. “Why can’t we be together? Why can’t I come to Lagos and look after you as I did in Port-Harcourt? I’m a free woman now, Chris. My husband is dead.”

*Thanks to me*, Chris thought but did not speak out the words.

“I’m aware of your current marital status, Alaere. But I’m not a free man. I am married.” He picked up his glass and sipped his drink. “Besides, Bio and I have some unfinished business, and that for me is paramount.”

“Bio?” Alaere’s eyes widened in astonishment, her expression a mix of disbelief and curiosity. She pulled her hand away from his chest. “What business could you possibly have with Bio? What can Bio possibly offer you?”

“I will find out soon enough as I’m off to Port Harcourt tomorrow to see her.”

“You’re going to Port Harcourt? To see Bio?” Alaere couldn’t hide her surprise. “Why? Your arrangement with her ended when she got married.”

“But her husband is dead.”

“That doesn’t make her free, Chris. I would tread carefully around Bio, her husband’s family plan to marry her off to her brother-in-law. She is gone, Chris. Lost to you forever!”

“Is that why you married her off? To end my arrangement with her?”

Alaere looked surprised. “Is that the nonsense she’s been filling your head with?”

Chris drained the content of his glass and set it down, clenching his jaw to control himself.

“What happened to my child?”

Alaere shrugged. “Bio aborted the baby. I asked her to. She had a suitor and needed to marry. You were not going to marry her, so it was best she got rid of the baby. How did you regain communication with Bio? I expressly asked her to stay away from you.”

“Well, maybe she found out you weren’t staying away from me yourself and decided to go against your wishes. I’m going to see her and the child she claims is mine.”

“What are you saying?” Alaere looked confused. “There is no such child.”

“Bio says there is. She says you asked her to abort the child, but she had the baby anyway and passed it off as her husband’s.”

Alaere laughed drily. “I don’t know what games Bio is playing, but I assure you that’s all it is.”

“Really? Chris asked.

“She is telling lies, Chris. Perhaps to extort money from you. Perhaps to get you to marry her or resume your arrangement with her now that her husband is dead. I have no idea what goes on in her head. But there is no child. Bio’s daughter was born during her marriage. Your baby was aborted. I didn’t just ask her to abort it; I took her to the clinic where the procedure was carried out.”

“You are a horrible woman, Alaere.”

“What was I to do? Who would have married her as a young unwed mother?”

“You had no right to take such a decision without my knowledge. So what child is this that Bio claims is mine?”

“How should I know? She is delusional. But I can assure you that Bio was not pregnant when she married.”

“Are you sure about this?”

“Why should I lie?” Alaere asked.

“She said she’s willing to have a DNA test done, which is why I am off to Port Harcourt.”

Alaere laughed. “A word of caution, Chris. Never underestimate the lengths a desperate woman would go to get a man.”

Chris frowned. “What’s that supposed to mean?”

“Ensure the DNA testing is carried out free of Bio’s influence. She is a little unstable in the head and not to be trusted.”

The soft buzz of his phone echoed from the pocket of his cargo shorts. With an earnest smile of apology directed at Alaere, he retrieved the device and scrutinised the screen, curiosity dancing in his eyes. A deep frown creased his forehead as he recognised the caller’s name

flashing on his screen. He turned his back to Alaere, answering the call as his heart raced in his chest.

“John?”

SAMPLE

## Chapter Fourteen

Elizabeth groaned as the sound of her phone vibrating ceaselessly on the bedside table cut through the quiet stillness of the bedroom. Reaching out a hand, she found the irritating device and grabbed it, but just at that moment, it stopped ringing. She let out a sigh and lifted her eye mask. The first thing she noticed was the time. It was 9.15 am. She had slept for longer than she expected, which wasn't surprising.

The baby moved restlessly in her womb for most of the night, making sleep impossible. Sleep had not come until about 5 am. She was grateful for Desree, who at such times fed the boys and took them to school without bothering her. However, she had an appointment with the midwife later that morning, so it was time for her to get out of bed and begin preparing.

As she pulled back the duvet to climb out of bed, the phone began to vibrate again. It was an unknown number, and she frowned, wondering who was calling her, why, and whether she should answer. Finally, she shrugged and answered.

"Good morning. Is this Elizabeth David-West?" the caller enquired.

Elizabeth's frown deepened. The voice was that of a man, and very unfamiliar. "This is Elizabeth David-West," she said, sounding so groggy that she couldn't recognise her voice.

"Mrs David-West, I'm Nicholas Morgan, from Christian Times Magazine and would like to ask you a few questions about your relationship with Barry Babs-Jonah."

Elizabeth gasped and ended the call, after which she sat in bed, her heart racing as she stared at her phone, horror etched across her face.

Who was that, and what was that about? Christian Times Magazine? She had never heard of them. However, the name suggested they were a faith-based news media. They sought information about her relationship with Barry. Why? What was going on?

Her phone began to vibrate again, and she looked at the screen, relieved to see Anita's name flashing. She couldn't take another weird call this morning.

"Hey, Anita," she said, as she threw her legs off the bed and planted them on the luxurious, fluffy rug by the bedside. "How are you?"

“I’m good, Elizabeth. Have you heard the news?”

Elizabeth’s heartbeat quickened as she recalled the call she had just received from Nicholas Morgan of Christian Times Magazine.

*What on earth was happening this Monday morning?* she wondered.

“What news?”

“There’s news online about you being pregnant with Barry’s baby. It’s in some trash online magazine that trashes churches and pastors. As you’re a pastor’s sister and missionary’s daughter, hence the interest.”

Elizabeth buried her face in her hand, while the hand holding her phone shook slightly. This was not happening. Any minute now, she would wake up and realise she’d been dreaming all this time.

“Oh my God. No.”

“The office is buzzing with gossip about you.” Anita’s voice sounded remarkably calm, “I have received two calls this morning which suggest that they’ve heard the news and have taken an issue with it, primarily because Barry Babs-Jonah was your client while you were sexually involved with him. Richard is going to call you any moment and invite you for a chat at some point. If they’re not satisfied with what you have to say, this may very well lead to disciplinary action and possibly suspension from practice. Brace yourself.”

With a deep inhale, Elizabeth steadied herself, her heart racing as she fought to maintain her composure. “I’ll handle it. I appreciate you informing me, Anita.”

“What are friends for?” Anita asked. “Take care, I’ll speak to you soon.”

“Dear God,” Elizabeth groaned after ending the call. Could her life get any worse?

With a sense of urgency pulsating through her, she dialled John’s number, desperate to reach him without delay. Her world was falling apart; she needed her brother to step in and support her. He answered almost immediately as though he had been waiting for her call.

“Elizabeth.” His voice sounded almost wary.

“John, are you aware of what’s happening?” she asked as she tried to rise, wincing at the pain in her lower abdomen and sitting back down. She was under a lot of pressure right now and

didn't even want to think what that was doing to her poor baby. "I just got a call from Anita; there's news about me and Barry in some trash magazine."

John sighed. "I was hoping it wouldn't come to this."

"What do you mean?" *Was he pre-warned about this?*

"I received notice yesterday morning that security personnel found reporters on the church property before the service, questioning church members and seeking information on whether the pastor's sister was expecting a child out of wedlock."

"Oh," Elizabeth groaned, rubbing her temple. "This isn't happening."

"I don't want you to bother yourself about it. I probably should have called you yesterday to warn you, but I didn't think it was right to worry you, just in case it turned out to be nothing. But I did call Chris, and he should be in London later today."

Elizabeth's eyes widened. "You called Chris? But he only just left to go to Lagos."

"I realise that, but what other choice did I have? You're not exactly in a state to deal with all this on your own."

Elizabeth chewed the bottom of her lip as she considered what John had said. She may not be in the right state to deal with this on her own, but wouldn't it be better than having Chris here? His presence would remind her of how things stood between them and why they were that way.

"How did the press get to know this, anyway?" Elizabeth asked.

"There was a fight between Chris and Barry in my office on Saturday after the men's breakfast meeting. There were other men present, so anyone could have sold the story to the press."

"Fantastic," Elizabeth muttered to herself. *Just fantastic.*

"I had no idea Chris and Barry were in a fight," she told John. "Chris said nothing to me. Not like he's been saying much to me in recent times."

"I wouldn't call it a fight. Barry didn't get a chance to defend himself, let alone retaliate. Chris punched him and threatened to drive a pen into his throat," John said.

Elizabeth brought her hand up to cover her mouth. "Why would he do that?"

“For a smart woman, you sometimes ask dumb questions, Elizabeth. Why would he do that? He’s defending your honour and his!”

Elizabeth dragged a hand through her hair. “I realise that, John, but he could have been arrested.”

“I don’t think he cared about that too much. He told Barry he was neither afraid of death nor prison.”

“Oh, I’ve turned the gentle, peace-loving man I married into a monster,” Elizabeth cried.

“Maybe. Maybe not,” John said. “Either way, don’t worry about that and face what’s coming now that the news is out.”

Elizabeth sighed. “Anita said my office might call me, especially as Barry was my client while I was having an affair with him.”

“Well, you’re a smart lawyer, Elizabeth,” John said. “I’m sure you’ll figure out what to say to your law firm.”

“Oh, John,” Elizabeth brushed her hair back, tears welling up in her eyes. “This is a nightmare. I feel like my world is falling apart. What should I do?”

“Pray,” John said softly. “It’s what I do when I face difficult situations.”

“Does it work?” Elizabeth asked a little sceptically. She had prayed for divine concealment, but her secret was revealed; not only was it in Chris’s possession, but others were also aware.

“Always, Elizabeth,” John said confidently. “Prayer works always.”

After the conversation with John, Elizabeth put the phone aside, placed her hands together, bowed her head and prayed. She had been talking to God more since John Jr.’s stabbing, especially since God had answered the corporate prayer of the church. She experienced a connection with Him, but none of those prayers had been spoken in a time of emergency. This would be the first time she would be praying to God in a crisis since the night of John Jr.’s attack, and this was not a corporate prayer; this was a personal prayer.

She didn’t know what to expect, but upon completion, she experienced no reaction. With a slight shrug, she stood to her feet.

*Maybe God doesn’t care,* she concluded.

After all, she wasn't a goody-goody like John. She called her midwife and rescheduled the appointment for the following day, as she did not wish to go outside for the rest of the day. She showered, donned maternity skinny jeans and a hooded jumper, then proceeded downstairs to eat breakfast. When she entered her home office and switched on her computer, she discovered that her office had called twice.

The call to her office turned out to be far more unsettling than she'd ever anticipated. She'd enjoyed her relationship with Barry, but having to tell her colleagues that she'd been in an affair with her client, a behaviour that raised ethical questions, was probably one of the hardest things she'd done in a long time. She agreed to attend the office for a more formal discussion in a few days and ended the call. Elizabeth bowed her head, feeling utterly drained, as if every bit of her energy had been siphoned away.

*Could her day get any worse?* she wondered.

It could. James and Andrew were picked up from school by Desree. All three entered the house, looking subdued. Elizabeth stepped out into the hallway from her home office to meet them, shocked when she noticed James' black eye.

She moved forward quickly to get a closer look at the nasty bruise. "Oh, my goodness! James!" She paused and turned to Desree. "What happened to him?"

"Mum, is it true? Did you have an affair with Tracy Babs-Jonah's dad?"

Elizabeth's eyes widened in disbelief, her breath catching in her throat as she struggled to regain her composure. She turned from Desree to James. "James, where did you hear that?"

"From school." He scowled. "The kids were making dismissive comments about you!"

Elizabeth looked at Desree, who averted her gaze, and then at James. "James, honey, it's a little more—"

"I don't want to hear anything you have to say." He pushed past her and walked towards the stairs. As he reached it, he turned to look at her. "I pray I never marry a woman like you."

Elizabeth's expression darkened, her heart sinking as she turned her gaze away, stung by the weight of her son's words.

"It's your fault James is hurt!" Andrew stomped his foot and followed his brother up the stairs.

Elizabeth sighed wearily as she watched them go.

“His bruise is not as bad as it looks,” Desree said quietly, causing Elizabeth to turn and look at her.

“Thank you, Desree.” Elizabeth forced a small smile.

“He’s been excluded from school,” she added quietly. “I’ll get started on dinner.”

Chris arrived home later that evening, before the boys turned in for the night. Elizabeth had never been more pleased to see him. The boys had not said a single word to her all through dinner. She may not have even been there for all the way they had behaved. There was also the issue with the school. She was too ashamed to go in and speak to the headteacher, but someone had to. Now Chris was here, he would.

She had gone to her bedroom upon his arrival, weary and wanting to retire early. He entered the room just as she was turning down the sheets and sat in the chaise lounge across the room from the bed, looking distressed.

“Are you okay?” he asked.

Elizabeth nodded, sitting on the edge of the bed, wishing she could go to him and sit in his lap as she had done countless times in the past and feel him put his arms around her. “Thank you for coming home at such short notice. I don’t know what to do about the boys.” She began to sob.

“I spoke with the head teacher on the phone as I arrived in London. I had seen emails from him while en route and called him as soon as I landed. We decided it’s probably best to pull both James and Andrew out of school for a few weeks. Until things die down. It can’t be beneficial for them to attend school and have students make hurtful remarks. The school will soon vacate for the Easter break, so they’ll be leaving a bit early.

“The headteacher will ensure the school is in touch with homework so they’re not behind in their schoolwork when the school resumes after the Easter break. Hopefully, by that time, people will be talking about something else. I will take them with me to Lagos. You should probably come too. You can have the baby there if need be.”

Elizabeth looked at him, tears in her eyes, and shook her head. She couldn’t go to Lagos with Chris and the boys. This was happening because of her, due to her poor choices. Her children were suffering, and her husband and marriage were hurting. The press had come after them

because of her. If she followed them, the press would follow them too. It was best that they went alone, and she remained in London to deal with her office and any other problems that would arise from this situation.

Earlier that morning, she had prayed and experienced nothing. Still, after the boys' tantrums, she began to experience peace inside. As the day progressed, she began to recall how her mother had told her as a little girl that God was the only one she could trust to remain with her even when everyone else had deserted her.

She stood, hands cradling her baby bump as she paced the room in deep thought. The day she had gone to Chris's old flat to confront him over his relationship with Ava, she had done so in fear, fear that Chris would abandon her for Ava, and she would have no one to look after her in old age. Now she realised how silly she had been and how far she had strayed from her parents' teachings. She was God's child. He had promised to carry her in old age. She loved Chris and her boys, but she didn't need them. Jesus was sufficient for her. His grace would carry her through this season.

"Elizabeth?"

She stopped and turned at the sound of Chris's voice. He was still waiting for a response from her. She smiled as she returned to sit on the edge of the bed.

"You know something, Chris?" she began, looking at him, meeting his eyes for the first time since he entered her bedroom. "I was worried about you being with Ava because I thought, if I lost you to another woman, who would look after me? But I just realised now I know the answer to that. I've always known the answer. God will look after me. He reminded me of His word that my mother spoke to me as a little girl, 'I have made, and I will carry,' and also, 'I will never leave thee nor forsake thee.' You should take the boys. I'll stay here. I have God on my side. He forgives me. Together, He and I will navigate this situation."

Chris frowned. That was not what he expected to hear. "Are you sure?"

His phone beeped, and he smiled apologetically at her as he pulled it out and peered at it. It was a text message from Bio. A sigh escaped his lips. She was probably questioning his failure to arrive in Port Harcourt. Instead of reading the unopened message, he immediately put his phone away. He was unable to attend to her at that moment. Also, after speaking with Alaere yesterday, he began to wonder what was really going on with Bio and whether she was being truthful. He turned his attention to Elizabeth once again.

She smiled at him. “I am certain, Chris. I will remain in London.”

“I worry about you,” Chris said quietly. “I don’t want to leave you alone.”

“Chris, I will be fine. I won’t be alone. Desree is here if I need anything, and John and Victoria are only a few minutes’ drive or walk away. And God is here. You and the boys go to Lagos for the Easter holidays. I need to stay here and face my issues.”

Chris nodded, understanding her resolve. He stood and, without another word, exited the bedroom.

SAMPLE

## Chapter Fifteen

Mabel slipped into Tracy's room quietly and gently eased the door closed behind her. With cautious steps, she navigated her way toward the bed, skilfully sidestepping the books, pens, and various objects scattered across the carpet like forgotten treasures. With an irresistible urge pulling her in, she leaned down and scooped up a towering brown teddy bear, Mr Snuggles, and restored him to his rightful spot of honour, nestled in the pink floral fabric armchair by the bed.

She glanced over at Tracy, who lay across the bed, facing the wall, and had not acknowledged her as she entered the room. The teen had been quiet since Mabel picked the girls from school that afternoon. Mabel understood that Tracy was upset because James had been in a fight and was being excluded from school. She also understood that the fight had been caused by rumours of Barry and Elizabeth's relationship, which was now the talk of the church and had naturally found its way to their school, a Christian independent school, attended by children whose parents were members of The Vine Church.

Mabel liked James; he was a good kid, but she wondered if it was a good idea to encourage Tracy's friendship with a boy whose mother had had an affair with Tracy's father and may be pregnant by him. After telling her what had transpired, Tracy fell into a quiet silence. She had remained in a thoughtful silence, her mind seemingly miles away. Not even an attempt by Mabel or her sisters, Stacy and Daisy, to draw her into conversation had worked. The teen had retired to her room, showing up only for dinner and retiring to her room as soon as the meal was over.

As Mabel approached the bed, a faint sniffle pierced the silence, sending a jolt through her heart.

"Tracy, honey, what's wrong? Why are you crying?" Mabel perched on the edge of the bed and gently moved Tracy's braided hair aside to see her face. "Is it about James?"

"Yes." With a soft sigh, Tracy nodded, brushing away a tear that had escaped her eye. She then turned onto her back, gazing up at Mabel, her expression a mix of vulnerability and strength.

"I'm sure he'll be fine, honey. Do you want to call him before you go to bed?"

Tracy shook her head. "We're not talking anymore."

"Oh," Mabel said, now understanding the reason for her daughter's tears.

"Don't say, Oh, Mummy." Tracy sounded frustrated as she pushed herself into a sitting position and pushed her braided hair out of her face. "Do you expect him to want to talk to me after my father has been, has been—"

Tracy struggled to find the words, her voice caught in her throat. With a tender smile, Mabel pressed a finger gently against Tracy's lips, urging silence in that moment.

"You are not your father, Tracy, and you are not responsible for his choices. Unfortunately, that doesn't exempt you from suffering for them, as you are already aware, but don't let anyone take out their anger towards him on you. You suffered too, we all suffered when your father left us more than two years ago. James is hurting, and that's understandable. But he needs to understand that you're hurting too. He may very well do. Perhaps you should give him some time alone to work through the situation and decide how he wants to handle it. If he comes back and wants to be your friend, that's fine, and if he doesn't, that's also fine."

"You're right, Mum, I understand this, I just feel so awful about the way he yelled at me in front of everyone." She began to cry again.

"Oh, honey." Mabel pulled her into her arms and held her as she cried.

"Is Tracy okay, Mummy?"

Mabel glanced back at Daisy and Stacy, who stood in the doorway, gripping the half-open door and uncertain about entering.

"Tracy is fine," Mabel said in a low voice as she patted Tracy's head, buried in her shoulder.

"You two go and get ready for bed."

"Don't cry, Tracy, we love you, remember that." Daisy came in, patted Tracy's head affectionately, and ran out of the room.

"Goodnight, Tracy," Stacy said quietly as she shut the door behind herself and Daisy.

"You see, you have lots of people who love you, Tracy," Mabel whispered as she held Tracy close and stroked her hair.

Tracy pulled back and smiled. "This is true, Mummy. Thank you for reminding me." She leaned across to the bedside table and grabbed the box of Kleenex, instantly pulling out a tissue to dry her tears and blow her nose.

"You're welcome."

As Mabel got up to leave, Tracy reached out and tugged on her hand, causing her to turn around and sit down once again.

"What's the matter, precious one?" Mabel tenderly touched the cheek of her eldest.

"How are you, Mummy?" Tracy looked serious, suddenly reminding Tracy of the teen who had stepped up to do more than was required of her when Barry abandoned the family.

Mabel smiled. "I'm fine. Why do you ask?"

"Don't lie to me, Mummy," Tracy said. "I'm not Stacy or Daisy. How are you?"

Mabel took her daughter's hands in hers. "I'm taking each day as it comes. I talk to God every day, and He gives me strength for that day."

Tracy nodded. "It can't be easy having Aunt Kofo around, can it?"

Mabel laughed at the mention of her disagreeable sister-in-law. Kofo was not easy to live with under normal circumstances, let alone now that a crisis had facilitated her visit.

"No. It can't be easy. But in-laws come with marriage, and good, bad or ugly, you have to accommodate them."

Tracy shuddered in feigned horror. "The joys of marriage."

"Yes." Mabel playfully tugged at one of Tracy's braids. "The joys of marriage."

"Will our family ever be the same again?"

Mabel gazed at her daughter, a thoughtful expression dancing across her face as she pondered the depths of the question. There was no denying the tension lacing Tracy's voice, a clear indication of the worry that weighed heavily on her mind. Although Mabel did not want to worry the teenager, she also didn't want to lie to her.

"I don't have a clue, darling." As she spoke, her fingers glided over Tracy's knee, a gentle and comforting gesture that seemed almost instinctive. "We'll just have to wait and see what happens when your father's son arrives."

Tracy gently clasped Mabel's hand, bringing it to her lips for a tender kiss. "I'm here for you, Mum," she assured her. "And if you ever decide you don't want to stay married to Dad, I'll understand and I'm on your side and we'll be okay."

Mabel's heart tightened as tears began to shimmer in her eyes, blurring the world around her. "Yes. We'll be okay."

"Oh, Mum. This is all so wrong. So unfair to you. To us." Tracy began to cry again, and Mabel wrapped her arms around her to comfort her as she battled with her own tears.

"I know, my darling. I know," she whispered.

When Tracy had quietened down, Mabel helped her prepare for bed and tucked her in. Then, with a frustrated sigh, she threw her hands up in exasperation, then knelt down to gather Tracy's scattered belongings from the floor.

Tracy giggled from under the covers. "Sorry, Mummy," she apologised.

"Be quiet, you're not sorry," Mabel complained, eliciting more giggles from Tracy. "You're going to make Sabrina quit this job even before she's started. Keep your things where they belong, Tracy."

"Some of them are fine on the floor, Mummy, they're not complaining," Tracy grinned.

"Silly sausage," Mabel muttered under her breath as she took the box of Kleenex and placed it back on the bedside table.

"Thank you, Mummy, I love you," Tracy said when Mabel was done. "Good night."

Mabel rose to her feet, her heart swelling with affection as she approached the bed. She leaned in gently, pressing a soft kiss on Tracy's forehead, a gesture filled with warmth and care.

"Good night, my angel. Have sweet dreams," she said as she left the room, turning out the light and shutting the door behind her.

Her next stops were Stacy and Daisy. Once she was satisfied that all the girls were in bed for the night, she made her way downstairs just in time to see Barry walk through the front door.

"Hi, honey," he greeted.

Despite the weariness etched on his face, he exuded a captivating charm. His jacket hung open, revealing a relaxed posture, while his tie and the top buttons of his shirt were casually undone, giving off an air of effortless elegance.

Mabel burned with anger; her frustration eclipsed any remaining fondness for him. She couldn't summon the empathy to consider his weary demeanour; all she could focus on was the storm brewing within her. His poor choices were causing problems for her babies, and she was determined to ensure he understood the consequences of his actions.

With an air of determination, her hands tucked casually into the pockets of her loungewear, she descended the stairs and brushed past him without acknowledging his greeting. Pausing in the middle of the living room, she turned to face him.

"I hope the cost of having a son will be worth it in the end," she stated softly, her voice tinged with a hint of bridled anger.

Barry sighed as he moved to the sofa, placed his briefcase beside him, and sat down to untie his shoes. "Mabel, we've already talked about this."

"What have we talked about?" Mabel arched an eyebrow, a hint of curiosity flickering in her eyes as she struggled to maintain a steady tone. "About Tracy being made an object of ridicule at school because her father has been sleeping with James David-West's very married mother, and she is pregnant with his child?"

Now she had Barry's attention. He stopped untying his shoelaces and looked up at her, his expression was a mix of disbelief and astonishment.

"The news is in Tracy's school?"

"It is. Many of the kids who attend that school also attend The Vine Church with their parents. There were pressmen in church yesterday, in case you're the only member of the church not yet aware. They were asking members, who, I might add, love to gossip, questions about the pastor's sister, particularly regarding her pregnancy and the mystery of who might be the father. You do the math!"

"Mabel! Mabel!" Kofo called out as she entered the living room, dressed in silk floral pyjamas and a matching silk robe. Her hair was in a black satin bonnet, an indication that she was ready to turn in for the night.

She stopped as she reached the living room entrance and stood, looking from Mabel to Barry and back to Mabel. Her expression was clouded with displeasure, a frown tugging at the corners of her lips.

“What do you think you’re doing, Mabel?” She asked, folding her short arms across her breasts. “The man has just returned home. Give him something to eat and drink, and allow him to rest before reprimanding him. What is the problem? Is Barry the first man to expect a baby with his lover? You claim to be a Christian woman, but you are loud and cantankerous. I can see why your husband had an affair.”

“Sister Kofo, please, let her be.” Barry’s voice carried a subtle warning before he turned his attention to Mabel. “I did not foresee any of this.”

“You did not foresee any of this?” Mabel asked Barry. “Can you believe this?” She exclaimed to no one in particular, throwing up her hands in disbelief before looking at Barry.

“Your successful business demonstrates your remarkable ability to foresee and predict the future accurately, yet you couldn’t foresee or predict any of this drama? What did you think? That you would say, ‘Hey, Elizabeth, the baby is mine,’ and she and her husband would gladly hand it over for you to take home to your submissive wife to care for?”

Kofo snorted. “Submissive? You are not submissive!”

Mabel ignored her.

Barry’s eyes were heavy with fatigue, his shoulders slumped as if a great burden rested upon them. “I’m sorry. I will go and speak to Tracy now if she’s still awake.”

“You will do nothing of the sort!” Kofo’s expression was one of utter disbelief. “You will come into the kitchen, where I will fix you a light meal since your wife has forgotten her duties.”

Mabel glared at Kofo, her frustration boiling over. “What’s your problem?” she asked, her voice trembling with barely contained anger. “You will mind your business, sister Kofo, and stay out of my kitchen. Remember your place here. You are a guest.”

“I am not a guest! This is my younger brother’s house!”

Mabel whipped around to face Barry. “Do you now see why I didn’t want her in this house?”

Barry rose to his feet and approached her. “Honey, please calm down.”

“Didn’t want me in this house?” Kofo sneered. “Is it your house?”

“It is my house!” Mabel retorted angrily.

“Yes, Sister Kofo,” Barry turned to look at his older sister. “It is her house.”

“Because you gave it to her, you foolish boy!” Kofo cried. “Giving a house to a woman who has not produced a single heir for you! Who does that?”

“Mind how you speak to my husband, Sister Kofo, or I will have you thrown out of my house!” Mabel warned.

“Honey, it’s fine.” Barry gently touched her shoulder, trying to placate her. “She can speak to me however she wants.”

“No, she can’t!” Mabel turned on Kofo angrily. “You are a guest in my home, please abide by my rules. You will not disrespect me, my husband or my children!”

“I will not disrespect your husband, I don’t have to, you do that all by yourself,” Kofo sneered. “He just stepped into the house, and you’re set to quarrel with him. That’s how you respect him.”

“How I deal with my husband is none of your business, sister Kofo,” Mabel retorted. “You are here to await the birth of the child that is tearing this family apart. Do that quietly in your room and don’t poke your nose into my matrimonial matters.”

“Let me correct you concerning that child.” Kofo wagged a finger at Mabel. “It is not tearing your family apart; you are doing that by yourself because you are a selfish and inconsiderate woman.”

“Sister Kofo! Please stop this!” Barry snapped.

Kofo let out a sharp gasp, her hand instinctively covering her mouth as her eyes widened, reflecting a mix of shock and astonishment. “Oh, Barry, so you now raise your voice when you speak to me? After everything I did for you?”

“Who asked you to do it?” Mabel countered.

“Mabel, enough!” Barry said and turned to Kofo. “Please, I need you to stay out of my affairs with my wife.”

“Yes!” Mabel sneered. “Stay out!”

Barry grabbed her hand. “Come on,” he said, pulling her away. “We’ll talk upstairs.”

“Work on your bad character, do you hear me, Mabel?” Kofo jeered as they walked past her toward the stairs. “You’re uncouth. It’s why your husband can’t take you anywhere when he goes away on business.”

“Ignore her,” Barry said to Mabel, who was already turning to respond to Kofo.

SAMPLE

## Chapter Sixteen

“How are you, Elizabeth?” John asked as he and Victoria entered the brightly lit living room, its cheerful glow starkly contrasted with Elizabeth’s mood.

He observed his sister standing in the middle of the room, clad in drawstring linen trousers and a T-shirt, her long hair pulled back in a ponytail, and her face devoid of makeup. It had been a week since Chris returned to Lagos, taking the boys with him, and Elizabeth still looked as miserable as she had on the day they left. She had been isolating herself at home, avoiding the outside world and the news circulating about her affair with Barry. Despite her midwife’s best efforts, Elizabeth stubbornly resisted any thought of a checkup, prompting her caregiver to pay an unexpected visit that morning.

Just yesterday, John called her office and firmly requested that any questions about her relationship with Barry be put on hold. He emphasised that this should wait until she was ready to discuss it or until after she had the baby, considering her current condition. He was upset with Chris because when he called and asked him to return from Lagos, it was to stand by Elizabeth’s side and address these issues, not grab the boys and run off to Lagos, leaving his pregnant wife to deal with matters that would stress her in her current state.

“I’m fine.”

“Come here.” John pulled her into his arms, and Elizabeth broke down in tears, her head buried in John’s chest as she wept.

“It’s going to be okay, Elizabeth.” Victoria rubbed Elizabeth’s back and wrapped her arms around her, placing Elizabeth between herself and John, creating a safe haven that shielded her from everything outside.

Elizabeth surrendered to the sweetness of the moment, allowing herself a rare glimpse of joy. For days, she had wandered through the shadows of isolation, feeling lost and forsaken. But now, a spark of hope ignited within her, banishing the loneliness that had clung to her like a heavy shroud.

Taking a deep breath, she steadied herself, summoning all her strength to regain composure. “Thank you for coming, John.” She carefully pulled away from John’s embrace to look at

him. Turning to Victoria, who stood beside her with concern in her eyes, she offered a tearful smile. "Thank you, Victoria."

"For nothing." With a warm smile, Victoria draped her arm around her shoulder, guiding her with tender care toward the inviting sofa, which was adorned with multiple coloured throw pillows.

Victoria sat close to Elizabeth on the sofa, keeping an arm around her shoulder. John sat in the armchair facing them.

"How are you feeling?" John asked, leaning in, his face and voice filled with genuine concern.

Elizabeth lovingly cradled her baby bump, a warm smile spreading across her face as she sensed the gentle flutter of life growing inside her.

"I'm feeling physically well, and the baby is doing great. The midwife has no concerns." With a heavy heart, she let out a long, trembling sigh, as if the weight of the world rested on her shoulders. "Emotionally, I'm in pieces. I sometimes wonder how my emotional state is affecting the baby."

"God's grace is sufficient," John said.

Elizabeth laughed drily. "God's grace should have kept me from this nightmare, John." She buried her face in her hands. "My embarrassment knows no end concerning this matter. And if only adults were aware of my deeds, it would be all right. But children are aware. *My children*. I'm unsure how to recover from this."

"You don't have to worry about how to come back from anything right now," Victoria gently patted her knee, a reassuring gesture that brought a sense of calm within Elizabeth. "Just focus on your health and birthing a strong, healthy baby, and everything will take care of itself."

"I'm uncertain whether Chris or my children will ever be able to forgive me," Elizabeth's voice was barely a whisper as she mumbled to herself, her gaze lost in the distance. "I'm unsure if my life will ever be the same. I begged God to keep this secret hidden; to keep Chris in the dark. But now the whole world knows."

A heavy silence hung in the air, stretching out like a taut string, until finally, John broke it, his voice cutting through the stillness.

“I understand your disappointment in God, Elizabeth, especially after you’ve spent the last few months turning a new leaf and drawing closer to Him, but I need you to understand that God knows what He’s doing. If He allowed your secret to come out, the purpose was not to shame you.”

“John is right.” Victoria softly rested her hand on Elizabeth’s shoulder, offering a reassuring touch that spoke volumes without a word. “Something good will come out of this.”

Elizabeth sighed but remained silent, contemplating the potential consequences of having her affair splashed across tabloid magazines and discussed in The Vine Church and her children’s school.

*What good could possibly come from that?* she wondered.

“What are your plans now?” It was John who broke the silence.

“Plans?” Victoria’s eyebrows shot up in astonishment. “John, she’s pregnant. What plans could she possibly have besides having the baby?”

“I suggested to her before now that she might want to go and stay in South Africa with Lindiwe for a while after the baby’s born.”

It was the first time Victoria had heard of such an idea. With her green eyes wide in astonishment, she looked at John before turning her gaze to Elizabeth. “Are you okay with this?”

“Chris doesn’t want me here, and I’m a source of embarrassment to my sons.” Elizabeth looked from Victoria to John with a faint smile and a shrug. “A break from here is probably what I need as I decide how to navigate a life without Chris and the boys.”

“Oh, Elizabeth.” Victoria wrapped her arms around Elizabeth, pulling her close as fresh tears began to spill down her cheeks. The warmth of the embrace offered a momentary refuge and a safe harbour amidst the storm of emotions that surged within.

John sprang up, a surge of energy propelling him to his feet as he started to pace back and forth. “Chris should never have left her here, not in this state. Not now, not when she needs him more than ever.”

“Please calm down, John, and take a seat. Your pacing isn’t helping the situation.” Victoria spoke in a gentle voice.

John abruptly halted, a spark of surprise flickering in his eyes as he pivoted to face Victoria. "I gave the man an option to leave. All he had to do was take it, and I could have shipped his belongings to him in Africa or anywhere he wanted them. He asked me to stay out of it. He argued that he was her husband, and it was his duty to protect her. Well, I don't see him around, now that she needs protection. I call the man and inform him there's a crisis on the ground, and what does he do? He flies in, picks up the boys, and disappears, leaving his pregnant wife alone. What kind of man does that?"

"John, you need to calm down," Victoria repeated gently, stroking Elizabeth's hair fondly. "We aren't certain that's how it happened."

"Of course, that's how it happened!" John stepped closer to the elegantly draped double-glazed windows. Parting the curtains with a gentle tug, he gazed out, taking in the world beyond the glass. "Do you see Chris and the boys?" He glanced back at Victoria.

Victoria sighed, leaned forward, picked up the box of Kleenex from the coffee table, and offered it to Elizabeth.

"Thank you," Elizabeth mumbled as she received the box and pulled away from Victoria's embrace.

Victoria turned to John. "I'm aware that Chris and the boys have gone to Lagos, primarily to shield them from the scandal and its effects. But I don't think he meant to abandon Elizabeth. It's not like she can go globe-trotting at this stage, John. She's pregnant."

"Then he should have stayed put!" John turned away from the window and resumed pacing. "He should have stayed with his wife! He quickly reminded me that she is his wife, but failed to act like a husband when it mattered."

"It's not his fault." Elizabeth spoke just above a whisper, then paused to blow her nose, "I asked him to leave me behind. It wouldn't have been fair to ask him or the boys to stay, knowing they already resent me for the scandal."

"Do you hear that, John?" Victoria nestled into the plush sofa, elegantly crossing her legs as she settled into a comfortable position.

"It doesn't matter what Elizabeth told him." John paused to shoot Victoria an irritated look. "I maintain that a good husband would have stayed put and looked after his wife."

“Let’s give Chris the benefit of the doubt, John,” Victoria said. “The man isn’t here to speak for himself. Let’s not be judge, jury and executioner.”

John was on the verge of speaking when Desree came in with tea and cakes for everyone. Victoria smiled as she rose to help.

“Let’s all calm down, have a cup of tea, and discuss the way forward.” She looked at Elizabeth and John as Desree walked away. “I’ll take on the role of Mother and serve the tea.”

John and Victoria’s visit lasted about an hour, and their lively company brought a much-needed spark to Elizabeth’s spirits, just as it was intended to do. As they were leaving, a blue Ford Fiesta pulled up, and a woman got out.

“Freya!” John could barely hide his surprise.

He had not seen Freya Thomson in a while. He tried to think back and concluded it had been more than a month since Freya had come to see him with her twin babies after church. The realisation left him wondering if there was a problem. From the moment Freya’s twins, Ethan and Ella, began attending church with their mother, Freya would bring them to him every Sunday after church so he could lay hands on them, anoint them, and speak over them.

Had he been so busy that he had failed to notice that Freya hadn’t brought them to him in over a month? He made a mental note to ask Victoria to get in touch with Freya in her capacity as women’s leader and find out if Freya was having any personal issues that had kept her away.

He also wondered why she was in Elizabeth’s house. As far as he was aware, Elizabeth and Freya weren’t friends away from The Vine Church. At this time, his sister was vulnerable and kept away from the public, including church people who had been most unkind in the things they had said about her since the news broke. John was unaware of Freya’s reason for seeing Elizabeth and hoped it wasn’t to hurt her. He considered sending her away, but decided against it, as he had not had any reason so far to think of Freya as being a malicious person. He would give her the benefit of the doubt and allow her to see Elizabeth.

“Hello, Pastor John. I didn’t expect to see you here.” Freya looked just as surprised to see John as he was to see her. She turned her head and looked around for his car.

“Victoria and I walked down.” With a smile, John explained the absence of his car.

“How are Ethan and Ella?” Victoria asked.

“They’re fine.” Freya appeared uneasy at the mention of her children, and John frowned, making another mental note to ask Victoria to contact the woman and find out if she was all right.

“Are you here to see Elizabeth?” Victoria asked.

“Yes,” Freya flashed a smile, but her eyes hinted at an underlying discomfort.

To avoid making her more uncomfortable, John gently took Victoria’s hand. “Well, we’ll leave you to it. We’re leaving now.”

“Thank you. Bye.”

“Bye, Freya,” Victoria waved with her free hand as she and John walked hand in hand down the driveway.

A warm smile spread across Elizabeth’s face as Desree gracefully ushered Freya into the living room, moments after John and Victoria took their exit. The other woman wore a smile, but her eyes were far from joyful, and for a moment, Elizabeth forgot her problems.

“Freya. It’s good to see you. I wasn’t expecting you.”

Freya nodded. “This is true, and I’m sorry I came to your home uninvited and unannounced, but I need to speak to you urgently.”

“Of course, please come in and sit down.” She turned to Desree. “Some more tea would be divine, Desree.”

Desree smiled and walked away, and Freya stepped further into the room, her arms wrapped around herself. A shiver coursed through her body, prompting a worried frown to form on Elizabeth’s face.

Is everything okay?” she asked.

“Yes.” Freya sat and rubbed her upper arms through her black knit blouse.

As Elizabeth’s frown deepened, a tremor of despair rippled through her. She shook her head slowly, a strangled sob escaping her lips, the weight of her emotions threatening to overwhelm her.

Elizabeth nestled beside her on the sofa, wrapping her arms around her in a comforting embrace. As the tears flowed, she held her tight, whispering soothing words, creating a safe haven in that moment of vulnerability.

“What’s the matter?” she asked when Freya quietened down.

“I’ve done something terrible, Elizabeth and I’m about to be exposed.” Tears welled up in her eyes once more, cascading down her cheeks as she surrendered to her emotions.

Elizabeth leaned over, grabbed the box of Kleenex and placed it in Freya’s hands. Freya accepted it with a smile and proceeded to dry her eyes and blow her nose noisily.

“I need to share what I’ve done with someone,” Freya began after regaining some composure. “Do you remember how the Bible teaches us to confess our sins to one another?”

Elizabeth nodded. “I’m conversant with that scripture, but I’m not the pastor of The Vine Church, nor am I the women’s leader. If you need counselling, aren’t you better off talking to John or Victoria?”

“I have contemplated doing that for weeks, believe me, I have. But the thought of telling my deepest secrets to someone so holy and perfect that they will despise me fills me with dread.”

Elizabeth’s face drained of colour. “Oh, but I can assure you that neither my brother nor his wife nor indeed any of the other pastors will—”

“It’s you I want to talk to, Elizabeth,” Freya cut in quietly. “You will understand me. With you, I can speak freely.”

Elizabeth swallowed hard and gave a slight nod, indicating her agreement. “Go ahead.”

Freya was poised to speak as Desree came in with the tea. “Ah, here comes the tea,” Elizabeth said.

Both women were silent as Desree moved about serving the tea along with a selection of cakes, from lemon drizzle to red velvet and chocolate.

“Thank you, Desree,” Elizabeth said when Desree was done.

The other woman smiled cheerfully at both women as she left the room.

“I had an affair,” Freya whispered when Desree was out of earshot. “Ethan and Ella aren’t IVF babies.” She took a sip of her tea, her gaze fixed on Elizabeth as she observed her reaction.

“Say that again.” Elizabeth’s eyes widened in disbelief.

“Hmmm...” Freya placed her teacup in the saucer and glanced at the contents briefly before looking up at Elizabeth. “Ethan and Ella aren’t IVF babies. They were conceived naturally. I had been planning an IVF, and I was also on a dating site seeking a husband. And then I met this guy, and we talked and texted a lot. I don’t know what possessed me to tell him about my situation, but he offered to get me pregnant. He said he didn’t want to have any kids, and he was only doing it to help me, and he wouldn’t want to have anything to do with me or the babies. After I got pregnant, true to his words, he disappeared for a while. Now he’s reappeared, and he wants to marry me and claim Ethan and Ella. But how do I come out and tell everyone the truth after I lied to the entire church? To Pastor John!”

“Yes. I can see the problem,” Elizabeth murmured softly, her head spinning. The media would undoubtedly be eager to uncover Freya’s story. After her own scandal, it would be a double-edged sword: selling newspapers and tabloids on one hand, while potentially damaging The Vine Church on the other.

Elizabeth quietly sipped her tea, contemplating what she had been told as she watched Freya struggle with her emotions and attempt to calm herself.

“I needed to say something to someone. To get this off my chest. But who could I talk to? I can hardly share this with Pastor John or Victoria. Look at their lives! They’re the perfect examples of what Christians would be. Met in university, both married as virgins and have never defiled the marriage bed and had children when they desired. What would they comprehend about my hardship? What would they know about celebrating your fortieth birthday and not having a suitor, never mind a husband? What would they understand about observing your irregular cycles, and God still hasn’t answered your prayers for the family you’ve desired for over a decade? When I heard your story, I knew you would be the ideal person to talk to, someone with a blemish that makes them more compassionate and less judgmental. Did I make a mistake in coming to you, Elizabeth?”

A slight smile played on the edges of Elizabeth’s lips as she gently shook her head. She understood Freya’s situation. Although she felt confused and uncertain about how to help her

or how the story would unfold and what impact it would have on The Vine Church, she realised that simply being a confidant and listening without judgment was enough. She set down her cup and took Freya's free hand, squeezing it.

"No. You didn't make a mistake in coming to me. I think I understand now why God allowed my deepest secret to be revealed. Unfortunately, I don't have the answers as to how you should proceed, but together we can pray and ask God for wisdom to deal with this situation."

Freya set down her cup. "I'd like to ask God's forgiveness first."

"That's a good starting point. Let's ask the Father for forgiveness."

## Chapter Seventeen

*How gorgeous you look, sexy little thing. I saw you arrive home earlier. Come and find me, let's talk.*

Rebekah froze as she read Conor's message. She had been getting messages from Conor on and off through the semester, messages of a sexual nature, messages asking to see her and alluding to having nude pictures of her on his phone, but she had never seen any of those pictures until this moment.

As she gazed at the picture, a wave of nausea washed over her, twisting her stomach into knots. She could hardly recognise the girl in the picture, yet it was her in her bra and panties. Her bra straps were slipping off her shoulders, and she placed her hand over her chest to keep the bra in place.

She flung the phone onto the bed, its dull thud barely registering as she sprinted into her bathroom. Sinking to her knees beside the toilet, she vomited all of her breakfast and lunch, utterly disgusted with the person she had once been.

When she was done, she gripped the toilet bowl, overwhelmed by a surge of emotions as tears streamed down her cheeks. "Jesus, please, get me out of this situation. Please get me out. I won't ever do anything foolish again, I promise."

*Go to your Aunt Elizabeth and tell her everything.*

Rebekah's breath caught in her throat as she turned and looked behind her, her heart racing with a mix of excitement and apprehension. Though no one was in the room, an eerie certainty gripped her: a voice had whispered from behind her. Had she just experienced God talking to her? John Jr. often said, 'God told me this' and 'God told me that,' but she had never had that experience. Was that what had just happened? Had God just asked her to tell Aunt Elizabeth everything?

Rebekah stood to her feet, her heart racing as she glided towards the vanity. As she gazed at her reflection in the mirror, she turned on the rose gold basin taps. The entire situation with Conor was consuming her thoughts. It was impacting her studies at school and had strained her relationship with Isla. Isla was not only encouraging her to resume her relationship with Conor, but she suspected, based on how Isla spoke about him, that they had been intimate.

Rebekah wanted nothing to do with that life, so she cut ties with Isla and formed new friendships with girls from a Christian youth group at her school.

But Conor refused to go away. He held the past over her like the sword of Damocles. She was concerned that the pictures on his phone might end up in the wrong hands and be used against her dad. Aunt Elizabeth's scandal was still very fresh; her father could not afford to have her nude pictures spread across some trashy online magazine, claiming the daughter of a mega church pastor was posing nude for her boyfriend. It would break his heart. It would kill her.

She couldn't confide in her mother because her mother would be livid. She asked her to stop after John Jr. and Paul caught her last year taking off her clothes during a video call with Conor and reported the matter. But she had not listened. She couldn't tell John Jr. because he might do something reckless, like confront Conor. After the stabbing last year, she knew she would never forgive herself if he got hurt. Her parents would never forgive her either for putting her brother's life at risk after she had acted foolishly.

Aunt Elizabeth was her best bet. Aunt Elizabeth would understand and not judge her, especially after what she'd recently been through, and she'd also offer sound advice on how to deal with Conor. She decided to visit Aunt Elizabeth because she sensed God was asking her to do so. She poured water over her face, reapplied her makeup, brushed her hair and was ready.

"Rebekah, where're you going?" Paul asked as she exited her room and walked past the home theatre where he was curled up in one of the large seats, watching a movie, a big bowl of popcorn on his lap.

She paused in the open doorway to look at him. The home theatre was a recent addition to their house, and since Paul was on holiday, Rebekah knew he would spend hours in there, making every pound their parents invested in the design and installation worthwhile.

"I'm going to see Aunt Elizabeth."

"You just got home." He let out a frustrated sigh, slumping back in his seat as he hit the pause button on the movie. "I wanted you to watch a movie with me after you finished unpacking."

Rebekah smiled, touched that Paul wanted to spend time with her. However, she doubted he would feel the same way after she had been around for a week. "I'll be back soon. And we can watch a movie. You get to pick."

“Promise?” he asked.

“Promise.”

“Okay.” He resumed playing the movie. “Tell Aunt Elizabeth hi.”

Rebekah turned on her heel and dashed down the stairs. She paused at the bottom as John Jr. exited the kitchen carrying a platter with chicken wings, mac and cheese, sandwiches, and a can of Coke.

“What are you doing? You need to stop snacking in between meals,” Rebekah complained. Since John Jr.’s near-fatal stabbing, Lindsay had been allowing him to get away with anything. He would enter the kitchen whenever he pleased and take whatever food he wanted. Lindsay would smile and say it was okay, but she would never allow anyone else to behave that way.

“I’m hungry. Besides, Lindsay said it’s okay.”

Rebekah rolled her eyes. “See you later.”

“Where’re you going?”

“Aunt Elizabeth’s.”

A deep furrow crossed John Jr.’s brow. “Are you okay?”

“Yes. Why?”

He shrugged. “You seem a bit distant and distracted lately, and I think you might be losing weight. Consider joining me for some snacks between meals.”

“You want Lindsay to bite my head off,” she muttered drily, and she walked towards the front door, shutting it behind her as she made her way down the end of the driveway and turned in the direction of Aunt Elizabeth’s house.

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“How did your meeting at the office go yesterday?” Anita asked, sipping her wine. She had stopped by for lunch with Elizabeth, and after eating, both women retired to the living room, where Elizabeth sipped herbal tea and Anita sipped some wine.

Elizabeth playfully twirled her cup around the saucer, a subtle shrug escaping her shoulders as she lost herself in thought. The visit to her office was not one she particularly wanted to discuss, and were it anyone else, she would have changed the topic.

“Well, we’ll have to wait and see how it goes. I admitted that sleeping with my client was a breach of professional ethics. But I did make it clear that at no time did I leverage our relationship to take advantage of him or extort him.”

With a warm smile dancing on her lips, Anita leaned forward and whispered gently, “It was courageous of you to admit your mistake, Elizabeth. They’ll probably want to hear from Barry before they decide on any disciplinary actions. But whatever happens, I’m here to support you.”

Overwhelmed by emotions, Elizabeth put down her drink, and both women embraced tightly, their hearts full of emotion, as the warmth of their shared connection encircled them, reinforcing a bond that seemed unbreakable.

“How are things between you and Chris?” Anita asked, pulling away and dabbing at the corners of her eyes with her fingers.

Elizabeth picked up her drink and took a sip. “To be honest, I’m uncertain, Anita. We’ve spoken a couple of times over the phone, but it’s been like talking to a stranger and always about the boys.”

“That’s a good start. Something to build on.”

“I understand, but I want my husband back. I want things the way they were before I got involved with Barry. Chris was the perfect husband for me, but I didn’t see it until it was too late.”

Anita squeezed her hand. “Don’t be too hard on yourself. You made a mistake. You’ve asked God for forgiveness. You asked Chris for forgiveness. Now give it time and go easy on yourself while waiting for God to answer.”

“Sometimes I wonder why God would bother with me at all.”

“Because He’s good.”

“Yes, He is.” Elizabeth smiled. “Initially, when the news of my affair with Barry broke, I was angry at God. I realise that my feelings may seem silly and entitled, but that’s honestly how I

felt. However, I soon started to recognise how God was using my experience. Anita, you wouldn't believe how many women have approached me since the press released the story. I have had women in my home, I have visited them at theirs, met up with some for coffee, and it's been one thing; these women are Christians who've had secret affairs or were sexually molested, and it's affecting their marriages, but they can't tell their husbands, or anyone."

"But they can tell you."

Elizabeth nodded. "Yes."

"Because they believe you won't judge them."

"That's what the majority of them have said. Every day, I receive texts or phone calls from women seeking my advice. Me. Elizabeth. What do I know? Am I John, my mum, or my dad?"

Anita's face lit up with a warm smile. "You don't have to be John or your parents. They had their ministries and made significant contributions to the body of Christ. John has his ministry. And God may be giving you yours."

Elizabeth raised her hand, her expressive blue eyes blazing as she shook her head with fierce determination. "I don't want any kind of ministry!"

Anita laughed. "I don't think you get to choose. Besides, from what you tell me, you're now a magnet attracting every woman and twin sister with a dark secret to confess."

The doorbell rang before Elizabeth could respond. With a frown on her face and curiosity about the identity of the visitor, Desree quickly made her way to the front door. She opened it and, with a smile, ushered Rebekah into the brightly lit hallway.

"Hello, Aunt Elizabeth!"

Elizabeth turned around and saw Rebekah in the doorway, resembling a younger version of herself. As she took in the teen's baggy jeans, T-shirt, and cropped biker jacket, Elizabeth couldn't help but smile, reminded of her own youthful days.

"Rebekah, darling. How lovely to see you!" Elizabeth rose and walked towards her niece to give her a hug. "How are you?"

"I'm fine, thank you, Aunt Elizabeth. I'm sorry I didn't call or text to inform you I was coming over. I just hoped you'd be home and available for a chat."

“Okay!” Anita jumped to her feet. “My cue to leave.”

“You sure you won’t stay a while longer?” Elizabeth asked.

“Nope! I still have to drop by my office to finish some paperwork before I go home to Sophie and Matthew, who probably think they’ve been abandoned.”

“Okay. If I don’t see you again this week, enjoy the bank holiday weekend and don’t forget you’re all expected at the cookout on Easter Monday.”

“Of course.” Anita picked up her purse, drank the rest of her wine and put her glass down.

“Hopefully, I haven’t gone over the limit.” She giggled.

“Be safe,” Elizabeth warned. “I don’t want to come get you from the police station or hospital.”

“Okay, Mum,” Anita teased.

The two women laughed and embraced each other warmly. Anita smiled warmly at Rebekah as she walked towards the front door, escorted by Desree.

“Come and have a seat, Rebekah. You can drop in for a chat anytime.” She touched Rebekah’s cheek affectionately before turning to Desree. “Desree, please bring us some tea and cakes.”

Elizabeth moved into the room, leaving Rebekah to follow closely behind even as Desree walked away to fetch the tea.

“How’s school?” she asked, sitting down on the sofa and patting the space next to her.

Rebekah smiled as she sat next to her aunt. “School’s fine, Aunt Elizabeth. I have a two-week break for Easter, after which I will return to write my second-semester exams. I arrived only this afternoon.”

“Did you? And you’ve come to see me already? It must be important if you’re spending time with me instead of your friends.”

With a gentle smile playing on her lips, Rebekah glanced down at her hands, a hint of shyness colouring her cheeks. “Friends are the reason I came to see you, Aunt Elizabeth, and it is important.”

“Okay. I’m all ears. Tell me what’s going on.”

“I’m being sort of blackmailed.”

Elizabeth arched an eyebrow, a glimmer of curiosity dancing in her gaze. “What do you mean sort of blackmailed?” she asked. “You’re either being blackmailed or you’re not. Which is it?”

Rebekah sighed. “I’m being blackmailed.”

“I take it you haven’t spoken to your parents about this?”

Rebekah shook her head. “I’m not sure how to tell them.”

“Tell me everything,” Elizabeth encouraged.

“I had a boyfriend before going to university,” she began and paused as Desree entered with the tea.

“Carry on,” Elizabeth urged once Desree had poured the tea and left.

Rebekah told Elizabeth everything about Conor, from the day they met to the picture and text he had just sent her. She left nothing out.

Elizabeth sipped her fresh cup of tea and set it down. “I see. So basically, he’s saying, sleep with me or I’ll release your nude pictures to the world, or some unfortunate incident may happen where they fall into the wrong hands.”

Rebekah nodded as she eagerly scooped a generous bite of the Victorian sponge cake into her mouth, savouring the rich flavours of jam and buttercream “Pretty much, Aunt Elizabeth. Yes.”

“You say you met him when you were seventeen?” Elizabeth asked.

“Yes.”

“And he made sexual advances? Pestered you for sex?”

“That was right before he discovered how old I was.”

“Upon learning your age, he decided to wait; however, he did not wait. Instead, he began asking for other things to satisfy his desires. Is that correct?”

“Yes, Aunt Elizabeth.” As Rebekah sipped her tea, a cosy warmth spread through her. Yet, beneath the surface of that soothing sensation, she couldn’t shake the feeling of being cross-examined.

“You began to take your clothes off for him before your eighteenth birthday?”

Rebekah’s cheeks flushed a deep crimson, a rush of embarrassment sweeping over her. “Yes, Aunt Elizabeth.”

“Put the young man on the phone,” Elizabeth ordered quietly.

“But Aunt Elizabeth,” Rebekah began.

With a warm smile, Elizabeth gently patted Rebekah’s knee, a gesture that radiated both comfort and camaraderie. “Put him on the phone, Rebekah.”

With trembling hands, Rebekah set down her teacup, pulled out her phone and dialled Conor’s number.

“Hey, gorgeous,” Conor’s deep voice came through on the phone. “When are you coming over?”

Before Rebekah could speak, Elizabeth snatched the phone from her trembling hands.

“Hello!” she began in her most authoritative voice. “You must be the young man who has a date with prison.”

“Excuse me?” Conor’s voice conveyed utter confusion. “Who are you?”

“I’m the woman who won’t rest until I see you behind bars. First, I need you to confirm whether you’re the lowlife who took nude pictures of a minor. Also, confirm that you’re the blackmailer threatening to use them if you don’t get sex. Hopefully, I needn’t explain that your incessant messaging and calls constitute sexual harassment.”

“W-what? What are you talking about? I don’t have any nude pictures of anyone. Rebekah’s probably misunderstood me. She and I are great friends, and I tease her often; I thought she was okay with it. But I know better. I won’t bother her anymore.”

“You’ve had your chance to leave her alone, but you didn’t take it. We will speak to the police and let them decide if this is a tease or if you have broken the law.” Elizabeth ended the call and passed the phone to Rebekah, who was staring with her mouth open wide.

Elizabeth ignored her and pulled out her phone, calling her friend Anita. “Anita, please come meet Rebekah and me at the police station in about half an hour.”

“You’re really doing this?” Rebekah asked breathlessly.

“Yes, I am. The man only had power over you due to your fear of being discovered by your parents. He is a common criminal who belongs behind bars. We’ll go home after the police station to report this to your parents, and if they kick you out, then you can move in with your Aunt Elizabeth.”

“Oh, Aunt Elizabeth!” Rebekah hugged her tight, so relieved the issue with Conor was over, she didn’t know whether to laugh or cry.

The visit to the police station was brief and blurry. Elizabeth then drove Rebekah home after calling John and Victoria to confirm they were home so she could speak with them. As Rebekah had feared, Victoria was furious when Elizabeth brought up the issue.

“Is this not the same man that John Jr. and Paul saw you taking your clothes off for? Did I not warn you to stop?”

“As I see it, the damage was done before you realised what she was doing and asked her to stop,” Elizabeth said calmly.

“But even then, she didn’t stop, did she?” Victoria exclaimed, her frustration evident in her voice. “She continued to do the very thing she was asked not to do!”

“Calm down, Victoria.” John’s voice was low and heavy, his expression a mix of contemplation and restraint. “Let’s hear the matter carefully to the end.”

Victoria seethed in silence, her legs crossing and uncrossing, mirrored her growing annoyance as Elizabeth and Rebekah narrated the events concerning Conor. After Elizabeth left, Victoria walked away, leaving Rebekah alone with her father in his home office.

Rebekah stared at her Converse trainers, unable to lift her head to face her father. She knew she had disappointed him, especially after everything he had done since John Jr.’s stabbing, to be present and be a good father. Tears flowed quickly down her cheeks, and a sob of anguish escaped her.

“I’m truly sorry, Daddy.” What else could she say? This was entirely her fault. She had messed up.

John sighed as he stood up and hugged his daughter, holding her close and gently stroking her hair as she cried. His heart ached as he thought about how this was yet another consequence of the years he had spent away from home, trying to save the homes of others.

SAMPLE

## Chapter Eighteen

“Is that your wife?” Bio asked as she sank into the luxurious, cushioned chair that faced Chris's grand, expansive desk, a spark of curiosity igniting within her.

Chris gave a slight nod but kept his gaze fixed on his phone. He recognised that she was alluding to the grand portrait of Elizabeth that loomed majestically on the wall behind his desk. Its presence was impossible to ignore. She was not just beautiful; she was utterly captivating. Dressed in skinny jeans and a bustier top, her blonde hair fell over her bare shoulders, and her blue eyes gazed into the camera. A subtle smile danced across her face, while a playful pout lingered on her soft pink lips, adding a touch of allure to her expression.

Chris turned his head to gaze at the picture, and a wave of emotions washed over him, tugging at his heartstrings. This was not the Elizabeth he had left behind in London over a month ago. The spark in her eyes had faded, along with the cheerful mischief that once danced there. The woman he had left behind stood on the brink of despair, her heart fractured and spirit nearly shattered. Her eyes shimmered with a haunting depth, reflecting a whirlwind of fear and the heavy ache of rejection.

Once again, he found himself grappling with the thought that he should have chosen to stay with her. But how could he, with the gossip flying around? How could he when every time he glanced at her, he saw her in the arms of another? Additionally, he had his own issue to resolve. Bio had been blowing up his phone, insisting he come to Port-Harcourt and have the DNA test carried out.

He had returned to Lagos with the boys, making a trip to Port-Harcourt out of the question. So, he asked Bio to come to Lagos with the child and at first, she had refused. They had been at it for weeks, and finally, she agreed, and his assistant had handled their travel logistics. His refusal to go to Port-Harcourt wasn't just about the boys, though. After Alaere's visit, he realised he had to be careful and have the DNA testing done differently from how he had previously said.

He hated to think that Bio would lie to him. The Bio he knew was too innocent, too naïve, to do such a thing. Nevertheless, he had taken adequate measures to ensure his protection. He still didn't know how to handle the matter if the child turned out to be his, but he wouldn't

think of that now. Now, they would focus on getting the test done, and afterwards, he would deal with how to be a father to the child going forward.

“She’s very beautiful.”

Chris turned away from Elizabeth’s portrait to look at Bio, whose eyes were still fastened on the picture. She stared on in awe, unable to look away. This was her initial encounter with a photo of Elizabeth. Chris had not had any family photos in his Port Harcourt home, possibly because he didn’t see the place as a home, just somewhere he lived while working. Also, things had been difficult in his marriage to Elizabeth.

She had been the wife who was never pleased or satisfied, no matter what her husband did, and he was the husband who wanted to protect his peace at all costs and welcomed the distance, so he wasn’t going to have a photo of her as a constant reminder of her hanging anywhere in his space. This time, things were different. When Princewill Consortium began operations, and he bought this property and had it renovated for his use in Lagos, he was in love with his wife. He wanted a constant reminder of her around, hence the large portrait.

“Yes, she is beautiful. Thank you for saying so.” He turned his chair around to face Bio and put his phone down, having completed his text. He studied her momentarily, wondering how she would react to what he had to say. “I’m having a DNA test carried out right away.”

“I thought you might want to do that.” Bio smiled. “I expected you to come to Port Harcourt for the test, but this alternative is acceptable as well.”

“I won’t interact with the child until the results confirm that she is mine.”

Bio laughed a little uneasily. “Isn’t that a bit too extreme?”

“I wish to protect myself. If she weren’t mine, I wouldn’t have formed an attachment. I’m sure you can understand and pardon me if I appear a little cruel.”

“As you wish.” Bio gently shrugged her slender shoulders. “I expected Dr. Wilcox to be present when we arrived.”

Before Chris could say anything, the door opened, and a young Caucasian doctor in his thirties entered the office.

“Chris, I came as soon as I received your text message.” He walked over to Chris, who rose to his feet, and both men shook hands.

“Thank you for coming. I hope my staff have made you comfortable?”

“Very comfortable.” He smiled at Chris.

Chris turned to Bio, who looked between both men and had a mild frown on her face. “This is Dr Graham Ferriman. He’s my doctor in the UK, and he flew in this morning at my request.”

“You must be the child’s mother. Bea?” He turned to Chris for help with pronouncing her name.

“Bio,” Chris said.

“Lovely to meet you, Bio,” Graham extended his hand in greeting, and she rose and took it graciously, looking a bit confused. “I’m Graham.”

“Dr Ferriman is here to take the sample from the child and will return to the UK, where he will run the test and give me a result.”

“Is the child here?” Graham asked, looking around the large, minimally but opulently furnished office.

“I’m told the child’s downstairs by the poolside,” Chris said, looking at Bio, who nodded in agreement.

“Well, then, can I see her?” Graham directed this question to Bio, who turned to Chris almost immediately.

“Can we speak privately for a minute?”

“I’ll go and wait downstairs. Possibly find the child and get her comfortable before I have to invade her personal space with a swab.” A playful grin spread across his face as he pivoted toward the door. “Text me when you’re ready, Chris,” he called over his shoulder as he left the room.

Bio turned to Chris. “I don’t know him.” Her voice conveyed the concern that was evident in her eyes.

“Of course, you don’t. He’s my doctor in the UK.”

“You flew him in for this?” Bio asked, appalled. “What about your doctor in Port-Harcourt?”

Chris shook his head. “I will not be using Dr. Wilcox for this test. Dr. Ferriman will collect the swab samples and return to London, where the test will be conducted.”

“But I don’t know this man,” Bio said. “I can’t allow him to touch my child.”

“Why not?” Chris asked. “To the best of my knowledge, you don’t know Dr Wilcox either.”

Bio overlooked his remark. “What’s wrong with using your regular doctor who’s based in Port-Harcourt? Wouldn’t it have been far cheaper to fly Dr. Wilcox from Port-Harcourt than to fly this man from London?”

“Why should the cost bother you?” Chris asked, sitting on the edge of his desk and folding his arms across his chest. “And what does it matter what doctor I use?” he added.

For a moment, Bio appeared lost for words. “But it’s absurd to bring a doctor from the UK when there are plenty of doctors here in Lagos!”

Chris shook his head, letting out a dry laugh. Leaving the desk, he strolled to the window, admiring the pool separating the house's residential and official wings. A figure, possibly the child, was visible under the umbrella's shade, but its face remained hidden from him. He looked at Bio, their gazes locking.

“I will fly the child to the UK to have the test done if necessary.”

Bio shook her head. “I would never allow it.”

“I realise that and that’s why I flew the doctor in.”

“And he’s going to have the test done in a lab in the UK?”

“Exactly.”

“This is absurd. Why can’t the test be done in a lab here in Lagos?”

“Because I want the test to be done in a lab I trust.”

“But I don’t trust this lab you have chosen. And I don’t know or trust your doctor.”

Chris shrugged, his hands deep in the pockets of his pants. “Then I’m afraid that we’re at a stalemate. I won’t claim this child unless my doctor does the DNA testing in a lab in London.”

Her eyes started to fill with tears. “Why do you have to be so difficult? Why can’t you have the test done here?”

Chris’s gaze was intense as it met hers. “This child isn’t mine, is she, Bio?”

Tears streamed down her face as she shook her head slowly. “I really wanted her to be. My mother arranged for me to receive anaesthesia, and the abortion was performed. I refused to accept that your child was no longer in my womb. When I got married, I got pregnant so fast that I told myself that our baby had not been killed. I looked at your photo every day, hoping for a son and willing him to look like you. Then she was born early, and I convinced myself she was yours. I had a DNA test done, but...”

With her voice trailing off, Chris gazed at her, his mind racing but utterly speechless, as a swirl of emotions tangled in his chest.

Bio drew closer and took his hand. “I love you, Chris. Won’t you give me another chance? I’m free, we can be together.”

Chris shook his head. “It’s not a good idea, Bio.”

“I love you. You were my first lover, my first love. Chris. You’re the only man I want. I will take anything you give me. I want to be with you again.”

“Bio, it can’t happen. It should never have happened in the first place. It was wrong and selfish of me to do the things that I did. You will find someone who will love and appreciate you.”

“There’s no one for me but you, Chris. You were my first, and I want you to be my last.”

“I’m sorry, Bio. Not only because I can’t say yes to your request, but because I should never have had an arrangement with you in the first place. You deserve better, and I will be praying that God gives it to you. But I’m not your man, Bio.”

She stepped closer to him. “You can’t mean that, Chris. Look at me, remember everything we shared, the intensity of our intimacy. Tell me that it meant nothing to you and that you can walk away from it all.”

Chris looked at her, and their gazes met and held. He remembered the nights they had spent together. Once, he believed he loved this woman and felt a deep bond with her. Even now, he sensed the undeniable connection that remained. Slowly, he tilted his head, bringing his lips nearer to hers, as if drawn by an invisible thread that tugged at their hearts.

“Dad.”

Chris abruptly broke away from Bio, his gaze snapping to the doorway as he spotted James standing there. A rush of tension filled the air, and the moment hung between them, charged with unspoken words.

“You need to leave right away,” he said quietly, giving Bio his attention once again. “My assistant will arrange your trip back to Port Harcourt and credit your account with a substantial amount. Consider it a final parting gift. Please take care of yourself.” He walked away towards James without offering Bio a backwards glance.

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“Dad.”

Chris paused his typing and glanced up from the glow of his laptop, only to find James’s eyes locked on him. He had been so engrossed in his work that he had not heard the teen enter his bedroom. Once he had settled the boys into their beds, he slipped away to his room, laptop in hand, ready to dive into his work.

As he lounged on the spacious terrace just outside his bedroom suite, the warm night breeze whirling around him, he occasionally stopped to admire the stunning view, from the pristine lawn, pool, and tennis court to the vibrant tropical garden, especially at night when the lamps illuminated its beauty.

He found the scene therapeutic and beneficial for work, especially today, when he had experienced one too many challenging situations. First Bio had come to see him in the office wing of the house, bringing a child that wasn’t his, possibly hoping to get away with it by bribing Dr Wilcox, probably with her body. With the truth out, she cried and begged for another chance with him, and at some point, he almost caved in.

Turning down Alaere had been easy, and he knew it would just be as easy to turn down Doubra if she ever approached him. But Bio was different. She was special because he had been her first. Also, the thought that she had carried his baby in her womb, no matter how briefly, had weakened him.

He was grateful for James’s timely arrival, but that arrival, while helpful, also came with its issues. James had seen something he should not have seen. And though he had said nothing at the time, probably because Andrew was present and also because they were both only

interested in getting a promise from their dad that they would go to London to see their mum. They had been away from their mum for over a month, and naturally, they missed her.

The flight tickets had been booked, and they left for London in one week. Both boys were pleased, but Chris realised that James had a lot he wanted to say, and he expected James to approach him privately to discuss the matter at some point. Now that James was standing before him, even though the teen's face was expressionless, Chris knew he had come for some answers.

"You're awake, buddy?" he asked, unable to keep the surprise out of his voice. "Everything okay?"

James did not respond to the question. Instead, he moved further onto the terrace and sat down in a chair next to Chris. For a while, he was quiet, possibly thinking about what he wanted to say. Then he turned to Chris, a light frown playing about his brows.

"Who was the lady in your office earlier today?"

Chris let out a deep sigh and closed his laptop to avoid any distractions, placing it on the footrest where his feet lay. He turned in his seat to meet his son's gaze. He'd been expecting this question, and finally it was here. James was not too young to understand certain things, but Chris didn't think it was right to discuss with him matters that should be addressed with Elizabeth and a matter that he was yet to discuss with her.

"Her name is Bio, and she worked for me long ago. We were close. Then she got married, and I didn't see her again until about three months ago."

Chris watched as James struggled to process the information, determine its exact meaning, and decide whether to request clarification.

"She's in my past," Chris said, holding James' gaze. "I love your mum very much, and she's all that matters. She, you and Andrew."

"And the baby," James mumbled, tears filling his eyes.

"Yes. And the baby." He pulled James closer, causing their foreheads to touch, and then he playfully ruffled his hair. "I love you."

"I love you, too, Dad." A subtle smile played on James's lips, hinting at a buried joy within him. "I want to be like you someday."

“I shouldn’t be your standard, James,” Chris said gently, shaking his head. “I’m not perfect, and I’ve made a lot of mistakes.”

“I know, I’m not looking to be perfect, just to be like you.”

Chris groaned and buried his head in his hands. “God help me.”

James giggled. “Amen.”

As he stood to his feet, Chris asked, “Are we good?”

“Absolutely, Dad,” he replied with a grin, extending his hand toward Chris. They met in a fist bump that sparked a playful energy between them. “Good night.”

“Good night, buddy.”

As James walked away from his dad, back to his bedroom, he was peaceful. The unease that had gripped him after witnessing his dad with the woman named Bio earlier in the day began to fade away, replaced by a strange sense of calm. He understood without his dad telling him that the other woman meant a lot to him, but he had chosen his family. That was all James needed to know. His father’s past actions only concerned him to the extent that they affected their family’s present and future.

His dad was a good man, and James trusted him to always make the right decisions for their family. He wasn’t perfect, but James wasn’t asking for an ideal father and role model; just one who would do right by the family he had created. His dad was that man. With a gentle smile gracing his lips, he closed his eyes and surrendered to the comforting embrace of sleep, letting the world fade away.

After James left, Chris stood up, shoved his hands deep into his pants pockets, and walked toward the glass balustrade. He had obliged the boys’ wishes to return to London, as they missed their mum. He missed Elizabeth, too, but he was still unsure what the future held for them. The issue with Bio was resolved. There was no child. Alaere had killed his child. Bio had received a generous settlement from him, bringing that chapter to a close.

It remained to bare his soul to Elizabeth. Would Elizabeth forgive his affair with Bio, her sister and mother? Would she forgive him for putting them in financial jeopardy when he altered the building plans, ultimately causing the David-West Tower to collapse? Would she forgive him for the lives lost? Would she ever be able to forgive him for keeping all of this a secret from her?

Suppose she forgave him? Then what? She was pregnant and about to give birth to a baby that might belong to another man. He had asked Elizabeth if she was willing to give up the baby if it was Barry's, and she had agreed. But could she give up the child she had carried for nine months? Did her love for him run that deep? And if she was still willing to give up the child, was that truly what he wanted for her?

He may have resolved the issue with Bio, but matters with Elizabeth were still far from resolved.

SAMPLE

## Chapter Nineteen

“Welcome back home, Mr David-West!”

Elizabeth gently descended the stairs, her heart pounding as Desree opened the front door and welcomed Chris and the boys with a wide grin that indicated she had missed them. Elizabeth didn't know what to expect as she descended the last stair and observed the exchange between Desree and the boys, who were excitedly sharing stories about their trip.

With a warm smile, Chris turned to Desree, his gaze intentionally drifting away from Elizabeth, who stood nearby. “Thanks so much, Desree! How have you been lately?”

“As well as can be expected, sir.” Desree smiled back at him, returning his smile with one of her own. “It's so good to have you and the boys back home.”

She closed the front door, picked up a couple of small bags, and walked toward the stairs, avoiding eye contact as she passed Elizabeth.

“Mummy!” It was Andrew who approached her first, arms wide. Elizabeth felt a wave of emotion wash over her as he enveloped her in his arms. Tears streamed down her cheeks, yet she clung to him even tighter, seeking comfort in his presence. “I missed you, Mummy. How are you?” Andrew lifted his gaze to meet hers, curiosity sparking in his eyes.

“I'm fine, Andrew and I missed you, too.” Elizabeth kissed his hair. When she looked up, James stood nearby, his gaze brimming with unspoken thoughts, the words swirling in his mind, eager to break free but caught on the tip of his tongue. “I missed you, James.”

Overwhelmed by emotion, James finally let his guard down, and tears streamed down his face. Without hesitation, Elizabeth stepped forward, enveloping him in a warm embrace, offering him comfort in his moment of vulnerability.

“I'm sorry, Mum,” he sobbed. “I shouldn't have left you. I should have stayed and looked after you.”

Elizabeth gently cupped his face with her hands, tilting his chin upward until their eyes locked. “Don't be silly. You don't need to apologise, and you're not responsible for taking care of me.” She kissed his forehead and wrapped her arms around him as he tucked his head into her shoulder and cried.

“I love you, Mummy, and I’m sorry,” Andrew said.

Elizabeth gently pulled him closer, allowing his head to rest on her baby bump. “I love you, too, Andrew. I love you both very, very much. You’re my whole world.” She wept as she embraced her sons, wrapping each of them in a protective hug. The warmth of their bodies filled her with a bittersweet mix of love and sorrow.

“He kicked me. The baby kicked me.” Andrew looked up at her in awe. “The baby really kicked me.” He turned to Chris, who leaned against the door, observing the scene with an expressionless face.

“Yes. He’s been doing a lot of kicking lately,” Elizabeth turned to Andrew, her gaze deliberately averted from Chris.

“Can I feel him kick, Mum?” James asked, a spark of excitement brightening his expression.

“Of course you can.” As Elizabeth gently guided James’s hand to rest on her belly, she felt the baby stir. At the same time, Andrew nuzzled his head against her, creating a tender moment filled with love and connection.

“Cool,” James chuckled with delight, his heart swelling as he felt the unmistakable flutter of the baby kicking inside. “That’s so cool.”

“Boys, go upstairs and freshen up. And Mum needs some rest.”

The boys spun around at the sound of their father’s voice, their expressions shifting from excitement to disappointment in an instant. They stepped away from their mother, grabbed the suitcases that Desree had left, and began to make their way up the stairs.

Elizabeth turned to look at her husband; his blank expression told her that, unlike the boys, distance had not made his heart grow fonder for her.

“Chris.” She uttered his name, grasping at any words that might fill the silence.

“Elizabeth.” Chris stood tall, his hands comfortably tucked into the pockets of his chinos and his chest proudly thrust outward, exuding a quiet confidence that drew the eye. “Are you well?”

“Yes, I am.” She smiled. “Thank you for asking.”

As he gazed at her, the weight of unspoken words hung heavily in the air, stretching the silence into an awkward moment. A part of him wished he could hold her as the boys had, cry

on her shoulder, and tell her how much he had missed her. He longed to place his hands on her belly as he had freely done before and feel the baby inside move. He remembered how it felt to put his hand on that bump and feel it grow with each passing month. Back then, he believed the baby was his.

So much had changed since that January morning when he placed his hands on her belly and kissed it. He was no longer the same man, Elizabeth was no longer the same woman, and their marriage was certainly not the same either. As a result, he couldn't touch her, even though a part of him longed to.

Feeling the tension between them growing with each passing second, Elizabeth turned and retreated up the staircase with a sense of unease lingering behind her. She didn't see him again as he locked himself in his bedroom for the rest of the day. However, Elizabeth didn't mind. She spent the day with the boys, sharing laughs as they recounted their holiday in Africa and enquired about her activities during their absence. For once, they didn't blame her for the issues she had with their dad.

On the following morning, Chris took the boys to church, and they went out for a meal afterwards. When they returned, the boys, who were still exhausted from their trip the previous day, went up to have a nap. Elizabeth was in her bedroom, where she had watched the church service online and was treated to breakfast in bed by a doting Desree.

Propped up on her pillows around midday, she basked in the soft springtime light filtering in through the open French windows. She was engrossed in a pregnancy and parenting book, its pages filled with wisdom and wonder, when Chris walked into her bedroom, his presence casting an unsettling shadow that heightened the tension in the air.

"Elizabeth, we need to have a conversation," he said, sitting on the chaise lounge, a picture of quiet contemplation, his expression tinged with a sense of melancholy.

Elizabeth nodded as she closed the book, put it on the bedside table and folded her arms in her lap, indicating she was ready to hear what he had to say. She had been waiting for this moment for months, and she was ready. Whatever happened, God was with her, and that was what mattered most.

"Before you say anything, please hear me out." With a determined effort, her lips curved into a hopeful smile despite the heaviness in her heart. "I completely understand your decision to end this marriage, and I do not blame you. I've spoken with Lindiwe, and she is excited about

the prospect of my visiting South Africa following the baby's birth. The change of environment is what I need to care for the baby, spend time with God, and see what the future holds for me."

As Chris stared at Elizabeth, a heavy realisation washed over him: this future she envisioned seemed painfully devoid of his presence. Why would it not? His absence made no difference to her. She hadn't missed him, preoccupied as she was with the women who now gravitated towards her more than Victoria, The Vine Church's designated leader for women.

"Speaking of the future, I heard that you've been meeting with numerous women, and there was a large turnout of women at the Easter Monday cookout because of you."

Elizabeth smiled. "Yes. I've been meeting with women, both within and outside The Vine Church, for weeks. They seem to think they can tell me their deepest secrets, seeing as I have blemishes of my own. Some I invited to the cookout, others came thinking it would be an opportunity to grab me for a quick private chat. I feel a tug in that direction, but once the baby's born, I just want to focus on myself for a while."

"So, South Africa it is?"

"Yes."

"For how long?"

Elizabeth sighed. "A year, maybe two, I don't know yet."

"And how are the boys supposed to function without you?"

Chris didn't know how he felt about Elizabeth going off to South Africa after the baby was born. He didn't know how he felt about coming home from Lagos to a house without Elizabeth in it. What would happen to the boys? He couldn't leave them with a housekeeper and go off to Lagos for a month. He couldn't take them with him as they'd have to be in school.

James had A-level exams to write in the coming year. Their studies couldn't be disrupted again. The only option would be to return to London and possibly employ a managing director for Princewill Consortium. That would work, but staying in the house without Elizabeth? He didn't even want to think about it.

“Let’s face it, Chris, I’ve never been the ideal mother. You were always the responsible parent.”

“It was easy because you were there.” Chris stood up, pushed his hands deep into his trouser pockets and walked to look out the window. “Elizabeth, I don’t know how we got here. A few months ago, I thought we were in love again and everything was perfect in our world. I had things I wanted to tell you, but I dared not because I feared this: the end of us.”

The tears filled Elizabeth’s eyes. “I don’t want it to be the end, but I realise nothing’s going to be the same between us again.”

Chris took a deep breath, his throat tight with anticipation, and then he turned to meet her gaze. “I want it to be the same again. I want us to be happy again. But there are things you need to know. I’m tired of keeping secrets from you.”

Elizabeth’s heart raced wildly, pounding against her chest like a drum in a frantic symphony. “What is it, Chris?”

“I had an affair, years ago, up until the point when David-West collapsed.”

Elizabeth sat still, staring at the man before her, pondering how he could have hidden an affair for years.

“Ava?” Had Chris lied to her when she confronted him about Ava? It had to be Ava. She didn’t know another woman who was close to Chris. Chris didn’t have a lot of friends that he kept close. He was a private person and kept to himself for the most part. But he had allowed Ava to get close. He had drawn her close, looking for reasons to be with her even when Elizabeth ended her babysitting job.

“Ava?” A look of astonishment crossed Chris’s face. “Heavens, no. Ava is nothing more than a friend.”

“Who is she?”

Chris turned to look Elizabeth in the eyes. “There were three of them.”

Elizabeth took a deep breath, placing her hand gently over her baby bump as she felt that familiar fluttering within her. The tiny life stirred, a reminder of the miracle growing inside her. “Tell me everything.”

“It began with Bio. She was employed to cook my meals with the understanding that she would meet my other needs.”

“Sexual needs.” Elizabeth’s voice was a whisper as she felt her heart breaking.

Chris nodded. “It was strictly an arrangement, for which she was well paid. When she left to get married, her sister Doubra replaced her. She was probably attracted to the position because of the money. She was with me for over a year, and when she left to get married, their mother filled the position.”

Elizabeth gasped. “You had intimate relations with a woman and her daughters?”

Chris nodded. “And she was my friend’s wife; they were his daughters. He trusted me, but I ruined his family.” He flashed her a wry smile. “That’s the man you married, Elizabeth.”

“Why?”

“Why what?”

“Why did you sleep with them?” Elizabeth tugged at her hair in frustration, her fingers weaving through the strands as a deep sigh escaped her lips. “Have you no conscience?”

Chris shoved his hands into his pockets and looked out the window as he shrugged. “Maybe not. Seeing as I also killed him.”

“Chris!” With a swift motion, Elizabeth raised her hands to her mouth, her eyes widening in a mix of shock and disbelief. “Who are you?” she asked in a whisper, tears in her eyes.

Chris continued to stare out the window into the distance, though he saw nothing. “I’m the man who had an affair with a mother and her two daughters and killed her husband when the building, the unsafe building I had him working in, collapsed.”

“David-West Tower?” Elizabeth’s voice trembled with emotion, her words heavy with unshed tears. “What are you saying, Chris?”

Chris turned to look at her briefly. “I altered the building plans,” he said, his voice void of emotion. He averted his gaze once more, overwhelmed by the pain etched on her face that he could no longer bear to see. “I became greedy and wanted to earn more money, so I decided to expand the building by adding more floors.”

“That’s why it collapsed.”

“Yes. It should never have been approved, but I bribed everyone and every organisation that mattered, and it was.”

“Oh God,” Elizabeth groaned.

“I should have died with those who perished that day, but God saved me. Not sure why.”

“Now, it all makes sense. That’s why you made the payments to the victims’ families. That’s why insurance didn’t sort it out. That’s why we were financially ruined. Oh, Chris.” Elizabeth bowed her head and wept softly.

“I also paid to avoid going to prison. After killing others, I didn’t even have the decency to go to prison and suffer for my wrongdoing.”

“Oh my God,” A shuddering breath caught in Elizabeth’s throat, and she pressed a trembling hand to her lips as a soft sob slipped free.

Chris refused to look at her. He had to lay it all bare before her. And then she could decide how she wanted to go forward from here. “I got Bio pregnant. I didn’t know this until recently. The child was aborted without my knowledge.” He turned to look at her, and their eyes met and held.

“Why?”

“Why what?” Chris asked, genuinely curious as to what she meant.

“Why did you have the affairs?”

“I think primarily because I thought I could get away with it, and it boosted my ego.” He sighed and paced the room. “Whatever the case, I have no excuse. And I don’t like the man I used to be, the man who did those things. Also, I didn’t get away with anything. It was a lie of the enemy. At the end of the day, I lost my business, and another man took my wife, just as I had taken my friend’s wife.”

With a heavy heart, Elizabeth lowered her head, tears streaming down her cheeks as she wept softly, each sob a reflection of her unspoken sorrow.

Chris closed the distance between them, kneeling before her. “You asked me who I was, and most times I don’t know. I want to be a good man, a loving husband and father, but I’m also a man who ruined another man’s family and killed him along with nearly a hundred other people. I’m a man with ugly demons. For the most part, I want to do what’s right, but I find

myself going in the opposite direction. I don't deserve you, I am not worthy, but don't leave me. Don't go to South Africa. I need you to find me."

"Oh, Chris," Elizabeth wrapped her arms around him, drawing him close as he leaned into her lap. Tears streamed down his face, a raw expression of vulnerability as he wept, finding solace in her comforting embrace.

"I feel so unworthy. So unworthy of you and the boys and the baby."

Elizabeth shook her head, tears running down her cheeks.

"Chris, you're worthy. We can try again."

He lifted his head to look at her. "I'm so sorry I left you when you needed me most. I should have been here for you and the baby." He took her hands in his and kissed them.

"You're here now." Elizabeth gently caressed his face, her fingers brushing away the shimmering tears that fell silently down his cheeks. "That's all that matters."

Without warning, a jolt of searing pain shot through Elizabeth, taking her by surprise and leaving her breathless. Instinctively, she drew her hand down to rest on her lower abdomen, as if trying to soothe the ache with her touch.

"What's the matter?" Chris asked, his face etched with worry.

"I think the baby's coming."

Chris was frozen in place, his expression a mix of confusion and disbelief. "Like, right now?" he asked, rising to his feet. *Wasn't it early?*

Elizabeth nodded, unable to speak.

## Chapter Twenty

“Dad, are you busy?”

Barry looked up and saw Tracy at the doorway. He smiled and turned away from his computer, extending a hand to her as he did.

“I’m never too busy for you, sweetcakes,” he said. “Come in.”

Tracy crouched low as she reached him and wrapped her arms around him. He wrapped his arms around her and dropped a kiss on her forehead. “Are you okay?”

She shook her head and pulled out of his embrace, rising to her feet. “I need to talk about something that’s bothering me.”

Barry’s brow furrowed in worry, and a sense of foreboding washed over him. Tracy had not been herself since the news of his affair with Elizabeth spread to her school. He hadn’t had a chance to address the issue because on the day he received the news, Tracy was already asleep. Sister Kofo believed that he was entitled to his own life and didn’t owe his children any explanation or apology.

Barry knew this wasn’t true, but he found it easier to hide behind that advice rather than confront his shortcomings as a father, so he hadn’t mentioned it. He had also avoided his family, leaving early and coming home late. Once the school vacated for Easter, he asked Mabel to take the girls on holiday to Greece and Spain. He caught up with them in Spain, but his busyness left no room for discussions. He suspected Tracy wouldn’t let things slide even when some time had passed.

“What’s bothering you, darling?” he asked, feigning ignorance. “Have a seat.”

Tracy chose the two-seater Chesterfield sofa slightly further from the desk, positioned to allow her to see her father as she spoke. She settled into her seat, curling her feet snugly beneath her.

“Before I say what’s on my mind, I want to thank you for a lovely holiday. Greece and Spain were enjoyable. But more importantly, getting away from London for a little while was great.” She exhaled deeply, a cloud of frustration lingering in the air.

“You don’t need to thank me, sweetheart. I love spoiling you. You know that.” As he spoke, he couldn’t help but notice the sorrowful expression on Tracy’s face, which contrasted sharply with her nod of agreement. “Tell me, what’s bothering you?”

Tracy stared at her hands, absentmindedly tracing lines on her left palm with the index finger of her right hand. “I know you’re expecting a baby with James David-West’s mother.”

Barry sank back into his chair, a deep sigh escaping his lips. He rubbed his face with tired fingers, the weight of Tracy’s words pressing heavily upon him.

“Your mum told me that the news reached your school, and you were quite upset. Understandably, so.” He took a moment to let his words linger in the air, allowing their weight to settle before contemplating his next move. “I should have spoken to you about this sooner. I know better than to assume that time can resolve problems. I apologise.”

“That’s okay, Daddy.” A faint smile tugged at the corners of Tracy’s lips.

“Yes, it is true that I’m expecting a baby with another woman. I was with her when I left you, your mum, and your sisters.” A thoughtful look crossed his face as he scratched his brow in contemplation. “Tracy, I have done things that I’m not proud of, and although I have asked for God’s forgiveness for abandoning my family and pursuing other women, my actions have consequences that I cannot escape. I love you, your mum, and your sisters, and I would do anything to protect you from harm. I’m sorry you had to learn the truth about your flawed father from unkind people.”

“It’s fine, Daddy.” Tracy met his eyes and smiled. “I never thought you were perfect. Only God is. And I was almost fifteen when you left us. I was old enough to know you’d gone to be with another woman and didn’t love Mum anymore.”

“That’s not entirely true. I always loved your mum. I never stopped. I just thought I didn’t love her.”

Tracy nodded. “So, what happens to our family now?”

Just as Barry was about to speak, Stacy and Daisy appeared in the open doorway. “Is your son really going to inherit everything and leave us with nothing?” Stacy asked.

Barry let out a heavy sigh, the weight of the world pressing down on him as he buried his head in his hands, seeking solace in the darkness for just a moment. Things were a lot worse than he thought. “Who told you that?”

“We’re aware of everything that’s happening in the house, Daddy,” Daisy told him.

“Not that we listen when adults are talking,” Stacy said quickly.

Daisy’s eyes widened, and she shook her head vigorously. “Oh, no, we don’t listen when adults talk.”

Tracy rolled her eyes but remained silent as Barry looked at all three of his daughters. “No one is inheriting anything. And there is no favourite child.”

Stacy shrugged. “If you say so, Daddy.” She turned to leave. “Come on, Daisy.”

Daisy drew closer to her father and whispered, “I can run big companies, Daddy, because I’m smarter than all the boys in my class!”

Tracy burst out laughing, and Barry had to join in despite himself as Daisy, having made her point, quietly left with Stacy.

“I can’t say that the baby’s arrival won’t change our family,” he told Tracy when they were alone again. “But know this, I love my wife, and I love all my children equally.”

Before Tracy could respond, Barry’s phone rang. She observed intently as he answered the call, his expression shifting from surprise to a beaming excitement that lit up his face.

“She’s in labour? What hospital? Fantastic! I’m on my way!”

Tracy stood up as Barry ended the call. It was clear that their conversation had reached its end.

“Sweetheart, I need to go out right away,” he informed her. “Can we continue this conversation when I get back?”

Without waiting for a response, he sprinted past her toward the stairs and ran down as quickly as he could, entering the living room where Kofo was watching an African movie.

“What’s the matter, Barry?” she asked as she turned down the volume on the TV.

“I have to go to the hospital right away. Elizabeth’s gone into labour,” he announced excitedly.

“Do you mean it?” A smile formed about her lips as she began to rise. “This is wonderful news.”

“Do you want to come with me?”

“Come with you? Why did I come to London? Was it not for this very moment?” She stood and re-tied the wrapper of her *Adire buba* and *iro* attire. “Of course, I will come with you. Give me a moment to get ready.”

“Okay,” Barry turned to leave. “I’ll meet you at the car in ten minutes. I need to freshen up and inform Mabel.”

He didn’t wait for Kofo to say anything, knowing she would disapprove of his decision to inform Mabel. Mabel was his wife, and this moment concerned her; it was only fair that he tell her. He found her in her office, where she was preparing for the workweek. She didn’t look up from her computer as he entered.

“Elizabeth’s gone into labour.”

“I see,” Mabel murmured without removing her gaze from the computer.

“I’m off to the hospital. Sister Kofo is coming with me.”

“Of course you are. Of course she is.”

He stood watching her. “Mabel, –”

“Barry, I’ve got a ton of things to do. I need to focus right now.”

Noticing her unwillingness to speak further, he shut the door behind him. He sauntered away, his head reeling as he went. His life was about to change forever. As excited as he was to hold his son in his arms, he realised that the very birth of that son would take away the family he loved and cherished so much.

Even if Mabel decided to stay, their relationship would never be the same again. What about the girls? They believed this child was preferred over them because he was a son. They would come to resent him and the father who, in his insatiable lust and desire, opened the door through which the child entered their lives.

Barry drove to the hospital in silence, feeling a mix of emotions. Delighted to have a son, but fearing the sacrifices required. Kofo radiated joy like never before and chatted nonstop. She was so excited that she failed to notice he wasn’t saying much, only answering the necessary questions with one-word responses. Hell was on the brink of eruption. At this crucial

moment, what desperate prayer dared to cross his lips? That the child, born into chaos, wasn't his?

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"Your baby has a lot of hair," the young midwife informed Elizabeth with a smile as she completed the examination.

"Well, that's going to be wasted on a boy," Elizabeth murmured drily.

The midwife grinned. "You're close to holding your little one. Five centimetres dilated already," she said. "It could still take a while before you're ready. I'll return to re-examine you in an hour."

"Are you okay?" Chris asked as soon as the midwife left.

Elizabeth inhaled the gas and air, nodding. "I just want this to be over."

"It will be soon," Chris said, approaching and sitting on the bed, tucking a strand of her hair behind her ear. "You'll never have to go through this again."

Elizabeth winced as pain coursed through her body. Once again, she lifted the mouthpiece to her lips and inhaled the gas and air. "I'm getting too old for this," she complained.

Chris chuckled as he took her hand in his. "I'm sorry I let you go through this alone."

"That's not true, Chris." Elizabeth shook her head. "You were with me for most of my pregnancy journey, and for the little time that you weren't, I understand. You had a lot to deal with. I don't hold it against you." She squeezed his hand partly to reassure him and partly to get relief from her pain.

"You're too kind." Chris rubbed her hand to offer some comfort. "But I maintain that I should not have left you alone."

"I was never alone, Chris. Apart from Desree, John and Victoria, God was with me the entire time."

"I know that, but you're my wife, and the responsibility for your welfare lies with me. I was in the wrong."

Elizabeth sighed in exasperation. “Christopher Chimbiko David-West, I’m not a violent woman, but if you keep arguing, I’ll be tempted to smack you with this.” She lifted the gas and air mouthpiece, waved it threateningly, and then put it to her lips.

Chris hid a smile, and he lifted her hand to his lips, kissing it gently. “I didn’t mean what I said about the baby, Elizabeth. I don’t want you to give it up, and whatever the DNA results reveal, I want you to know that we’re in this together, whether that’s parenting, or confronting Barry, and the press and whoever else is out there. It’s you and me against the world.”

“Oh, Chris, you darling of a man.” Elizabeth’s eyes were filled with tears, partly because of his words and partly because of her pain. “You say the nicest things but choose the worst of times.”

She pulled her hand away from his and set down the gas and air so she could rub her thighs. The pain was everywhere, and she moved a hand to her lower back to massage it.

“Do you need me to rub your back?” Chris asked, looking a little alarmed.

Elizabeth nodded as she tried the breathing exercise to calm herself. She felt an urge to push, followed by a sensation of water flowing out from between her legs. As Chris stood up, he noticed the pool of water.

“I’m getting the midwife.”

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“I hate hospitals, John.” Victoria visibly shuddered as she sat next to John outside the delivery suite.

John wrapped his arm around her shoulders and pulled her in closer. He understood what she was thinking. It was the same hospital where John Jr. had been brought after his stabbing several months ago. They had stepped into this very hospital, hearts pounding and minds racing with fear for their son. Today, they visited for the birth of a baby, who promised to transform their lives in ways they could never have anticipated.

If it were Barry’s, the impact would be devastating for Elizabeth; she would be utterly shattered. Chris would feel it deeply too, along with John and Victoria—they would all be left grappling with the weight of the news. While there was no fear of losing a loved one today, there was a fear of losing loving relationships.

“God, help us all,” he muttered to himself and kissed Victoria’s head to offer her comfort.

“There’s something you should know.”

Victoria gently pulled away, giving her the chance to gaze into his eyes. “What is it?”

“I asked Liam to call Barry and inform him.”

Victoria’s eyes widened in disbelief, her mouth slightly agape as she struggled to process the shocking revelation. “Why would you do that?”

John let out a tired sigh, the weight of the day pressing heavily on his shoulders. “He may be the father, and he needs to know. And to be honest, I’ve been on edge all this time, and I think that either way, the earlier we know who the father is and how this ends, the better.”

Victoria nodded and squeezed John’s knee. She knew John wasn’t thrilled about inviting Barry to ruin Elizabeth’s happy moment, but what choice did he have? And he was right, the earlier they knew the truth, the better.

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The midwife rushed into the room after Chris pressed the buzzer. “Did your water break just now?” she asked as she prepared to examine Elizabeth.

Elizabeth nodded, unable to speak as the pain was becoming more unbearable. The back rubs Chris was giving were soothing, but they were starting to become annoying, and she had to suck on the gas and air to keep from yelling at the midwife while being examined.

“You’re fully dilated,” the midwife announced with a smile as she completed the exam. She hit the buzzer, and immediately the door opened, and a neonatal resuscitator machine was wheeled into the room by a second midwife.

The final stage of labour progressed quickly, with Elizabeth on her knees on the bed, her head resting against Chris’s shoulder. A wave of relief washed over her as the ordeal came to an end, and the air was suddenly filled with the piercing cry of her newborn, echoing throughout the room. As she shifted into a sitting position, resting her head against Chris’s warm chest, the little one was gently cradled into her arms.

“It’s a girl!” she exclaimed excitedly and burst into tears as she cradled her little bundle of joy.

“Yes.” Chris was beaming. “And she is the most beautiful girl in the world.”

Elizabeth laughed as she looked at her daughter, then suddenly turned her head to look up at Chris. “Oh, my goodness, Chris, she looks exactly like you.”

Chris laughed. “I noticed that the moment she popped out,” he said. “Same facial features.”

“This means—”

Chris pressed his lips to hers to quiet her. “She’s ours,” he said before kissing her again.

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The sound of a door opening behind them caused John and Victoria to break apart and turn their heads. Chris came out wearing scrubs and holding a swaddled baby in his arms. John and Victoria stood up. John’s heart began to race, and Victoria stepped closer to look at the baby.

Chris’s grin stretched from one cheek to the other, lighting up his entire face. “We have a girl!”

“Oh, my goodness! Praise God! What a delightful baby!” Victoria watched with tears in her eyes as Chris placed the little swaddled baby in John’s arms.

“Yes, she is.” John held his new niece tightly. He smiled as he noticed Chris’s features and looked up to heaven. “Amazing Grace. Amazing Grace. Amazing Grace. We are grateful for this child, Lord.”

“Indeed, Pastor John.” Chris concurred.

Victoria turned to look at Chris. “How is Elizabeth?”

“She’s fine,” he said. “The midwives are dealing with the afterbirth.”

Just then, the door opened, and a midwife peeked her head out. “Mr David-West, your wife wants you.”

“I’ll be right back,” Chris said, smiling at John and Victoria, and then returned inside.

As if on cue, Barry and Kofo burst onto the scene, their faces lighting up with wide grins, like two mischievous cats who had just savoured the sweetest cream. Barry had a bouquet in his hands, which Kofo had insisted they buy upon arrival at the hospital. Kofo, looking gorgeously dressed in a green *Ankara* jumpsuit that matched her green lipstick and green nail polish, carried a large blue teddy bear bearing the words “Welcome to the World.”

“John, I got your message and came immediately.” He came closer and peered at the baby, a frown forming around his brows. “Is this the baby?”

“Barry, you made it just in time,” John said, presenting the baby in his arms. “Yes, this is Elizabeth’s daughter.”

“Daughter?” Barry asked, turning to look at Kofo, who was also frowning and craning her neck to get a closer look at the sleeping child. “Is it a girl?”

“Indeed, it is,” John said.

“It’s been a girl all this time?” Kofo could not keep the displeasure out of her voice. “And what’s worse, I can swear she hasn’t got a drop of the Babs-Jonah blood in her.” She turned around and, without another word, matched off, and Barry, smiling uneasily at John and Victoria, turned on his heels and hurried after her.

John and Victoria watched them go and turned to each other with a smile. “Would you like to hold your new niece, Mrs Griffith?” John asked.

“I thought you’d never ask, Pastor Griffith,” Victoria grinned as John passed the little bundle of joy to her.

## Chapter Twenty-One

“It’s a girl!”

The announcement came from Barry, who looked subdued as he and Kofo entered the living room where Mabel was curled up on the sofa with her nose buried in a fashion magazine.

Mabel swung slim, toned legs off the sofa and rose, closing her magazine and holding it against her chest. She smiled sweetly as she looked from Kofo to Barry.

“My condolences!”

Without waiting for a word from either of them, she turned and walked away.

“Don’t mind her, let her gloat,” Kofo said. “This is just a minor setback.”

Barry wasn’t listening as he followed Mabel closely behind like a man in a daze. On the drive home from the hospital, he had thought only of his wife and what would now become of their marriage. He had only just recently won her love and trust, and in the last four months, as they went on the roller-coaster ride wondering whether Elizabeth’s son was his and what that meant for Mabel and the girls, he felt he lost her daily, with each mention of the baby, with each argument. He had known he should mend things, but how did he mend them when she was adamant she didn’t want to see or hear of the baby?

Now that there was no baby, it was time to mend the fence with his wife. He didn’t know what Kofo meant by saying this was a minor setback. He had no intention of trying to have a son. Mabel did not want to have any more babies, especially as having Daisy had not been easy for her, and he didn’t want her risking her life to give him any more children. He had all the children he needed. Everything he built was for his daughters, and if a son were so important, then he would hand over to his grandsons, the sons who would one day be born to his daughters. He was done with anything that would make Mabel leave him, or worse still, stay with him just because of the girls.

He found her upstairs on their bedroom terrace, where she continued reading her magazine. As he approached and sat close to her, she continued to flip through the magazine, ignoring his presence. He sighed. What did he say? How did he make her stay? How did he win her back?

“The baby’s not mine. It bears a strong resemblance to her husband. A DNA test will be done, but I don’t need one to tell me what I already know.”

“Hmmm.” As she flipped through the magazine, her eyes remained glued to the glossy pages, avoiding his gaze entirely.

“Mabel, how can I tell you how sorry I am?” He drew near and settled onto the wicker sofa beside her.

Suddenly, she shut the magazine and let it fall on her lap as she turned to look at him. “What prompted you to try to claim someone else’s child?” she demanded. “Is your longing for a son this intense?”

“Mabel, I’m not going to lie and say that I wouldn’t have wanted a son, but I do not have one and having one has never motivated my affairs. I went after Elizabeth because I was certain the child was mine and that she had got back with her husband to conceal that fact. I couldn’t let another man raise my son and give me his last name. It’s got nothing to do with you and my love for you. Elizabeth means nothing to me, and I haven’t been with another woman since I returned to you. I know I’ve let you down, and I don’t know how to make amends, but I will find a way. All I ask is, please don’t leave me.”

“I don’t intend to leave you,” she said without looking at him.

“I’m so glad to hear that.”

“I’m sure you are. But I wouldn’t celebrate too soon.” She briefly made eye contact with him before averting her gaze. In his eyes, she saw the depth of his panic.

“Just tell me what you want. And I’ll do it. Anything.”

“You made a lot of promises to me months ago when you asked me to be your wife again,” Mabel began. “And while you have tried to keep your promises, I am somewhat unnerved by this new development. Before now, I was too fat and not educated enough, and so you left. My size and lack of education are no longer a problem, and now you’re back. But I’m concerned about the speed with which you went chasing a son. It makes me worry that at some point, if not now, but in the future, your desire for a son will drive you into the arms of another woman.”

“No, it won’t.” Barry took her hand in his. “Look at me, honey.”

Mabel turned to look at him and smiled faintly. "Please don't make any promises. I have something to say, and I'm not done. Please hear me out."

"Okay."

Mabel looked away and pulled her hand out of his. "I'm not the same Mabel you abandoned two years ago," she said matter-of-factly. "I am a different woman now, one who is intentional. And I will be very intentional about my decision to remain your wife."

"That's fair."

"When you left very excitedly to go to the hospital, I was of two minds. I wanted to pack up, take the girls and leave before you return."

"Mabel?" Barry gasped.

Mabel laughed drily. "But I remembered that this is my house, so I considered packing up your things and sister Kofo's and leaving them outside the front door. But I thought, what would it benefit me and my daughters to act that way? To ruin my marriage? You have your faults, but you are, by and large, a good husband and father, so why not stay together and make the marriage work?"

Barry heaved a sigh of relief. "I am so glad you came to that conclusion. I promise you nothing like this will happen again. Ever."

"Which brings me to the conclusion I reached. The conclusion being that I cannot trust that this will not happen again. Grace has saved me this time, but I cannot always rely on grace; however, I can rely on wisdom. So, I have decided that things are going to change drastically."

Barry swallowed. "Okay. Tell me what you want."

"I have daughters, and please know that I have no regrets in being blessed with only female children. Once, I foolishly thought that you were also content with the children we had, but now I think differently, and so I will need to deal differently."

"That's fair enough." Barry sounded calm, even though his heart was racing. He wished she would stop this slow torture and just say what she wanted so he could give it to her and know she'd stay. Unless, of course, it was something he couldn't give. Was that it?

“I’m not stupid enough to believe that you can’t be pressured into having a son and heir outside of our marriage. So, even though I will remain, I will not remain only to be usurped down the road. You are going to give me fifty per cent of everything you own, at this point, so that I can hold it in trust for my daughters, or I am going to leave. No. You are going to leave. This is my house.”

Barry released his breath in a sigh of relief. For a moment, he thought she was going to ask for something impossible. Fifty per cent of what he owned was nothing. Mabel and his daughters would get everything he owned when he died, so he might as well give it to them now.

With a smile, he took her hand and gave it a tender kiss. “Look at me, honey.” When she did, he gently touched the side of her face. “I will hand over everything to you and the girls. One hundred per cent. Companies, cars, houses, everything. I will call my lawyer to come for a meeting tomorrow.”

Mabel frowned slightly as she wondered what game he was playing. Why would he hand over everything? She almost argued she'd only requested half, but she thought better of it. If Barry wanted to hand over everything, why should she stop him?

“Good.” She nodded, trying to keep her voice steady. “But I also want my lawyer present.”

“Done.” Barry inched closer to kiss her.

“What is done? Barry, have you lost your mind?”

Mabel gasped, and Barry pulled away from her at the sound of Kofo’s voice coming from the doorway. When they turned, there she was. She had changed out of the attire she had worn to the hospital and was now wearing the *Adire buba* and *iro* she had worn before leaving for the hospital. Her hands fiddled with the wrapper as she tried to secure it firmly around her waist.

“What are you doing here?” Mabel turned to Barry. “What is she doing in my bedroom?”

Barry attempted to stand up to speak to Kofo, but she gently patted him on the shoulder, causing him to sit back down.

“*Farabale!* You are going to have a son, Barry,” she said with determination. “You will not die without a son; you are an only son. And your business empire will not be inherited by women who will marry and change their surname. You need a son who will bear the Babs-Jonah name.”

“Will you please leave my bedroom?” Mabel demanded.

Kofo laughed drily at the request. “Mabel, don’t think you have won just because this child turned out to be a girl and another man’s. Barry will have a son. He must have a son. It’s either you give him one or he will have one outside of this marriage under duress.”

“Sister Kofo, please stop this!” Barry said, rising to his feet.

“No.” Kofo shook her head. “I have been quiet for too long. Your friend Tobi had a son out of wedlock when his wife failed to give him one, and she received the child with affection. Why does your case have to be different?”

Barry’s face contorted with disbelief at the mention of his wealthy, older friend in Lagos.

“Tobi is not a good example to use, Sister Kofo. What did having a son benefit him? The boy is a hoodlum and a criminal who, at nineteen, has refused to go to school and holds his father at gunpoint to extort money from him. Is that what you want for me?”

“Good question.” A low mutter escaped Mabel’s lips.

“Tobi did a poor job raising his son,” Kofo retorted. “You will give your son a good upbringing. The Babs-Jonahs are a responsible family. Your son will not end up like Tobi’s son. You must have a son!”

“Are you God to determine such matters?” Mabel asked.

“Do not involve God in this matter, you wicked woman. You’re trying to steal everything my brother has worked for over the years, while he’s still very much alive.”

“Sister Kofo, Mabel is my wife, and what I own is hers.”

“Not when she has failed to give you a son, it isn’t!” Kofo said.

“Sister Kofo, I appreciate everything you’ve done, but it’s time for you to leave.”

“Barry, are you asking me to leave your house?”

“I’ll take you to my house in Bromley and you can stay there until you return to Lagos.”

Everyone fell silent. Mabel, who had initially insisted that Kofo stay in Bromley, was stunned by Barry’s announcement. Kofo was extremely shocked. Everyone was taken aback, their faces painted with disbelief—everyone except for Barry. He stood there, weary yet unfazed, as if he had been anticipating this moment all along.

“Barry, after everything I did for you? All the sacrifice?” Kofo’s face was wet with tears as she let out anguished sobs, her heart breaking open with every cry.

Barry reached out, his hand gently resting on her shoulder in an attempt to offer comfort. Kofo turned away, shrugging off his touch.

“I’m sorry, Sister Kofo, but I love my wife and cannot allow you to stay here while continuing to fight her.”

“I have always wanted what is best for you, Barry.” She unfastened her wrapper and used its soft edge to dab gently at her tear-streaked cheeks.

“I understand, Sister Kofo. However, wanting what’s best for me means accepting that I will not have a son.”

“God forbid! I will never accept that.” Kofo shot Mabel a withering glare, her eyes simmering with frustration, before spinning on her heel and walking away.

Barry sank into the sofa beside Mabel, his eyes glazed over and a look of bewilderment etched on his face. Without a word, she leaned closer and began to massage his shoulders. He closed his eyes, took a deep breath, and let himself relax for the first time in months. Mabel was here, and she wasn’t leaving him. That was all that mattered.

As Mabel softly pressed her lips against his skin, each kiss felt like a spark igniting a fire within him. They had not been intimate since the night he returned home and revealed the possibility of being Elizabeth’s baby’s father. Sleeping in the same bed was torture when her words and actions indicated that intimacy was not an option.

He picked her up and carried her into the bedroom, where they made love before drifting into a deep sleep. Mabel woke up first, kissed her husband as he slept soundly, then got out of bed. She quickly gathered her discarded clothes, dressed, and went to check on the girls. First, she needed to sort out Kofo. Since Barry was asleep, she booked a cab to take Kofo to Bromley and went to look for her.

Kofo was in her bedroom on the second floor, packing her bags. She was dressed again in the *Ankara* jumpsuit she had worn to the hospital, and as Mabel entered the room, she was coming out of the bathroom, holding her toiletry bag and some toiletries. She paused and shot Mabel a dirty look before dumping the items into her suitcase, which lay open on the large bed.

“Have you come to gloat, Mabel?”

“Not to gloat, just to let you know that Barry is sleeping and can’t take you to Bromley. I’ve booked you a cab, which will arrive within the hour.”

As Mabel turned to leave the room, she heard Kofo mutter, “Jezebel,” under her breath, which caused her to pause and turn around with a smile.

“Here's a friendly piece of advice from one woman to another. I understand you have made many sacrifices for Barry, giving you a unique position in his life, but you are not wise if you think that gives you an edge over the woman who sleeps next to him at night.” She turned to leave. “Go and settle with your husband, Sister Kofo, that’s where your power and influence lie.”

## Epilogue

*Three months later...*

“You may now kiss the bride.”

As Chris and Elizabeth leaned towards each other for their first kiss as a couple after renewing their vows, John and Victoria, who were officiating the ceremony, exchanged knowing glances, their eyes speaking of their love, their hearts renewing their commitment to one another even as they watched Elizabeth and Chris.

It was a beautiful Saturday morning in mid-August, and Elizabeth and Chris’s back garden had been turned into a picturesque wedding venue, brimming with charm and romance. The enchanting flower arches, beautifully arranged decorations, and thoughtfully designed seating created an inviting atmosphere. At the same time, the gentle notes of live music floated through the air, setting the perfect romantic mood for the few friends and family the couple had invited to witness their renewal of wedding vows.

The enchanting couple radiated joy as they stood at the altar, framed by a stunning trio of arches. As they shared their first kiss, the moment felt almost moving, capturing the hearts of everyone in attendance as their love was on full display for all to see. They were very intentional about leaving behind the old marriage—the marriage they had both destroyed in their own way — and moving forward to build a marriage that was the kind they were certain God would want them to have.

Since the birth of their beautiful daughter, Grace Iyingi David-West, fondly called Gracie by everyone, a lot had happened. Elizabeth wasted no time in getting a DNA test done, which confirmed that Gracie was Chris’s. The test was to put her mind at rest as much as it was to put Chris’s and, of course, to ensure Barry never bothered them again. Elizabeth was not taking chances with her marriage again. She understood that she and Chris had been beneficiaries of God’s grace, the primary reason they named their daughter Grace. But having been saved by grace, she intended to be wise going forward.

After some meaningful discussions, they reached a consensus to join forces on the Chris West project, determined to scale it to new heights together. With Alaere and Bio in Africa, and the

possibility of a similar temptation arising due to Chris's long periods away from home, they decided that Chris should appoint a managing director/CEO to lead the day-to-day operations of Princewill Consortium, while taking on the position of chairman. This would reduce his trips to Africa. Ava did not secure the partnership she wanted at Chris West but was employed at Princewill Consortium as Executive Assistant to the Chairman. In this role, she undertook most of the trips to Africa, allowing Chris to concentrate on scaling Chris West in the UK and be available for his family.

Elizabeth found herself increasingly surrounded by a steady stream of women seeking her out, eager to share their deepest secrets and confessions of hidden sins. As an increasing number began to come from outside the church, she took the opportunity to invite them to join The Vine Church. She was close to breaking the evangelism record set by Audrey Campbell during her time as women's leader. Still, she continued to stay in the shadows, allowing Victoria to follow up with the women once she had done the initial work of inviting them to church.

As a result of the scandal, she was let go from the law firm. Although the firm chose not to pursue disciplinary action that might have suspended her practising certificate—especially since Barry confirmed she had not leveraged the affair to exploit him—they opted to let her go, granting her the courtesy of a resignation. She had taken it as confirmation that her future was beside Chris, building Chris West.

With a hint of hesitation, Chris pulled away from the brief kiss, feeling a mix of longing and disappointment—it hadn't lasted nearly long enough for his taste. From the moment Elizabeth stepped into the back garden on John's arm, he wished to end the ceremony before it started and send all the guests home. She looked stunning in her white, one-shoulder, cape maxi dress, and no one would believe, just by looking at her, that she had given birth only three months prior.

"You are so beautiful," he whispered against her mouth before putting some distance between them.

She remained silent but glanced at him as she always did when she wanted to convey that she found him attractive, which made him laugh.

With the vows exchanged and the couple's kiss out of the way, the atmosphere shifted instantly, paving the way for a lively reception filled with laughter and celebration. The

caterers set up an extensive breakfast buffet, and the guests quickly helped themselves to food and drinks.

The couple, along with their children, embarked on a whirlwind photo session that left them all pleasantly exhausted. Laughter and love filled the air as they posed for memorable shots, with the enthusiastic professional photographer creating unforgettable moments that highlighted the joy of their special day.

As the celebrations unfolded and the hours passed, the air buzzed with excitement and laughter, and James took a break from his best man duties and stole a moment to go into Elizabeth's home office to call Tracy. When he returned from Africa, he took John Jr.'s advice and apologised to Tracy for his behaviour at school, and they were on talking terms again. However, he realised that things were tense between their parents.

James knew he couldn't expect to be invited to Tracy's house for jollof rice, just as he couldn't anticipate her parents allowing her to attend his parents' wedding vow renewal if he were to invite her. They had a conversation and agreed that if they wanted to remain friends, they would need to accept the situation between their families and keep their friendship either at school or over the phone for the foreseeable future. Both were happy with that.

He lounged in Elizabeth's swivel chair and chatted with Tracy, who was currently on vacation with her family in Dubai. Engrossed in the lively discussion, he remained blissfully unaware of Andrew, the charming ring bearer, entering the room.

"Who are you talking to, James?" Andrew asked, a smile on his face indicating that he was relieved to have finally found James.

James turned the swivel chair to face Andrew and sighed, hoping his younger brother would go and play with Paul and the other children present and leave him alone. With a deliberate gesture, he pointed to the phone in his hand.

"I'm on the phone."

Andrew appeared completely unfazed as he approached and settled into one of the leather armchairs, adjusting himself to get comfortable.

"I know you're on the phone," he said. "Who are you talking to?"

"Tracy," James announced, moving the phone away from his ear. He hoped Andrew would take the hint that he didn't wish to be disturbed while on the phone—no such luck.

He leaned forward, propping his hand under his chin for support and asked, “Why isn’t she here?”

“Because her family’s away on holiday.” It was best to keep things simple for Andrew; there was no point in explaining why Tracy couldn’t attend their family events.

“Ah,” Andrew said. “Can I tell everyone now that you like Tracy?” he asked.

James frowned like he was considering the matter. After a few seconds, he shrugged his shoulders. “Yeah, you can!”

“Cool!” Andrew said, and he got off the seat and ran out.

James was relieved to see him leave, but he hoped his announcement didn’t lead to questions like, “Tracy, who? Tracy Babs-Jonah? As in Mabel and Barry Babs-Jonah? The same Babs-Jonah?”

Elizabeth returned to the party, chatting and laughing with her maid of honour, Anita, after changing into a second outfit and retouching her hair and makeup. Her phone buzzed with a congratulatory text from Freya, and she smiled, silently giving thanks to God for how He had resolved the issue with Freya. Freya had confessed her sins to John, who then arranged a small wedding for Freya and her Italian fiancé in his office, after which they relocated to live in Italy, effectively quashing any scandal before it could even begin.

“Where’s Gracie?” she asked Anita as she quickly scanned the area for her daughter and found her nestled in Rebekah’s arms. The girl who believed she was Gracie’s mother sat at a table with her parents and brothers, engaged in conversation and laughter.

“Can I have my baby?” Elizabeth stopped in front of Rebekah, who never allowed her to carry her own baby when she was around.

Rebekah lifted her gaze to her Aunt Elizabeth; her brow furrowed in confusion. “What do you mean, Aunt Elizabeth?” she asked. “This is my baby!”

Elizabeth rolled her eyes in exasperation, and Anita giggled, then walked away to speak to the caterers. Gracie, in her pretty pink dress and matching flower headband, seemed unbothered; Rebekah resembled Elizabeth enough for her to feel content being with her.

“Please hand her over, Rebekah.” John took the baby out of Rebekah’s arms. “You come and give your old Uncle John some sugar, Gracie,” he said as he cuddled her close and kissed her chubby cheeks.

“That’s too much sugar, old Uncle John,” Victoria said, taking the baby from him so she could get some cuddles herself.

“Griffiths, can I have my baby?” Elizabeth’s brow knitted in confusion as she observed John Jr. gently lift the baby from his mother’s arms, the scene leaving her utterly perplexed.

“Relax, Aunt Elizabeth,” John Jr. said with a grin.

“Can I hold baby Gracie?” Paul left the group of Andrew, Sophie, and Matthew, with whom he was playing, and walked over to his parents’ table.

“Sit down and wipe your hands first,” Victoria said.

Lindsay drew out a wipe from her ‘Mary Poppins bag’ and passed it to Paul.

“Thank you, Lindsay,” he smiled at her as he wiped his hands, handed her the used wipe, and sat down to receive Gracie, whom John Jr. carefully placed in his arms. Without a moment’s hesitation, her little fingers curled around a clump of his hair, sparking a burst of laughter that filled the air.

“She likes you, Paul,” Victoria told her youngest, and he grinned at her.

“I don’t believe this, my baby is passed from hand to hand while I’m completely ignored.”

“Leave Gracie and come and dance with me,” Chris said, coming up behind her and wrapping his arms around her slender waist.

Just then, Gracie heard her father’s voice and turned towards him, stretching out her hands to be picked up and contorting her face to suggest that if she weren’t held, she would start to cry.

Elizabeth groaned, and Chris laughed as he took Gracie from Paul, which elicited a laugh from the baby. As they went to the dance floor, Gracie rested her head on her father’s right shoulder, leaving Elizabeth no choice but to rest her head on the left shoulder.

As Rebekah watched her aunt and uncle dance with Gracie, she reflected on their journey. Their love story was like no other. She prayed that someday she would find a love like that—a love that endured and triumphed against the odds.

Thinking of true love made her remember her experience with lust. Conor Wilson was facing trial. His arrest revealed Rebekah was just one of many victims, and possibly the least significant. It also uncovered numerous sex crimes, including sex trafficking, and Anita felt confident that he'd get the most severe sentence.

To Rebekah's relief, her involvement with Conor had concluded without causing a scandal. She learnt her lesson and wouldn't repeat her mistake. She was waiting for true love. A love mirroring her parents', and like that of Aunt Elizabeth and Uncle Chris. A love with God's blessing.

"Would you like to dance, Rebekah?"

Rebekah turned, surprised to see Liam beside her, impeccably dressed in a tux.

*Did he ask her to dance?*

"What?" Rebekah was sure she had misheard him. She looked at her parents, but John and Victoria immediately looked away.

"Would you like to dance?"

"Yes. I'd be delighted." She smiled at him and placed her hand in his as she let him lead her to the dance floor.

"I see Liam finally worked up the nerve to approach Rebekah." Victoria grinned as she leaned close to John.

"He had to work up the nerve to ask my permission first."

"Really?" The astonishment on Victoria's face betrayed her disbelief. "And you said yes?"

"Not to the full package." A frown creased John's face. "I told him it has to be in phases. In this phase, he's only allowed to be a friend. I'll review in ten years if he can date her, and then he can have my permission to ask her to marry him in another ten years."

Victoria's eyes widened. "John!"

He grinned. "Just kidding. But like I told him, I intend to keep him on his toes and eventually be the father-in-law from hell." He stood up and pulled her to her feet. "Come dance with me."

“You should ask me nicely as Liam asked Rebekah,” Victoria grumbled as she let him pull her into his arms.

“I apologise, my darling wife, for assuming you’d want to dance with your husband.” He bent and kissed her forehead. “But you know I’d never take you for granted. Many women have done excellently, but you surpass them all.”

Victoria laughed and allowed him to lead her to the dance floor, where he swung her into his arms.

“Everyone looks so happy, John,” she said with a sigh. “I’m so grateful Elizabeth and Chris found each other again after this roller-coaster season.”

“I know what you mean, and I think it’s time we found each other.”

Pulling back, Victoria looked at his face. “Oh, and what do you have in mind?”

“I was thinking that as we’re off to America next week, we could take some time to be together after Sarah’s wedding. What’s better than having our little honeymoon when the newlyweds go off for theirs?”

“Sounds like a plan, Pastor John.”

“And I could get you some more of that lingerie I never saw you wear when I missed the trip last year.”

“And maybe I’ll wear them for you.”

“Then, when we return from America, and Rebekah and John Jr. have gone off to school in Oxford, perhaps we can enjoy a honeymoon staycation.”

“Two honeymoons, in the space of a month. How can I refuse?”

“Thank you, Mrs. Griffith, for being so accommodating. I will eagerly look forward to every moment.” He nuzzled her neck, and she giggled as he twirled her around the dance floor.

Elizabeth smiled her thanks at Desree as the older woman took the sleeping baby from Chris’s arms.

“Finally, I have my man all to myself.” She smiled at Chris, winding her arms around his neck as his arms wrapped around her waist and pulled her closer.

“Always, my love. Always,” he said, bending his head to kiss her, forgetting the other couples dancing around them.

Chris and Elizabeth danced far into the evening, lost in each other’s gaze as the world around them faded away. With every graceful step, they exchanged silent vows of love, their hearts beating in perfect harmony.

Meanwhile, thousands of miles away in Dubai, Mabel sat at an elegantly set table, her heart fluttering with excitement as she glanced across at her husband. The restaurant sparkled with a warm ambience, the soft glow of candles dancing on the pristine white tablecloths, inviting intimate conversations. It was the perfect backdrop for a night filled with romance, and she felt a thrill knowing this was a moment just for the two of them.

They were on holiday in Dubai. Well, she and the girls were on holiday. Barry was in Dubai to attend to business. Their days were spent differently. He spent his time in boardrooms and business expos, while she and the girls immersed themselves in the city, its dazzling culture and breathtaking sights. And lots of shopping.

To help their family heal after the recent crisis, Barry decided to take his family with him on business trips whenever the girls were on holiday from school, so it appeared that in the future, they would be travelling as a family every six weeks. So far, it had done them good, giving them fewer contacts with the David-Wests, the Griffiths and The Vine Church.

“How did your meetings go?”

“They were good. You’ll be glad to know that you and the girls are richer this evening than you were this morning.”

“That’s good news.” Mabel raised her glass and clinked it against his. “Are you comfortable with us owning everything?”

“I would give you the shirt off my back if you wanted it.” He shrugged.

“In that case, I will need it when we return to our hotel suite. Pants too.” There was a glint in her eyes.

Barry laughed and stretched out his hand. “Anything for you, my darling. Dance with me.”

Mabel let him pull her to her feet, and before long, they began to sway to the music, dancing closely together, cheek to cheek.

-THE END-

SAMPLE

### **About Eturuvie Erebor**

British by birth and Nigerian by descent, Eturuvie ‘Evie’ Erebor is an inspirational and self-growth speaker, writer, publisher, talk show host, and lawyer. She has written twenty-two books and published her article series, ‘Preparing to Cleave’, on the Vanguard Newspaper’s Christian page in Nigeria between 2004 and 2007. Her articles have also been published in various newsletters and magazines, as well as on FaithWriters.com.

Since 2004, she’s spoken in churches and schools, transforming the lives of women and youth. Due to personal experience, she’s determined to add more value to the lives of her fellow women. Hence, she began her initiative, ‘DOZ Network’—writing and publishing DOZ Magazine, DOZ Devotional, and DOZ Chronicles, as well as hosting DOZ Show and DOZ Live Inspirational Conference.

A passionate storyteller, she’s currently working on stories that appeal to women who are romantics at heart, and aid in her lifelong mission to educate, inspire, and empower with everything she does.

## **About DOZ Chronicles**

DOZ Magazine was created to publish the stories of women, some painful, some joyful but all inspirational. When DOZ Magazine began operations in 2009, our true stories comprised a section within the magazine. However, readers quickly grew tired of reading the stories piece by piece. They came to loathe the phrase “to be continued”, so we created an independent magazine dedicated to telling our inspirational stories in their entirety in a series. This magazine was known as the DOZ (True Story) Magazine, which significantly affected readers. It went out of circulation for a few years, but due to popular demand, it returned in 2015 as DOZ Chronicles. Under this title, four novellas were published, namely, DOZ Chronicles: Kemi, DOZ Chronicles: Lara, DOZ Chronicles: Ruki, and DOZ Chronicles: Nneka. They were published under the African Women Narratives series, and each is based on actual events.

The vision of DOZ Chronicles is expanding with its first fiction novel, DOZ Chronicles: Oloi.